

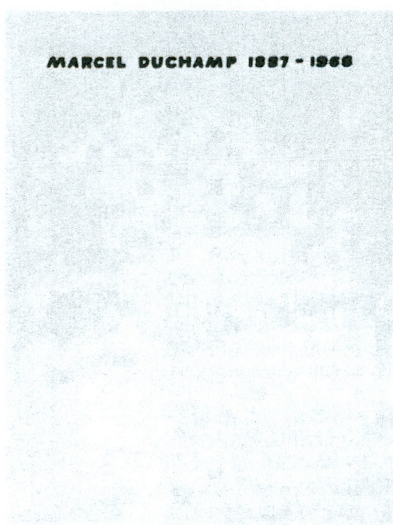
Ray Johnson

RAVEN ROW

A decade and a half after his death, Ray Johnson continues to occupy the marginal yet thoroughly involved position he held in life. The growing list of exhibitions and writings about his work serves to clarify rather than alter our understanding of the deliberate distance he maintained from the mechanisms of the art market, heightening our appreciation of the perspicacity with which he observed those workings.

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REVIEWS



Ray Johnson,
untitled, n.d., offset
lithograph, 11 x 8 1/2"

His conflicts with the fixed ideas of what constitutes an artist's career have only gained in significance with time.

Johnson's reliance on the postal system as a means to share his ideas and activities with others through his self-styled "New York Correspondence School" made for a body of work remarkably uniform in scale and feel, though it drew its material from a wide diversity of sources. The artist built his mosaic-like collages from sanded-down fragments of earlier pieces, reworked with autophagic, private dedication; together with the innumerable invitations, provocations, jokes, and statements he mailed to a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, these bear witness to a lifelong project of critical engagement with both the art world and the wider expanses of an image-saturated culture.

In the large body of work assembled for "Ray Johnson. Please Add to & Return," the opening show at the new nonprofit space Raven Row, the ambivalence of Johnson's position—at once enraptured and suspicious—is absorbingly laid out. His visual lexicon of recurrent images, icons, and marks keeps up a sharp conversation on art, fashion, economics, sexuality, fame, and success. At times, the assemblages mailed to carefully selected recipients are laugh-out-loud funny, but the shared intimacy they assume can also lead to obscurity of reference. As with most correspondence, their immediacy and relevance to the moment can abate over time. But the sheer persistence and energy of Johnson's approach wins out. In *Untitled (Ray Johnson is a dum dum)*, 1963, an image of a woman's face, breast, and upper arm, seemingly cut from a page in something like a health-and-wellness magazine, has been further altered with the typewritten text RAY JOHNSON IS A DUMDUM, below which the dictionary definition of the word *dum dum* has been taped. Maybe Johnson did appear dumb to some for refusing invitations to exhibit his work in private galleries after a certain point, or for sabotaging offers to purchase by pricing his collages at a million dollars apiece. But more to the point, Johnson might be akin, as the dictionary definition has it, to a soft-nosed bullet that explodes on entry, lacerating the pretensions surrounding the distribution and circulation of art.

"Please Add to & Return" is organized more or less chronologically, beginning with the collages of the 1950s featuring Elvis Presley, James Dean, and other pop-cultural icons. Johnson referred to these works, made using the cards around which shirts are folded, singly and collectively as "moticos." From here the show takes us right through to the late, increasingly bleak, and visually congested pages made in the years leading up to Johnson's death in 1995. Again and again, one finds the refrain FAILURE, FAILURE, FAILURE. That full stop coming after the repeated comma carries the weight of a heavy punch. In this same late period, Johnson used a letterhead with the legend MARCEL DUCHAMP 1887 - 1968. Duchamp is everywhere in Johnson's work, not just in his visual tropes but also, of course, in his withdrawal from the art world. That there ultimately seemed to be no satisfactory way for him to deal with the older artist's legacy and example is one of the show's strongest messages.

—Michael Archer