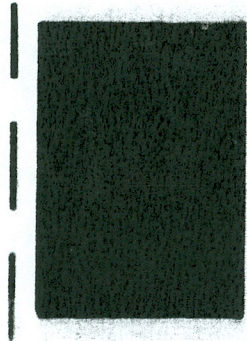


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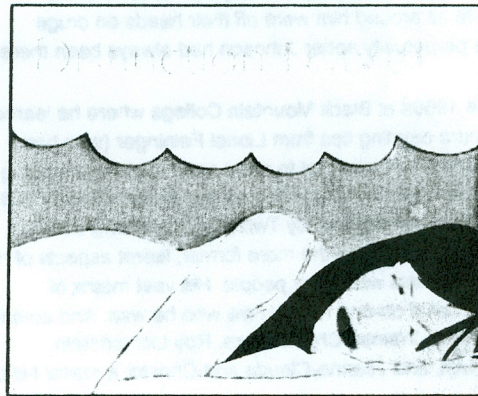


SCREEN PLAY

While Andy Warhol's film pieces toyed with our boredom thresholds, Ray Johnson played visual games and invented mail art, and now William Kentridge is projecting his cartoon characters onto the fire.

Simon Grant, Sunday, 1st March 2009

I'm bound to upset a few people when I say that Andy Warhol can sometimes be a tiresome artist. At the recent exhibition at the Hayward Gallery's impressive 'Andy Warhol: Other Voices Other Rooms' we were immersed in his films, screen-tests, videos and television programmes dating from the 1950s onwards. There were some great, iconic films including *Empire* (1964) the static shot of the Empire State, and *Screen Tests* (1964-66) where young Warholites try not to blink into the lens. The exhibition also revealed just how much incessant babble Warhol and his posse liked to record. Much of this was inane, but that was partly the point – the perfect reaction against the sober, angst-ridden art that had preceded it. (When Warhol was introduced to Rothko, the latter turned his back and walked off in disgust).



Among the blocks of TV monitors where you could watch Andy Warhol's TV productions, I sat through a screening of an aged Georgia O'Keeffe talking with Paloma Picasso, daughter of Pablo, and his friend and future biographer John Richardson. I say talking... but it was barely that. O'Keeffe twitched with bemusement; Paloma Picasso couldn't think of anything to say, and at one point asked her about her gardener. Seeing this, I realised how little Warhol really cared what other people said or did, just as long as he got them on screen. Critics might say Warhol just wanted to keep the camera rolling, to show how ordinary or how boring we all are. But I felt sorry for O'Keeffe and we learn nothing about her or the others.

Warhol, as always, had a line for this kind of experience. 'I like boring things.' An artist of his times; a mirror of his age; a lightning conductor for other people's anxieties. Warhol was all these, and more. While there is much of Warhol's work to like, and plenty that is rightly influential, I left feeling sad about Warhol the person. Unlike Duchamp, who enjoyed laughing at those who over-intellectualised his antics, the child-like Warhol always seemed like the living dead, trapped in the world he created, which of course makes him all the more fascinating.

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One fan and friend of Warhol was the New York artist Ray Johnson (1927-95) who is one of the great forgotten artists of his age. He too looked a bit ghostly, but you can sense there's life bubbling underneath his skin. A fretful, urgent, intense, angry artist, he produced work that seemed to absorb any -ism going – Surrealism, Pop, Conceptual art. 'My work is like driving a car. I'm always switching gears,' he said. His work constituted collage, sculpture, correspondence art, photos, graphic design, and he delighted in linguistic and visual games.

One series of works, for example called Feelings featured, quite simply, tracings of people's feet (including Ad Reinhardt's), but also included a project in which he dropped 12-inch-long hot dogs out of a helicopter onto a Manhattan crowd who ate what landed. Ever the humorist, he called his performances 'Nothings' – a wise crack at Allan Kaprow's 'Happenings'. So, when he would propose to a gallerist that he would like to do 'Nothing' for an exhibition, they got nervous.

His work often played on his love of celebrity, myth and glamour – though often at the expense of those he purported to idolise. (The Shelley Duvall Fan Club apparently irked Duvall, who sensed it was not totally sincere – and she was right). He also made knowing references to artists and their work, which might explain why he didn't get the attention he deserved at the time – though he was a master at sabotaging his career.

In tone, he was almost the opposite of Warhol. In his Elvis collage of 1956, little red drips for tears could be Johnson's own – so removed from the distanced blankness of his friend. At the heart of his work was an unfettered energy that reflected his personality. As Billy Name, (one of the founders of Warhol's Factory) observed, 'While all around him were off their heads on drugs desperate to reach that "revelatory level", the perpetually sober Johnson had always been there.'

Johnson spent his early formative years in the 1950s at Black Mountain College where he learned colour and structure from Josef Albers, and extra painting tips from Lionel Feininger (who had originally been a cartoonist) and Robert Motherwell. He also got to meet and mingle with visiting artists Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Willem de Kooning. After moving to New York in 1948, he soon got to know Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly. Absorbing some of their ideas, elements of chance and spontaneity seeped into the more formal, learnt aspects of his output. The images were often based on direct contact with other people. His vast matrix of human relationships is what appealed to him, even if no-one really knew who he was. And among those with whom he was in contact were Lawrence Weiner, Chuck Close, Roy Lichtenstein, Joseph Cornell, Ad Reinhardt, James Rosenquist, and Jeanne-Claude and Christo, a stellar list by any standards.

His most prominent body of work was his mail art – messages, collages, letters, instructions – which he had started informally as a teenager but would send out to people he admired, people he wanted to meet, and people he knew. It was idea and image condensed into the size of an envelope. He would ask the recipients to add to his letter and return, or to pass on to others. He created his own system of distribution, partly, I imagine, in fear of being rejected by the art establishment. To this end he created fake exhibitions at non-existent galleries. This ambivalence was, of course, directed at art institutions. One piece is addressed to the Whitney Museum of American Art reads: 'Dear Whitney Museum I hate you, love Ray Johnson'.

Johnson is virtually unknown in the UK but that will all change at the end of February when a large selection of collages and mail art will be shown at the inaugural exhibition at ~~Raven Row~~ Alex Sainsbury's large non-profit contemporary art venue in Spitalfields, east London. It is an impressive building – not unlike a European Kunstverein in scale and ambition, and a great place to show Johnson's work.

As for Johnson, his own complicated life ended on in 1995 aged 67. His body was found washed up in a little cove in Sag Harbour, Long Island. Some say that they had spotted him jumping off the bridge nearby. Others described his passing as his 'final performance', the kind of comment only close friends or opportunist journalists could utter. Why did he do it? Nobody knows. We get a hint in one of the rare interviews that he gave. 'I like to say I am the ocean and like the tide,' he said, 'I mash up everything.'

The work of William Kentridge seems a world away from Johnson. The South African artist is best known for his magical yet politically charged black-and-white animated films using successive charcoal drawings about South Africa's dark socio-political situation.

Using his on-screen alter egos Felix Tertlebaum and Soho Ekstein, he creates sombre expressionist films that manage delicately to balance humour with a lightly worn message. Often the images he depicts fade and dissolve in and out of the screen, or morph from one discernible shape into something quite different.

His latest project followed a similar path but was executed in a different way. Asked to create a screen projection onto the fire safety curtain of La Fenice theatre in Venice (*Repeat*) *From the Beginning / De Capo* featured his new sculptures which are rotated on a platform. As they move round, they appear as abstract shapes, but at a certain point a complete image appears – be it a conductor in action or a lady's head with her mouth open. The images are intended to be seen while the orchestra is tuning up before each night's performance. The sculptures, which were on simultaneous display at the Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, appear far more abstract when you see them in the flesh – in fact almost impossible to work out.

These are the least political of Kentridge's works, which might disappoint those looking for hard-hitting visuals, but Kentridge has worked with opera several times before and to great effect. In 1998 he presented his own version of Monteverdi's *The Return of Ulysses*, and he is currently working on a production of Shostakovich's satirical opera, *The Nose*, based on the book by Gogol, and commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera House, New York – a production timed to coincide with Kentridge's retrospective that begins its US tour at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in March where elements of these works are bound to surface.

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