



June 23, 2011

## 'RAY AND BOB BOX'

By HOLLAND COTTER

*Esopus Space*

*64 West Third Street, Room 210*

*Greenwich Village*

*Through Thursday*

In 1988 the New York collagist Bob Warner came across a piece of mail art by another collagist, Ray Johnson, liked what he saw and decided to introduce himself. A friendship developed, conducted largely on the telephone and through the mail, and lasted until Johnson's death, apparently by suicide, in 1995.

The friendship, Mr. Warner quickly learned, came with obligations. One was to respect Mr. Johnson's obsessive privacy. Visits to his home on Long Island, where he lived alone, were forbidden.

Face-to-face encounters were rare. (The two men met in person only seven times.) And there were custodial duties. One day fairly early in the relationship Mr. Johnson delivered, without explanation, more than a dozen cardboard cartons into Mr. Warner's hands. The boxes were all labeled "Bob" and packed with letters, drawings, photocopies and found objects, the material of Mr. Johnson's art.

Although never stated, the understanding was that Mr. Warner would preserve the boxes, which he has done. Now, more than 15 years after Mr. Johnson's death, he is unpacking them, one box at a time, and cataloging their contents. He is doing so in public, in a gallery run by the nonprofit Esopus Foundation in the West Village, where he welcomes visitors as he works.

There's lots to look at. While opening the boxes Mr. Warner has been placing bits and pieces of the contents on display: old magazines, T-shirts, tennis balls, beach trash. Mr. Johnson signed or otherwise annotated many of these things, and together they give a good sense of his art: a stupefyingly complex weave of personal codes, puns, dark jokes and cultural cross-references obsessively edited and layered by a celebrity-worshipping near-hermit.



There's no point in trying to give an illustrative example here, because everything Mr. Johnson did was connected to everything else. In the gallery you can see the connections and, more than that, experience them unfolding as Mr. Warner brings more material to light. The Esopus Foundation had helped enormously in this process, not only by providing the space, but also by devoting a section of the current issue of its impressive biannual magazine to Johnson material.

Mr. Warner will continue cataloging in the gallery through Thursday, when the show ends. Technically he works on a schedule: Monday from 3 to 5 p.m. and from 6 to 8 p.m.; and Thursday from 3 to 5 p.m. But I showed up at an odd hour, and there he was. I have a feeling he'll be there often, and I can understand why. Once you get into Johnson art, it's very hard to leave. And for the next several days visitors will have the opportunity to take that immersive trip with a highly knowledgeable and profoundly committed guide.