

WHAT A
DUMP

by

Jarrett

Earnest

Perhaps I have loved the shadows that lay hidden behind his radiant forehead and his shining glance. Can you distinguish between loving roses and loving the scent of roses?
—Yukio Mishima, *Madame de Sade*¹

I

In his first session at Black Mountain College's summer art institute in 1945, seventeen-year-old Ray Johnson studied with legendary designer Alvin Lustig, who revolutionized book publisher New Directions' aesthetic in the 1940s.² That year, Lustig was in the process of creating a cover for Louise Varèse's translation of Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. The name "rimbaud" sits at the center, the source of an explosion of nested, jagged star shapes, redolent of Clyfford Still, in cream, yellow, and crimson, pulsing against a blood-red ground, while scratched along the bottom "ILLUMINATIONS" tingles like electricity. The cover, among others by Lustig, channeled the full force of abstract expressionism to convey the quasi-mystical charge of its contents: a sacred book of modernism.

After moving to New York in 1949, Johnson did commercial design work, including a few jobs for New Directions. In 1956, he was tasked with redesigning *Illuminations* for an expanded paperback edition, published in 1957. The aesthetic decisions of Johnson's cover have become so deeply absorbed into our visual culture as to now appear all but fated, pre-saging a new sensibility that would become "pop." Johnson's cover features a tight crop of Étienne Carjat's 1871 portrait of Rimbaud when he was a seventeen-year-old from the provinces, terrorizing Paris's poetry scene. Johnson upped the contrasts of the black-and-white image, enlarging the halftone screen to emphasize the inherent qualities of photomechanical translation. The effect is spectral, masklike,

as though the image of the poet is and isn't there, a face seen on the surface of Mars. The closer the eye gets to the printed surface the more the features recede, dissolving into a mist of coagulated dots. The title and author's name are blocked out in thick, ribbony script at a bias, alternating between black and white mid-word, to contrast with the shifting background. "R. Johnson" is hand-lettered in the upper right corner, a hieroglyph as much as a signature. Johnson's design was the first to utilize Rimbaud's image in this way, fusing the poet's portrait into the public imagination as an icon.

Within the rising counterculture of the 1960s, this edition became ubiquitous. Its cover foregrounded the teenage cipher of outsidership, characteristic of the young French poet, who, as one of his biographers put it, "has been treated by four generations of avant-gardes as an emergency exit from the house of convention."³ In ways that are demonstrable but incalculable, Johnson's cover contributed to this proliferating influence. Sixteen-year-old Patti Smith is merely the most famous of innumerable teenagers who knew nothing of the poet but grabbed the book because of Rimbaud's "haughty gaze," which in her case peered out from "a bookstall across from the bus depot in Philadelphia."⁴ It was on this visual evidence alone that she stole the book that changed her life. She would have likely passed over Lustig's elegant starburst if it were the edition on the stand that day. Smith described the effect of the book on her: "His hands had chiseled a manual of heaven and I held them fast. The knowledge of him added swagger to my step and this could not be stripped away. I tossed my copy of *Illuminations* in a plaid suitcase. We would

escape together."⁵ In 1967, when Smith moved to New York to become an artist, that copy of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* came with her, its worn cover tacked over her writing desk for years.

Ray Johnson was already making collages saturated with popular imagery, blurring high and low, with a special fixation on movie stars, long before the attitudes that became pop art cohered into anything recognizable as a movement. In the mid-1950s, he was appropriating pictures of Elvis Presley and James Dean from advertisements to make cryptic collages pasted with logos from Lucky Strike brand cigarettes. Around the time Johnson was designing *Illuminations*, one collage pairs an identically sized photograph of the recently martyred "rebel without a cause" James Dean with the original Carjat portrait of Rimbaud, pasted vertically on a blackened board. The Dean headshot (top) is heavily striped with translucent hot-pink ink, almost entirely covering the image, while Rimbaud (bottom) has the pink bands only over his eyes, nose, and mouth. The collage identifies an unmistakable affinity: two artists with passionate intensity and aberrant sexualities, hostile to the mores of their time. Johnson equates Dean's violent death at twenty-four from a speeding sports car crash with the force of Rimbaud's renunciation of poetry at the age of twenty. The visual logic suggests transposing the features from one onto the other, blurring them together, while retaining a vague distinction between the actor, known for playing characters, and the poet who once proclaimed that "every being seemed to me to be entitled to several *other* lives."⁶ The hot pink underscores their twinned roles as queer icons – a fantasy couple whose images evolved into potent sites of identification for gay men as that subculture began

taking shape. What might at first seem an arbitrary, even capricious juxtaposition of a poet and a movie star takes on the clarity of a formula when seen within the larger mathematics of queer desire.

This image of Rimbaud continued to proliferate in Johnson's collages and mailings until the end of his life, becoming a personal emblem. And like Rimbaud's poetry, the structures of Johnson's work undermine any single or coherent sense of an internal "self," inverting identity outward through seemingly endless chains of slippage and dispersal. In an issue of *Arts Magazine* in 1971, Johnson reproduced the Rimbaud portrait, filling a page of the magazine with the life-sized face. "FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS BELOW" was printed on the opposite page, with a number of corresponding options acted out by his trademark wide-eyed "bunnies" for how Rimbaud could be altered. "Detach along dotted line ... participate by adding words, letters, colors or whatever to face ... & mail to Ray Johnson, 44 Seventh St., Locust Valley, N.Y. 11560" (his home address). In 1971, this was only the latest incarnation of Johnson's interest in participatory art making and circulation via the postal service. As early as the mid-1940s, Johnson was mailing heavily illustrated letters to friends, which became a fully elaborated artistic mode by the mid-1950s. In 1962, artist Ed Plunkett named the phenomenon of Johnson's eccentric mailings the "New York Correspondence School," which Johnson shifted to spell as "Correspondance," crystallized by the iconic direction stamped on each parcel: "PLEASE ADD TO AND RETURN TO RAY JOHNSON." The playfully shifting network was visualized by Johnson's ever-updated series of "seating charts" – grids detailing the names of various artist friends and celebrities, beneath almost

identical cartoon faces. By way of his robust network, a swarm of Rimbauds were soon set loose upon the world, moving among the various audiences of the international art magazine, some returning to Johnson glamorized or brutalized, often both.

In the case of a photographic image, there are essentially two operations for its transformation. The first is additive: ink, glitter, other images, sundry *stuff* can be put onto the picture like a cosmetic, an invitation to put the young Rimbaud in drag. Many respondents gleefully understood, returning burlesque versions of the poet's visage. The second is deconstructive: to cut the image up, allowing the parts to be rearranged and collaged with pieces of other images. In each case, the effect of "defacement" brings both a joyous freedom and lurking violence to the subject, one perfectly suited to Rimbaud's poetry and biography. When Paul Verlaine left his wife for Rimbaud – according to the account of one Constable Lombard of the Brussels police, who had been tracking the young poets – Verlaine not only exclaimed "We love each other like tigers!" but also "bared his chest in front of his wife. It was bruised and tattooed with knife wounds administered by his friend Raimbaud [*sic*]." ⁷

In 1978, the twenty-four-year-old David Wojnarowicz took advantage of a short stint at an ad agency in Manhattan, using their photostat machine to make an enlarged copy of Johnson's cover of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, which he then cut out and burned eyeholes with a cigarette to create a life-sized mask. ⁸ Wojnarowicz felt a profound connection with the poet, who turned the extremity of his alienation and hostility toward society into a poetics that fused sacred with profane. Like

Rimbaud, Wojnarowicz would pursue a similar "derangement of the senses." Envisioning Rimbaud transposed into 1970s New York, Wojnarowicz photographed various friends and lovers wearing the Rimbaud mask in the places that embodied such derangements in his own experience: cruising for sex on the West Side piers, beside porn theaters in Times Square, in the Meatpacking District, on the subway. When the black-and-white Rimbaud mask was photographed on black-and-white film, it harmonized the face with the wearer and environment in such a way that the mask's dislocation remains legible as collage and creates a crosscut between past and present that is arrested, but never resolved, by the image. Whether they are understood as depictions of his various friends beneath the mask of Rimbaud or of Wojnarowicz himself is beside the point. What is important above all else is the way each of these identities is made to slide from one to the next within the work.⁹

That same year, on the other side of the country in Los Angeles, Dennis Cooper turned an issue of his literary magazine, *Little Caesar*, into a fanzine about Rimbaud with a degenerated version of the same Carjat portrait printed on its cover. Cooper, who was in the midst of developing his own literary genre at the intersection of violence and gay sex, prefaced this issue in his own handwriting: "When I was fifteen I wanted to be Rimbaud, and I still do, though now I'm too old for the part. Who needed Jagger, Lou Reed, Hendrix, bla, bla. He had everything and was farther away than the stars. No chance to disappoint me. I wanted to look like him and made a pathetic attempt - short hair in a long hair era - a fool."¹⁰ The issue of *Little Caesar* is populated by pictures dubbed incarnations of Rimbaud at particular

moments throughout the twentieth century, such as a shot of James Dean in a black leather jacket, cigarette hanging from his lips, captioned "RIMBAUD '55" - a gesture parallel to Johnson's collage from around 1957. Cooper's homage encapsulated Rimbaud's contradictory appeal: the desire to elide one's identity with a figure who sought to disperse identity itself, to be multitudinous rather than singular. Cooper recognized that same impulse at work in Wojnarowicz's *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* photographs and included a portfolio of them in *Little Caesar* #11 in 1980.¹¹ Along with their publication in the pages of the *SoHo News* a few months earlier, these were the first appearances of Wojnarowicz's now iconic series, and it is critical to understand them first as ephemera in circulation, sometimes xeroxed and mailed to friends, long before they were remade by the artist as gelatin silver prints for gallery exhibition in 1990.¹²

The fact that Johnson designed the cover that Wojnarowicz used to fashion his mask, most likely without knowing who the "R. Johnson" was at the time, indicates deeper structural resonances between their two evocations of the poet. The impulse suggests an affinity at the level of something as ineffable as a "queer aesthetic" or sensibility, as it was transpiring in and around New York City in the 1970s. Examining Johnson and Wojnarowicz under the sign of Rimbaud provides a case study of this precisely locatable and intangible historical phenomenon, traced at the level of feeling.

II

In the May 1968 issue of *Artforum*, Ray Johnson read about Michael Morris's painting called *The Problem of Nothing* (1966), an enigmatic image built of hard-edged abstraction. The curator Alvin Balkind, himself a gay man, used the painting to summarize the twenty-six-year-old artist's sensibility in his review of Morris's work: "To Michael Morris, the best art today is a put-down; it is deliberately subversive, utterly useless, consciously caught up in its own time, seriously intent upon producing monuments to nothing. Among his monuments to nothing, Morris is producing many which contain a theatrical bow to the thirties in general, and to Busby Berkeley in particular."¹³ The description stood out for several reasons, foremost because Johnson himself had been staging public performances he called "nothings" since 1961, a playful negation of Allan Kaprow's "happenings," which coalesced that decade's social attitudes into form. Morris's slippery antagonism, paired with his devotion to the camp fantasias of Busby Berkeley musicals, also signaled kinship and Johnson promptly sent the young artist a letter, care of the Vancouver Art Gallery, which owns *The Problem of Nothing*, explaining that he too had been involved with "the problem of nothing" for some time; Johnson invited him to be in touch.¹⁴ Morris happened to be visiting New York shortly thereafter, phoned Johnson as directed, and they met at a bar. Morris recalled: "When I spoke of my interest in Busby Berkeley and the sense of style in thirties film production, he mentioned that I

might see Michael Malce, who owned a shop specializing in items from that period – the shop where Tony Curtis had once purchased a Mickey Mouse watch strap.... We talked of London, Shirley Temple, Canada, and Ray mentioned his interest in the Dionne Quintuplets."¹⁵

Morris suggested Johnson take part in *Concrete Poetry*, an exhibition he was curating at the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery the following year, in 1969. On his first trip out of the country, Johnson went to Vancouver, bringing collages in his luggage and crashing on the young artist's couch. In the catalogue for the show, Morris wrote a text explaining Johnson's New York Correspondance School (NYCS): "Ray allows the School to function as a highly sensitive monitor, quick to recognize in others the concerns that relate in some way to its instigator's intentions. There is always an intensely selective process at work, both in choosing members and deciding on the nature of activities the school shall undertake."¹⁶ On this visit, Morris and his lover and collaborator Vincent Trasov told Johnson about an idea they had for a Vancouver-based hub for mail art activities, called "Image Bank," inspired in part by Johnson's Correspondance school. When Morris and Trasov sent out their first "Image of the Month" mailings a year later, Johnson supplied them with the addresses of his network.

Through this initial connection with Image Bank, Johnson entered into a decidedly queer subculture within the emerging Canadian art scene. Then in his forties and twice the age of most of these new associates, Johnson became a kind of mascot who had initiated an exploration of subculture and self that the Image Bank collaborators would elaborate in their own directions. Call-and-response, with directions

to alter and pass along, were strategies pioneered by Johnson's Correspondance school and adapted by many artists' networks around the world in the subsequent years. Mail art structured exchanges between those who may or may not have known each other, or knew each other only through slippery personae, creating an arena that intentionally blurred private and public, art and life, self and other. Morris's Toronto friends Michael Tims, Ronald Gabe, and Slobodan Saia-Levy, who renamed themselves AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal, formed General Idea in 1969.¹⁷ By then, Bronson was already experimenting with mail art through a sequence of chain letters, such as his *Massage Chain Letter* (1969): "Give someone a massage. If you don't know how, take lessons. Copy this letter 5 times. Send it to 5 friends."¹⁸ In 1970, General Idea put out a call via mailer, containing an image of Zontal in a contorted position above a text titled "MANIPULATING THE SELF":

The head is separate; the hand is separate. Body and mind are separate. The hand is a mirror for the mind – wrap your arm over your head, lodging your elbow behind and grabbing your chin with your hand. The act is now complete. Held, you are holding. You are object and subject, viewed and voyeur.¹⁹

This text was followed by instructions to send photographs in this position to General Idea in Toronto. They then published a pamphlet collecting one hundred and twelve of the responses, the photos reproduced as squares in a stacked grid, two by three. Johnson appears on the first page, beside his artist friend May Wilson, just below the photos of Kitty Tims

and Jack Tims, AA Bronson's parents, at the very top.

In spring 1972, Johnson sent General Idea sixty-eight pre-addressed envelopes containing mail art with instructions to send them on. General Idea decided to keep them, and instead sent along their own messages to the intended recipients, explaining that they had hijacked Johnson's correspondence in a move they titled *Ray Johnson Split Project* (1972). That same year, General Idea debuted *FILE Magazine*, with a format and logo adapted from *LIFE* as a parasitic assault on copyright and corporate identity. *FILE* was the first publication of its kind to harness mail art activities, blending the artists' directories and image requests from Image Bank with the results of their own experiments and art projects. On the cover of the first issue, Vincent Trasov is dressed as his alter ego, Mr. Peanut, usurping the snappy mascot of the American snack company Planters, to pose in front of the Toronto skyline. In their first editorial, General Idea explained that *FILE* makes tangible "the invisible network that binds the world," listing a handful of key figures including Ray Johnson who had pioneered this method of ongoing collaboration. General Idea then concluded: "We are concerned with the web of fact and fiction that binds and releases mythologies that are the sum experience of artists and non-artists in cooperative existence today. Every image is a self image. Every image is a mirror."²⁰

FILE heralded a new sensibility: a defiant and playful mapping of a society created by collaboration, outside the mainstream art world of galleries and museums. The provocation was met almost instantly by an angry editorial in Vancouver's alt-weekly: "They have paraded their homosexuality as though that in itself

gave the mag some bizarre status within the enigma of the alternative society. Instead the problems of homosexuality as an actual way of life recede into the pageantry of camp parody."²¹ The condemnation accurately, if unwittingly, pinpointed the stakes of General Idea's play with gay representation, attempting to undermine and complicate an identity that was swiftly becoming all too legible, seeing the rising politics of respectability as an inescapably conservative force.

Dubbed their "Daddy Dada," Johnson, whose pictures, drawings, and letters bounced through early issues of *FILE*, was a premade cult figure for General Idea's unfolding case study of micro-celebrity and artistic persona. Johnson was one of those called during General Idea's radio-based performance piece *Club Canasta - FILE's Filathon Telephone Canasta Party*, recorded at the CBC in 1972. After giddily ringing him at Max's Kansas City, clubhouse for New York's art world, to no avail, General Idea reached his friend May Wilson at home, who laughingly strips out of her nightgown upon their request and informs them Johnson is at a dinner party. Finally, Bronson and the gang get Johnson on the phone, giving him updates on the other calls, catching up on gossip and playing coy games:

Bronson: What are you wearing?

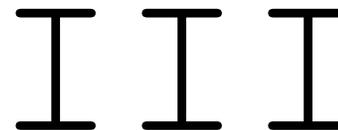
Johnson: I am wearing a paintbrush.

Bronson: Where?

Johnson: Where - In my ear.

They ask Johnson to come see them in Toronto: "We've been telling everyone that you're already here visiting us." Before getting off the phone, Johnson promises to send them his "Rimbaud postcards."

Daisy chains of self-reference provided an organizational force and means of propulsion for *FILE*'s form and content. The cover of the second issue, published May/June 1972, shows artist Marsha Carr, a respondent to their earlier "Manipulating the Self" mailer, a double-jointed contortionist wrapping her arms behind her so that her hands clasp improbably beneath her chin. She smiles placidly, large doe eyes slightly out of focus. The first page of the following issue in December 1972 features a full-page photograph of Johnson holding the May/June issue. The woman's face on the cover is cut out with Johnson smiling through the hole, hands gripping the sides of the magazine: "HERE'S RAY JOHNSON LOOKING THROUGH THE LAST ISSUE OF FILE."²² The following issue opens with the photo of Johnson, only this time a tongue protrudes from a cut-out in the image of Ray's face and the caption: "HERE'S AA BRONSON LICKING THROUGH THE LAST ISSUE OF FILE."²³ This *mise en abyme* literalizes *FILE*'s editorial promise; by courting the intentional fluidity of persona, "every image is a self image," and every self is someone else too.



To mark his graduation from the University of Georgia in 1972, twenty-two-year-old Jimmy DeSana self-published a boxed portfolio called *101 Nudes*, comprising staged photographs of his friends striking incongruous poses in suburban interiors. After coming across issues of *FILE*, DeSana sent a copy of *101 Nudes* to

General Idea, entering into their rich network. When AA Bronson visited New York for the first time in the 1970s, he connected with many of the people he had corresponded and collaborated with but up until then had never met in person, including Johnson and DeSana. Embracing his Daddy Dada role, Johnson planned a night on the town for their first meeting, introducing the two younger gay men to New York's thriving leather bars and outdoor cruising sites. Johnson's letters, especially those with other gay men, make frequent reference to his trips to the Anvil, Spike, Mineshaft, Eagle, and other places that specialized in leather, S-M, fisting, and watersports. Bill Wilson, May Wilson's son and another of Johnson's younger gay friends who would become his chief chronicler, once recalled Johnson stealing his bathtub that was decorated with painted flowers from his home; Johnson then brought Wilson to the Anvil to see his personal tub now on display in the bar, a young man sitting in it, being pissed on by the other patrons.²⁴

Bronson describes that first meeting in New York as a tailor-made Johnson event, one of his "nothing" performances, equal parts pedagogy and pleasure. After midnight the three met downtown and started the trek up to the Spike on Eleventh Avenue; taxis would not dare take them there, Johnson told them. Once they reached Eighth Avenue, he advised they walk in the middle of the street, away from where anyone hiding in doorways could launch surprise attacks. Johnson remained wary of street violence after being mugged at knifepoint in 1968, which occasioned his move from Manhattan to the Long Island hamlet of Locust Valley. After some time at the Spike, the three headed to the Eagle where they met everyone's favorite leatherman and bartender, John Dowd, who had

become a celebrity within the Canadian mail art scene via a typically circuitous chain of events. John Jack Baylin had started the "Bum Bank" as a spinoff of Image Bank, dedicated to the collection and distribution of ass pics, which spawned the "John Dowd Fanny Club" once Johnson introduced Dowd to a group from Image Bank when they all came to New York in 1972. In a letter beneath two cartoon bunny heads labeled "Frank Stella" and "Barbara Rose" — New York's reigning heterosexual artist-critic power couple — Johnson assured Baylin:

As per your request, I will attempt to obtain for you a genuine photo of J.D.'s bum.... At the Anna May Wong Meeting yesterday, John Dowd was there with a little baby Dowd and at one point after the Meeting he was bending over talking to someone and the exposed backside above his trouser belt was seen and had hairs on the said backside. We will go all the way for the cover photo. I am sure J.D. will cooperate.... Please trust me to follow through on your photo request and pray and light candles I push the right buttons when John Dowd is pants-lowered saying cheese.
Most sincerely yours,
Barbara Rose²⁵

In the end, Johnson enlisted DeSana's help for the photos. The pictures show Johnson at the edge of a room looking at Dowd, who faces a window wearing a black T-shirt, hands on hips and cutoff shorts around his knees. In another, Dowd smiles widely over his shoulder at DeSana as he bends to lift his pants. A commercial designer by day, Dowd eventually toured Canada participating in "bum signings," appearing at

meetings of his fan club. He also collaborated on the high-design mail art publication *Fanzini* with Baylin. The resulting "official" image of the Fanny Club is captioned: "JOHN DOWD SHOT BY JIM DESANA IN THE ROLE OF RAY JOHNSON" – Jimmy DeSana playing the part of Ray Johnson photographing John Dowd for John Jack Baylin, as promised by Barbara Rose.

After the bars, in the early hours of the morning, Johnson led Bronson and DeSana toward the dilapidated industrial zone along the West Side Highway to the piers, where men converged for anonymous public sex. Daddy Dada gave them advice, not only on how to navigate the treacherous debris, but also how to safely cruise by sticking to the more populated areas; violent crime was common, and more likely if they were to be caught alone in a secluded area. Before the cruising commenced, Johnson led them to an ideal viewing point to see a recent intervention by the artist Gordon Matta-Clark cut out of one of the piers, the holes framed against the larger void of the night sky. Then, as dawn approached and everyone had had some space to have whatever sex they wanted, Johnson reconvened with his friends, bringing them to the open area over the water. He had choreographed the entire evening for this moment, to see the sun rising over the skyline, illuminating the murals painted on the walls of the piers – urban decay and glittering water.

Soon DeSana's photographs permeated *FILE* as thoroughly as Johnson's letters had and often appeared with them in tandem. A special 1976 issue of the magazine, featuring a photo of "FILE NYC" spelled out in studs on black leather on the cover, details General Idea's gossipy misadventures during a temporary relocation to Manhattan. This issue opens with a

photograph of a lean DeSana wedged diagonally across a narrow New York foyer, cantilevered over messy piles of books with one forearm flat on the wall, the other curling a dumbbell up to his shoulder. Shirtless, donning aviators and billowing wide-leg bell bottoms and black socks, the caption below announces "DESANA UPTOWN opens sept. 1," though no further gallery information is listed – you'd just have to know. Following "Ripoff Red, Girl Detective," a story by Kathy Acker, is "New York's Ten Best Dressed," a photo-essay by DeSana, picturing New York artists and dealers across a two-page spread.²⁶ An accompanying text by the Canadian performance artist Dawn Eagle characterizes the more-or-less nondescript outfits of the list: "[The subjects] have chosen to slip away from this form of promotion without even taking recourse to the safeguard of an exquisitely esoteric or expensive accessory ... a restraint that is admirable ... which is not to say that total image cultivation is not also admirable."²⁷ The captions drive home the deadpan satire: "RAY JOHNSON (Artist) wears t-shirt, Levi jeans and jacket, work boots" – he stares as if frozen in a three-quarters profile, denim jacket draped off one shoulder, holding a headless and armless doll in his hand. DeSana's "Ten Best Dressed" portrait of Johnson had a long afterlife; Johnson cut his face out of one print and created countless copies. DeSana's image of Johnson then rolled through many subsequent collages and mailings, nestled within untold visual configurations throughout the rest of his life.

Dressed in simplified butch drag, Johnson's "Ten Best" outfit belies his later play with clothing as part of his ongoing performance. For example, Johnson painted his black leather jacket with multiple neon-pink Mickey Mouse

figures, a symbol of macho masculinity made flamboyantly "girly." This game of dress-up was captured by a piece of mail art designed by Robin Lee Crutchfield in 1976, which shows Johnson's smiling face pasted on the crude outlines of a body with the text:

THIS IS YOUR OFFICIAL RAY JOHNSON PAPER DOLL. CREATE YOUR OWN WARDROBE FOR HIM, KEEPING IN MIND THAT HE SEES NO NEW TRENDS IN FASHION AND HIS IDEAL WARDROBE IS A MONGOLIAN GERBIL NAMED CHIN. HE DESCRIBES HIS CLOTHING AS "LUCKY," AND THE ONLY COMMENT HE HAS TO MAKE ABOUT CLOTHES IS "CHARLES MANSON."

DeSana's "Ten Best" list aligned with his growing centrality within the downtown scene, photographing friends at parties in his rough black-and-white style that would define the gritty glamour of the New Wave/No Wave scene. Often DeSana came home and made prints from a night out, stamping them with his name and logo – disembodied hands holding a flashing camera – before dropping them in the mail. This was DeSana's version of mail art, which he took seriously enough to add the following line to a chronology he compiled, under the year 1975: "Opens world's smallest art gallery, a P.O. box called DeSana, which sends out mailings as shows."²⁸ His portraits of culture heroes, everyone from Yoko Ono to Debbie Harry, began to circulate outside the scene, appearing on the front of the *SoHo News* and album covers, like *More Songs About Buildings and Food* (1978) by Talking Heads and *Exterminating Angel* (1980) by Dark Day, Crutchfield's band.

In 1973, DeSana took a nude self-portrait that was later published in an issue of *FILE* and on the cover of *VILE*, the San Francisco-

based sister zine, a parody of a parody. William Burroughs saw the erotically disturbing photograph of DeSana's pale, naked body hanging from a noose in a doorway, sporting an erection. Burroughs had a friend track down the young photographer. DeSana had started seriously reading Burroughs as a teenager in the late 1960s; the intensity of the queerness and artistic experimentation, hostile to every facet of the suburban world of his childhood, was an early and continuing influence. Burroughs wanted to talk about autoerotic asphyxiation and pulled out a file of his own research he had collected over the years.²⁹ It was an image that recurred with graphic force across his writing, the hanging man dying at the point of orgasm. Burroughs stayed in touch with DeSana, who took his portrait several times. When the book of his S-M photographs *Submission* came out in 1980, it was introduced by Burroughs, ending with the questions: "The very word 'submission' contains the paradox of wanting and not wanting. And this ambivalent position can only be maintained by a double ignorance of not knowing what you want to do and not knowing what you don't want to do. Can this ignorance survive the impersonal click of the camera? Can such a paradox exist in an age of total confrontation?"³⁰

IV

Burroughs was the black sun of the counter-culture, and his ideas around language and social control radiated at the intersections of violence, queerness, sex, and death. His

mission was to combat the hypocritical forms of domination that saturated every word and image of postwar America's consumer culture. Beyond his string of influential novels, his single most important contribution was his articulation of the "cut-up" as a tool, an aesthetic and philosophical framework for collage that sought to disrupt the internalized circuit that linked each individual with the wider world. While cutting a stack of newspapers, Brion Gysin "discovered" cut-ups by noticing the accidental collisions of word and image that created new, unexpected and more complex meanings, and seemed to reveal underlying cultural "intentions" normally disguised by the syntax of logic. Gysin and Burroughs began to experiment with different procedures, cutting a text into quarters, rearranging or folding pages in half, and retyping straight across for a new text. What was radical was not the methodology per se — artists had been self-consciously cutting things up since Dada — but the force of their theorization, with its social and sexual valences, was an innovation of the practice. By taking preexisting texts from the world, the cut-up was a collaboration in which the artist was only partly in control, an escapee from the prison house of the singular self into the "third mind," something distinct that emerged from Burroughs and Gysin's separate selves within collaboration. Gysin offered this description of the cut-up: "Word symbols turn back into visual symbols — tilted back and forth through this 'me,' my very own machine. Every thing, at that moment, is one. I am the artist when I am open. When I am closed I am Brion Gysin."³¹

Not only a call to liberate writing, the "third mind" was articulated by Burroughs as an assault on the philosophical foundations

of dominant culture and binary thinking: "It is unfortunately one of the great errors of Western thought, the whole either-or proposition.... Either-or thinking just is not accurate thinking. That's not the way things occur, and I feel the Aristotelian construct is one of the great shackles of Western civilization. Cut-ups are a movement toward breaking this down."³² All forms of division — gay/straight, male/female, good/evil, self/other, live/dead — had to be deconstructed and reconfigured; these structures lived in the body and mind, and altering them necessitated violence. Rimbaud frequently appears in Burroughs's explanations as the prototypical artist as queer terrorist:

Poetry is a place and it is free to all cut up Rimbaud and you are in Rimbaud's place.... Cutting and rearranging a page of written words introduces a new dimension into writing enabling the writer to turn images in cinematic variation. Images shift sense under the scissors smell images to sound sight to sound sound to kinesthetic. This is where Rimbaud was going with his color of vowels. And his "systematic derangement of the senses."³³

Burroughs's writing was an express influence on both Image Bank and General Idea as interventions into media circulation; the mail art system in Burroughs's terms could be thought of as a transnational cut-up machine. Quotes from Burroughs appear in *FILE* editorials and statements from the beginning; eventually, Burroughs became a contributor to the magazine. Bronson later recounted that having experienced the political failures of the 1960s, General Idea shed their "hippie backgrounds

of heterosexual idealism" and sought out "the queer outsider methods of William Burroughs, for example, whose invented universe of sex-mad, body-snatcher espionage archetypes provided the ironic myth-making model we required."³⁴ He then quoted a significant passage from Burroughs's cut-up novel *Nova Express* (1964):

"We need a peg to hang it on," he said. "Something really ugly like virus. Not for nothing do they come from a land without mirrors." So he takes over this newsmagazine.... And he breaks out all the ugliest pictures in the image bank and puts it out on the subliminal so one crisis piles up after the other right on schedule.³⁵

When Burroughs happened to be in Vancouver in 1974 during Mr. Peanut's performance-art run for mayor, with the slogan "P for Performance, E for Elegance, A for Art, N for Nonsense, U for Uniqueness, and T for Talent," Burroughs was asked to lend his support and to give his endorsement at a "campaign event": "I would like to take this opportunity to endorse the candidacy of Mr. Peanut for Mayor of Vancouver. Mr. Peanut is running on the art platform, and art is the creation of illusion. Since the inexorable logic of reality has created nothing but insolvable problems, it is now time for illusion to take over. And there can only be one illogical candidate: Mr. Peanut."³⁶

In January 1965, in the midst of the collaborative work that would become *The Third Mind* (1978), Burroughs and Gysin returned to New York after ten years abroad. The capital of American media appeared to them as a citadel of corruption with enormous appeal. One night at a party they met the poet John Giorno, a generation younger. Giorno felt an instant

and electric connection with both of them. Their ideas added a new framework to the heady mix of his friends' pop appropriations and performances, joining Johnson's Correspondance school as a model for Giorno's own ambitions to circulate poetry in unexpected ways via new media. Giorno and Gysin soon became lovers and began collaborating on sound recordings and audio collages. While apart Giorno sent Gysin cut-up love letters, growing bolder in finding an explicit poetics for gay sex. In September 1965, Giorno wrote his breakout "Pornographic Poem," made from excerpts of a "found" erotic story, which reads in part:

At one point
they stood
around me
in a circle
and I had
to crawl
from one crotch
to another
sucking
on each cock
until it was hard.
When I got all
seven up
I shivered
looking up
at those erect pricks
all different
lengths
and widths
and knowing
that each one
was going up
my ass hole.³⁷

At the same time, Giorno was becoming frustrated with the fact that his friends and former lovers – Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns – did not use any explicitly gay imagery in their art. They were professionally closeted, keeping any reference to their queerness at the level of submerged code.³⁸

Giorno and Burroughs also became increasingly close. In 1968, after a conversation with Burroughs over the telephone, Giorno envisioned the phone as a medium for poetry, able to reach people all over the country and of different walks of life. He started work on his famous "Dial-a-Poem" (1968), a telephone number anyone could call to hear one of a rotating selection of poets reading their work. Furthering this vision, his nonprofit record label Giorno Poetry Systems began to release LPs in the 1970s, starting with a compilation of the Dial-a-Poem audio tracks. Burroughs was often central to these releases, appearing on anthology albums, reading alongside Giorno or poets like John Ashbery and Anne Waldman. Giorno Poetry Systems' *You're the Guy I Want to Share My Money With* (1981) brought Giorno and Burroughs together with the performance artist Laurie Anderson. Jimmy DeSana's portraits of all three of them are on the record's cover.

V

Many of the artists in this tight-knit scene were asking questions about gay identity and visibility in the 1960s and 1970s, a dialogue catalyzed by the Stonewall riots in 1969 and the "Christopher Street Liberation Day" march

that began the following year. In May 1971, the Fluxus artist Geoffrey Hendricks shaved all the hair from his body from the neck down, collecting it into jars that he labeled and gathered in one of his sculptural reliquary boxes. He described his motivation as "an act of 'shedding a skin,' and consciously or unconsciously giving form to my awareness of being a gay man, and confronting my changed identity."³⁹ This was followed in June by the performance of "Flux Divorce," the symbolic separation from his wife Bici Forbes (later Nye Ffarrabas) on their tenth wedding anniversary, during which they cut in half their marriage documents, bed, household objects, and, wearing overcoats sewn back to back, were pulled – Hendricks by a group of men and Forbes by a group of women – until the coats ripped apart. It was the beginning of new social and sexual identities for each, and for Hendricks a rebirth as an openly gay man.⁴⁰

However, there remained a nagging feeling about the beard. Hendricks wondered if he should have shaved it off during the private 1971 performance, and if by keeping it he was unconsciously clinging to the straight world, passing in his public face while invisibly, beneath his clothes, he had marked a transformation. Still bothered by 1975 Hendricks talked about all this with his good friend Ray Johnson on a street corner in SoHo, and the two decided there should be a petition to resolve this "unfinished business." Johnson, in a typical gesture, forwarded Hendricks the shaved beard of a young RISD student named Scott Mednick, a seemingly random piece of mail art that Johnson used to connect Hendricks and Mednick. In a flurry of postcards, the newly introduced friends began to plot a performance. In the meantime, Johnson assembled a petition: "WE,

THE UNDERSIGNED, REQUEST THAT GEOFF HENDRICKS SHAVE HIS BEARD." It was signed by Johnson's established art-world friends including Arakawa, Suzi Gablik, and David Bourdon, as well as younger gay figures who would populate the New Wave downtown scene, such as Robin Lee Crutchfield, David Ebony, and Duncan Smith. Mednick came down to New York to assist with the performance, in which the audience took turns cutting off portions of Hendricks's beard. Hanging out afterward, Mednick got to talk with his heroes about semiotics; Johnson explained his spelling of "correspondance" because he thought of the exchanges as a kind of performance – a pas de deux.

The beard petition was also signed by twenty-one-year-old Brian Buczak, who had met Hendricks at a party after moving to New York from Detroit earlier that year in 1975. Almost instantly, they became lovers and collaborators. Buczak had already been corresponding with Johnson through the mail art network ever since he had been a student at the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts. Johnson's letters to Buczak and Hendricks were full of playful, erotic allusions. In one, a can of Crisco – popular in the S-M scene as a lubricant for fist fucking – emerges from a gray xerox haze, with "For Brian & Geoff" written along the bottom, below a rubber stamp that reads "COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON." In another letter, Johnson writes: "Brian, I went to the Anvil very late the other evening after our visits to Edit DeAk and the Twilight Bar and checked my leather jacket & got the number 123 and talked the man out of giving me the tabs so I could send one to you. Ray." The coat-check ticket is taped below, and again proclaims it a COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON.

Around the same time, a nineteen-year-old Canadian named Peter Schuyff connected with

Johnson via the Image Bank mail art network. On his first visit to New York, Johnson brought Schuyff along on his tried-and-true fetish bar itinerary. At the Ninth Circle, the steak-house turned disco turned hustler bar in the West Village, the two talked with another man who was about Johnson's age. When the gentleman went to the bathroom, Johnson asked, "Do you know who that is? Edward Albee!" Schuyff was dazzled. Many friends remember joining Johnson on these rounds, which was something of a Saturday night routine after spending the day visiting galleries in SoHo. Having come of age in the 1940s, Johnson was now witnessing a transformation in gay bar subculture, a kind of renaissance. With post-Stonewall organization and activism, younger gay men, like artist and musician Robin Lee Crutchfield, entered the scene in the 1970s, blurring gender boundaries with their clothes and affect – the first time Johnson met Crutchfield, he was wearing clusters of colorful plastic earrings. However, as gay identities were becoming more public, there was a corresponding stabilization of behavioral codes. On one particular night, Crutchfield was refused entry at Mineshaft because he was wearing a red velour jacket instead of the requisite leather or denim. Johnson convinced the bouncer to let them in if he checked it at the door. Within this changing underground, there was a frenetic attention to "gay semiotics," as San Francisco photographer Hal Fischer jokingly dubbed it in his series of 1977, which diagrams the signifiers, accessories, and archetypal media representations of homosexual men.⁴¹ This new generation's experience is succinctly captured in artist and cultural critic Duncan Smith's essay "Reflections on Rhetoric in Bars." Smith begins

by meditating on the slippages between sign and referent before explaining that:

Gay people are implicated in this rhetorical play. They might call themselves "gay," but by so doing they fall prey to referential, denotative *straightjacketing*. Gay culture prides itself on its irony, its exuberant "lying," hence making the designation "gay" or "homosexual" a possible lie, a rhetorical play, an ironic figure. To make homosexuality into a referent, as does "gay liberation," seems false in terms of the idea of a "gay sensibility" with its ironic and aesthetic trademarks....

Does gay liberation now mean that gays can no longer lie about their sexuality? Does it mean that language henceforth will entirely consist of referents adequate to their signs, intentions to their expressions, thoughts to their utterances? Does it mean the death of lie? No matter what happens, access to language is contingent on our capacity to lie. Inasmuch as gay liberation desires to have the courage to speak the truth, it will not be able to control those situations where a lie will preserve life and livelihood. Why should one be a referee of one's sexuality if there's the possibility that honesty could cause one's death? As long as there is oppression and adverse legislation, gays will be forced to lie. From the referent "gay" to the figure, lie or ironic posture of "straightness" is the oscillation a "gay" still endures.⁴²

Smith models queerness as a multivalent, oppositional mode of *reading* within a fluid

constellation of signs, rather than something that could reside within the boundaries of a singular or static "representation," and it is no accident that it is the dynamics within the physical space of a gay bar occasioning these reflections. Queerness is thus a desire to work *against* fixed "identity" and instead seek the ambivalent freedoms of a contingent self. Smith's other widely associative writing — which includes a complex deconstruction of Elvis Presley's image and anagrammed analysis of famous names — provides a parallel model for Johnson's own prototypically queer methodology. Similar to Johnson, Duncan was obsessed with celebrity mystique, creating a series of deconstructed image-text collages. One shows a glossy black-and-white glamour shot of Gloria Swanson with vertical rips down her nose and throat with "TEAR ME IN TWO" repeated on each cheek. Another uses a colorized production still of Elvis Presley on the set of a film, guitar in hand, behind a movie clapboard, with "PHOTO ME CRUEL" painted in gold over the scene. When Smith altered a copy of Crutchfield's "Ray Johnson paper doll" mail art, the figure was drawn into Vincent Trasov's Mr. Peanut costume, sliding one mail art persona into another.

The complete run of *FILE Magazine* spanning the years between 1972 and 1989 is a primer on these queer modes of reading. The layouts themselves are usually overlapped collages, with no standardized design, able to switch visual language completely from one article to the next, from one side of the page to the other. For the September 1973 edition, the logo's letters have been rearranged as *IFEL* for the "Special Paris Issue." Inside is a two-page spread of "The Letters of Ray Johnson."⁴³ Two letters, layered in Johnson's manner, are

reproduced with columns of text in the magazine's voice written along the outer edges. The letter on the right proclaims in scratching script "Ray Johnson's new book 'What a Dump' send for your free copy" above a crude caricature of Bette Davis in a large hat, mascara running, cigarette smoking between teeth, and issuing a comic-book-style word bubble: "What a dump!"

The opening of Edward Albee's 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has Martha stumbling into her home to deliver the camp line "What a dump," a reference to Bette Davis in a film she can't recall. She harangues her husband George into helping her remember which "goddamn Warner Brothers epic" it was. He halfheartedly suggests "*Chicago*. It's called *Chicago*." and Martha launches in:

Oh, good grief! Don't you know anything? *Chicago* was a thirties musical starring little Miss Alice Faye. Don't you know anything? This picture, Bette Davis comes home from a hard day at the grocery store.... She's a housewife. She buys things. She comes home with the groceries and she walks into the modest living room of the modest cottage modest Joseph Cotten set her up in.... And she comes in and she looks around this room and she sets down her groceries. And she says, "What a dump!" She's discontent. What's the name of the picture?⁴⁴

In 1966's blistering film version, Elizabeth Taylor as Martha enunciates the line as a camp parody of Davis's movie star persona, waving her cigarette in circles with a shrug. The bitchiness of Davis's actual delivery in 1949's *Beyond the Forest* — the movie in question, but

never resolved — is understated by comparison. Indeed, part of the pleasure is the parallel incongruity between glamorous Bette Davis as the housewife in the "modest cottage" and glamorous Elizabeth Taylor as a boozy wife of an associate history professor in a small college town. Playing against type, the causes of their discontent are self-evident when run up against their real-world personas. The line pilfered from a play written by a closeted playwright, "What a dump" became an acidic slogan for queers, an indictment of the gender roles of a straight world in postwar America. Entwined with Johnson's "What a dump" illustration in *FILE* is also his typed letter, which concludes "if you take the cha cha out of Duchamp you get what a dump." In the 1990s, the younger mail artist Mark Bloch recalls Johnson calling him to tell a variation on the joke: "What did Bette Davis say when she looked at *Étant donnés*? Answer: What a Duchamp!"⁴⁵

VI

"Duchamp" plus "What a dump" is a typical Johnson equation, an associative free play that carries his words and images along their transformations with a touch of camp irreverence. There is no question that the gender-bending persona of Marcel Duchamp, who famously created the feminine alter ego Rose Sélavy, presages Johnson's own deconstructions of the Artist as elusive celebrity. Importantly, he adds to that construct the artist as *fan*, with an iconography encompassing a comprehensive pantheon of twentieth-century gay icons, from the immortal

classics Mae West, Greta Garbo, Jayne Mansfield, and Judy Garland to the fresher faces of Bette Midler, Liza Minnelli, Cher, and Sharon Stone. Johnson went so far as to send reinvented camp queen and Pepsi-Cola executive Joan Crawford a letter in 1971, inviting her to see a collage dedicated to her. Famously responsive to fan mail, Crawford sent Johnson a reply on her personal stationery:

Dear Ray Johnson,
Thank you very much for sending me an announcement of the exhibition of your "Joan Crawford Dollar Bill" collage at the Aldrich Museum. I'm so sorry I won't be able to get to see it before the 19th of September, as I'll be out of town on my travels for Pepsi, but it was kind of you to let me know about it. Bless you and all good wishes to you.

Johnson answered her letter, informing her of the collage's new whereabouts and garnering another reply: "I am delighted that the 'Joan Crawford Dollar Bill' was sold to America's Leading Art Collector, Joseph Hirshhorn. I hope that you had a magnificent Christmas and will have a beautiful new year." Facsimiles of Crawford's two notes to Johnson were cycled into mail art, distributed far and wide within NYCS networks, marked COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON.

The idealized package of classic Hollywood actors was the result of meticulous construction by studio publicity departments; careful placement of stories in magazines invented an altogether new kind of audience relation: movie fandom. The unbridgeable distance between star and fan opened up a space for both projection and identification; the self of the star could be dissolved into the characters

they portray (just as the roles Joan Crawford played are all subsumed into and indistinguishable from the encompassing image of the composite Goddess). The worshipful attitude of queer men toward these commodified stars was so well established within popular culture that it forms the foundation of Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* (1968), a novel whose main character, herself a synthesis of Hollywood trivia and quotation, is hard at work on a study titled *Parker Tyler and the Films of the Forties*, through which Vidal pays sarcastic homage to Tyler, the gay film critic whom Breckinridge quotes like scripture.

Movie star fan clubs and fan mail were an existing popular-culture phenomenon, markedly identified with young women, that Johnson could seamlessly incorporate into the New York Correspondance School ethos. Johnson started fan clubs for important older artists, placing them on the same level as the ones he launched for his favored idiosyncratic starlets, like Anna May Wong, making rubber stamps to designate various mailings and collages as part of the ODILON REDON FAN CLUB, MAX ERNST FAN CLUB, SANDRA BERNHARD FAN CLUB, or SHELLEY DUVALL FAN CLUB, to name just a few. In effect, the whole of NYCS was a fan club for the character of "Ray Johnson," by turns self-effacing and self-aggrandizing, with people all over emulating his style and iconography and impersonating him. Eventually, he added a FAKE COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON stamp to his repertoire. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Johnson became so fascinated by the critiques of authorship and representation formulated by what would become the Pictures Generation that he often peppered Peter Schuyff with questions about these new artists, especially artist Sherrie Levine, who wanted nothing to do with Johnson. Despite,

or because of, her resistance, Johnson was soon sending out mail stamped COLLAGE BY SHERRIE LEVINE, a return volley in the game of undermining the myth of singular genius.

It is useful to contrast Johnson's star images, as emblems of fame, with those of his friend and mirror image Andy Warhol. Born a year apart, in 1927 and 1928, respectively, the queer sons from industrial cities, each arrived in New York City in 1949 to become artists. Both pursued work as commercial designers for many of the same magazines and publishers, including New Directions. By 1956, the two were friends and shared many cultural obsessions; Johnson's early use of Elvis and Marilyn actually predates Warhol's, which would go on to define the era. The work of both artists evinces a mania for personae, gestures that evacuate the "self" to displace it with the image of another, thereby creating a chain of identification, where Warhol could be played by Candy Darling in an interview, and Jimmy DeSana could photograph John Dowd's butt in the "role" of Ray Johnson. Their twin obsessions with celebrity increasingly manifested in opposite directions: Warhol created an orbit around himself and his image was amplified exponentially through mass media, while Johnson dispersed into the fluctuations of the network, letters delivered one at a time, then passed along altered in ways beyond his control. Even their physical headquarters reflect their differing directions: Warhol's factory in Lower Manhattan was host to partiers and collaborators flowing in and out, while Johnson rarely let anyone visit his Long Island home. Through the 1970s and 1980s, Warhol's canvases became ever larger, emptier surfaces, while Johnson's became smaller, increasingly dense. Their personas similarly contrast hypervisibility,

Warhol consciously bewigged and omnipresent, with Johnson's progressively willed obscurity and removal of his person and art from public appearance, beyond friends and highly orchestrated events.

This paradoxical attitude toward his own celebrity is encapsulated by Johnson's visit to General Idea in Toronto in the mid-1970s, the second and last time he left the US. What could have been a journey into the very heart of the scene where Johnson would relish in his own fame as the almost mythic forerunner of General Idea's artistic and intellectual pursuits instead witnessed his arrival with a strip of silver electrical tape over his mouth, as though he'd been trussed up by criminals, and a note explaining simply that he could not talk. For the entire long weekend, whenever he was with General Idea, his mouth remained taped shut. He was excluded by his own efforts, hanging out during meals but not partaking, simply watching everything, and remaining present. AA Bronson imagined that when he went off by himself during the day, he took the tape off to eat and drink, but they never saw him break the performance.

VII

On April 20, 1976, Johnson had a friend hold a gooseneck table lamp a few feet from the left side of Warhol's face while Johnson traced the slightly larger-than-life shadow onto a sheet of paper on the wall. The whole procedure only took a few minutes and once it was over everyone left. However, the process

of assembling what Johnson would call his "Silhouette University" had just begun. By the end of the year, he had completed almost a hundred drawings, including ones of Edward Albee, William Burroughs, Peter Hujar, and Robert Rosenblum, the curator and eminent art historian who also happened to be deeply involved in New York's contemporary art and gay scenes, known for his rigorous and perverse accounts of unusual subject matter, including the florescence of a silhouette-related myth in art of the eighteenth century. In his essay "The Origin of Painting: A Problem in the Iconography of Romantic Classicism," Rosenblum examined the popularity of the legend of the "Corinthian maid," who traces the shadow of her lover who is about to leave for war, thus inventing drawing and painting.⁴⁶ Rosenblum connects the sudden appearance of the subject with the popularity of silhouette drawings as a widespread form of prephotographic likeness. The silhouette's sentimental associations of love and loss, presence and absence, perfectly suit the sensibilities of this mode of Romanticism. By the nineteenth century, it's already reduced to parody in cartoons by Daumier, and by the time Johnson starts playing the role of the maiden, silhouettes were quixotically anachronistic, the domain of children's crafts and country fairs.

Johnson continued tracing them sporadically into the early 1990s, amassing almost three hundred in total. He made them of his closest friends, like Ruth Asawa, his classmate at Black Mountain, and the characters of his expanded art world, including Michael Morris, Robin Lee Crutchfield, and Marcia Tucker, who curated Johnson's *New York Correspondence School Exhibition* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970. His idiosyncratic

selection showed particular interest in younger feminist and performance artists who sought to fuse art and life, such as Martha Wilson, founder of Franklin Furnace, where he performed in the 1970s, as well as Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh during their 1983 *Art/Life* performance, for which they stayed tied together with an eight-foot rope for a year.

The subjects never saw these drawings again, though Johnson carefully labeled and catalogued them, distributing mail art that announced the Silhouette University as an ever-growing column of names. Without access to these drawings, the announcements seem like yet another iteration of Johnson's famous seating charts, loose grids of bunny heads, or simply boxes labeled with the names of his friends, collaborators, movie stars, obscure poets, and so on, all intermixed in an impossible gathering. Trailblazing queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz saw Johnson's seating charts, along with the entire Correspondance school method, as the germ of an "anti-identitarian" queer art, one of magnetic social orbits founded on impossibility and "nothingness" that offered a new horizon for the imagination. Muñoz articulates his ideal of a queer utopia by way of Johnson's "nothings":

This performative insistence on "the nothing" (the not there) over the presentness of the happening (what is there) is both queer and utopian. Utopia is always about the not-quite-here or the notion that something is missing. Queer cultural production is both an acknowledgment of the lack that is endemic to any heteronormative rendering of the world and a building, a "world making," in the face of that lack. A nothing is a utopian

act insofar as it acknowledges a lack that is normalized as reality and attempts to work with and through nothingness and ephemerality: it is both a critique and an additive or reparative gesture.⁴⁷

It is within Muñoz's understanding of the "nothing" that the silhouettes take on their most interesting valence. As a representation of a particular individual, each silhouette offers the least possible amount of visual information, evacuating the face of all detail aside from the most basic outline from a single position. More than the fleeting instance of presence that it took to create them, as in the Corinthian maiden myth, they are frameworks for absence and disappearance. Taken together as a portrait of a milieu, the complete set of Johnson's silhouette drawings shifts the emotional inflection to a critique of what was and the force of what wasn't – the essence of a *nothing*.

Apart from the Silhouette University's status as a conceptual album, convening another visionary meeting through time and space in Muñoz's terms, Johnson used these silhouettes as the armature for the collages he would make the rest of his life. He would retrace the profile to make a pattern and then layer on imagery, building precise motifs that mutated around the forms of the face, often burying it beyond recognition, so that resulting collages depicting Andy Warhol or William Burroughs are not distinguishable from one another by sight alone. Johnson kept almost all of these collages for himself, returning to them year after year for decades, adding amendments, adjustments, and accretions that sometimes became reliefs. There is a sense they are forever in process, temporarily arrested rather

than resolved. He also fastidiously added dates to the surface every time he went back – sometimes dozens of times – which actually obscure rather than clarify how they came into being, given that there is no sense of what was added when. The effect is a rejection of linear time, as he once wrote in a collage: "NO CHRONOLOGY."

When considered as portraiture, this body of work raises certain questions. If one requirement of a portrait is a likeness, these hardly resemble anyone clearly by the time Johnson finishes encrusting them. If the portrait is intended to testify to some aspect of the subject's essential self or even social role, that too is actively undermined. Take for instance one of the several collages Johnson made from the silhouette of Burroughs, originally traced in 1976. Transferred onto a cardboard disk, the outline has become a shadow, filled in with black ink, perforated with a faint grid of white dots. A thick X is marked right across the nose, pushing its details into dark background. Two wiggling sun shapes with short tentacles hover, like a cartoon virus, ready to enter the eye and mouth, a frequently employed Burroughs metaphor for the effects of language on consciousness.

Pasted onto Burroughs's head, in ways that make the profile almost disappear, are over twenty years of accumulated materials and ephemera, cut from Johnson's other collages: delicate cartoon violets he used in stark "memorial" drawings of the early 1970s; a block-lettered text reading "JANUARY 26, 1969, DEAR SHIRLEY TEMPLE, GELDZAHLER"; a cartoon bunny head with alternating red and green eyes labeled "JOSEPH CORNELL"; an index card type-written "AUBREY VINCENT BEARDSLEY 1872-1898," with "SHIRLEY TEMPLE'S BLOOD" repeated twice

and the varying dates of "1.3.92" and "1.9.92" below it in pencil and a pasted-on news clipping about Shirley Temple's real-life daughter Susan, whose newsprint image is completely obliterated by a small, heavily collaged abstraction made of cut and painted paper. The whole "Burroughs disk" is then pasted onto a hexagonal diamond-shaped board. The lower left side says "RAY" in large block letters, superimposed over a BUDDHETTE UNIVERSITY stamp and loopy script reading "evening gown." As a portrait of Burroughs, it hardly coheres beyond the maniacal formal resolution Johnson has brought to bear in putting it all together with the precision of a jeweler fitting precious stones into their facets, repeatedly polished to a twilit gleam. These images and texts have entered the head of Johnson's collage from without, as alien intrusions, as if from one of Burroughs's stories. But perhaps in waging this pictorial war on coreference between each signifier and their sets of relations, Johnson's portrait offers a means of getting from that inside back out.

Peter Hujar knew Ray Johnson from the New York art world of the 1960s. In 1975, Hujar decided to photograph Johnson for his project *Portraits in Life and Death* (1976).⁴⁸ In assembling this book, Hujar considered not only the strength of the individual images, but also what the artists and writers inside signified, and furthermore, what it meant conceptually to gather them together. Hujar had been interested in the dynamics and representations of groups (what he called "tribes") since the 1960s and would go on to make a number of portraits of collaborators and friends together. The people Hujar photographed did not necessarily form a group, outside of the framework of

the book itself. The twenty-nine individual portraits Hujar ultimately included situates Johnson alongside many of those whose names and images Johnson had long included in his own work, and several he would make silhouettes of, including William Burroughs, John Ashbery, Ann Wilson, and May Wilson. All of Hujar's subjects radiated allure and outsidersness, the integrity of their work and vision separating them from the mainstream. Including his own self-portrait within his book, Hujar created his tribe, a bohemia that drew the periphery into the center.

The boldest conceptual move that Hujar made, which was also the most criticized upon its release, was joining the pictures he had taken in 1974 and 1975 with those of corpses in Palermo catacombs photographed in 1963. These skeletons, in various stages of decay, are still clothed, often with desiccated flesh describing the bare bone. Despite the apparent binary, the photographs do not fall on either side of a life and death divide. Instead, they propose to live somewhere in between, where life and death, appearance and disappearance, are interpenetrated. The book declares that the downtown celebrities, those famous selves, almost all of whom are also now dead, are just a temporal and cultural shift away from the anonymity of the cherished cadavers.

As in Hujar's book, death was a persistent theme in Johnson's work. Frequent appearances of skulls, memorial drawings that list birth and death dates of various figures — including Yukio Mishima, Diane Arbus, Judy Garland, and Frank O'Hara — and news clippings describing violent deaths hidden within various collages are just a few ways Johnson addressed mortality. This was concretized in a series of thirteen pages Johnson mailed individually

but collectively dubbed "A Book About Death" between 1963 to 1965. One titled "Page 5 A Book About Death" in curling script is filled with a grid of hand-drawn postage stamps, each bearing a wonky configuration of the name "Andy Warhol." Beneath a cartoon ouroboros, another page, now called "A Boop About Death," bears the creepy declaration: "Mary Crehan, 4, choked to death on a peanut butter sandwich last night." In 1973, he proclaimed the death of the New York Correspondance School in the pages of *FILE*, on the same page as the "What a dump" drawing, titled "Deaths New York Times":

Dear Deaths:

The New York Correspondance School, described by critic Thomas Albright in "Rolling Stone" as the "oldest and most influential" died this afternoon before sunset on a beach where a large Canadian goose had settled down on its Happy Hunting Ground, was sitting there obviously very tired and ill and I said to it "Oh, you poor thing."⁴⁹

Johnson went on conducting the Correspondance school meetings and mailings. But the thematics of loss, death, and destruction were embedded within his collage techniques themselves. To make a portrait of someone's face is one thing, but to cut that face up, to mutilate it, to occlude it, to splatter it with paint, obscuring the eyes and mouth, is another thing entirely. Defacement is Johnson's chief mode and it is within that active process that the deepest sense of his continual negation of identity and the individual self resides. As Burroughs and Gysin described, and as Johnson illustrates, identity is always a kind of collaboration between the past and future,

suspended along a looping chain of allusion and reference. For an artist so driven to map the shifting boundaries of groups – akin to Hujar, DeSana, and General Idea – within Johnson's collages every portrait is also, inescapably, an irresolvable group picture.

VIII

In 1984, Jimmy DeSana had to have his spleen removed, an indirect result of having acquired the recently named AIDS virus. The surgery and diagnosis profoundly changed his work. Instead of the stark chic of his downtown portraits, or the candy-colored lighting of his friends' bodies treated as props in domestic interiors, the work became increasingly abstract. He'd take images and cut them up, rearrange and dramatically light them with artificial colors, then rephotograph them, to be printed as small lush Cibachromes. Repeatedly, he cut lash-like wedges curled out of a face, a gesture that recalled the leather fetish masks of the *Submission* photos. When his friend Laurie Simmons asked him about this shift in his work, he explained:

I was thinking about the kind of nothingness of life and how to make a photograph of nothing.... That ambiguity interested me – that there was that ambiguity, and how far I could go. Could people actually figure out what it was? How far could I take the object, collage it, destroy it and rephotograph it. I think my life changed a lot, and that changed my way

of looking at things. I didn't want to joke about sexuality. I wanted to talk about death and nothingness, the way that I perceived death.⁵⁰

This community of artists and writers who were each other's collaborators and audiences, a finely wrought web of intergenerational interconnection formed through decades-long experiment into ways of being, was decimated as if overnight. The nuanced instability of queer culture was violently forced into definition – medically, legally, socially – by its own destruction. Within a span of five years, Brian Buczak, Peter Hujar, John Dowd, Jimmy DeSana, Duncan Smith, and David Wojnarowicz were all dead of AIDS-related illnesses, along with countless others. With them went lifetimes of knowledge about alternate ways of living and making in relationship with one another; the loss to our culture is not quantifiable, surpassing the total works they were never able to make, with the greater loss of an essential audience fluent in layers of cross-reference and close reading they provided for each other, which is the prerequisite for the existence of any form of artistic meaning.

In 1986, Jorge Zontal, Felix Partz, and AA Bronson of General Idea had just relocated to New York, continuing their collaboration, and caring for friends dying from complications with AIDS. After twenty years of artistic and intellectual work examining the way media images function and travel, once more they did what they do best: introduce an image as diagnostic intervention. In their long-standing struggle against copyright, an iteration of legally defined and monetized "identity," General Idea took on a famous artwork that could not be copyrighted: Robert Indiana's

LOVE, the four letters arranged in a square stacked two by two. The group changed "LOVE" to "AIDS," generating the image in many forms and color relations, including paintings on canvas, wallpaper, posters wheat-pasted on city streets and subways, and the Spectacolor boards that light up Times Square. They named each iteration and the project itself as a whole *Imagevirus*. The name is adapted from William Burroughs's concepts of language and images as viruses, which influenced General Idea's earliest collaborations. As their AIDS logo moved through the world, Zontal and Partz were becoming increasingly sick with AIDS.

General Idea's *Imagevirus* cycled promiscuously through the culture, traveling internationally through many contexts, just as planned, provoking a myriad of reactions as it went along. Many young gay activists back in New York hated it; they didn't understand why it was so cool and impersonal, the seeming antithesis of the "personal is political" imperatives that were necessary to their fight. Was this some kind of cruel joke? To turn "LOVE" into "AIDS"? The activists of ACT UP and Gran Fury, a generation younger than General Idea, failed to see these works within the context of a decades-long critique of mass media and the fixed identities it tosses up to be sorted along the battle lines of representation.⁵¹ General Idea returned to their mail art and magazine roots, inserting a special multiple – a grid of thirty-five perforated *Imagevirus* postage stamps – into an issue of the Swiss art magazine *Parkett* in 1988.⁵² Ray Johnson pasted one of these stamps onto the surface of a collage, embedded into inky torrents – the final gesture in an artistic exchange blurring distinctions of authorship and self that spanned a quarter

century. Zontal and Partz died in 1994, just five months apart.

In the midst of so much irrational loss, in January 1995, Ray Johnson leapt off a bridge into the frigid water of Sag Harbor. His body was found on the shore the next day. Art-world friends were shocked and confused. Some interpreted it as a last performance piece, the ultimate "nothing." Others close to him remained shattered by something so inconceivable, though clearly premeditated. By then, Johnson had essentially stopped coming into the city for at least a decade, refusing almost all attempts to exhibit or sell his work over that time, although he did maintain active friendships through phone calls and correspondence. One persistent aspect of Johnson's art, interviews, and performances is the way the work denies a personal inner life, as though "Ray Johnson" only existed outside, in the world he built through his work. Or, perhaps, inside and outside had switched places, had become indistinguishable from one another, were the same thing. Without a doubt, that world so long in the making was rapidly disappearing.

On the first anniversary of Johnson's suicide, Geoffrey Hendricks — his longtime friend, of the shaving and beard-cutting performances in the 1970s, among so many others — drove out to Sag Harbor with his partner, Sur Rodney (Sur), to gather rounded stones from beneath the North Haven Bridge where Johnson jumped to his death. As he had for so many friends and lovers, Hendricks wanted to make a kind of memorial for Johnson using those rocks in some way. The car sagged under their weight on the drive back into Manhattan. They sat in Hendricks's West Village garden until the right idea arose. Eventually, Hendricks used them to make two sculptures. One consisted of

thirteen rocks, each engraved with a selection of letters that could be assembled to spell "NO/T/H/IN/G/RAY/J/SAG/HA/R/B/OR" — a physical cut-up and anagram that could be arranged and rearranged endlessly. He set alongside them a mechanical bunny the couple found in Venice that can be wound up and made to hop around. For the other memorial, Hendricks took one stone, the size of a head, on which he had engraved the single word "nothing."

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