



October 9, 2002

Volume 38 Issue 37

How To Draw A Bunny

When friends speak of pop artist Ray Johnson, they tend to make sweeping statements like "His life was his art," or tell an amusing anecdote followed by the comment "That was Ray," as if they could summarize a man in a moment. The documentary *How To Draw A Bunny* offers about two dozen such anecdotes, assembled like the collages with which Johnson first made a name for himself. Filmmakers John Walter and Andrew Moore presume that their method is the only way to understand Johnson, and there's some truth to that. Virtually every article written about him refers to him as "New York's most famous unknown artist," a contradiction which describes the man's singular balance of charm and mystery. Johnson's early paintings were dominated by tightly bunched groupings of thin, multicolored stripes, but he soon abandoned conventional abstract painting in favor of collages made up of celebrity iconography and advertising symbols (presaging Andy Warhol on both counts). Never one for self-promotion, Johnson became wary of showing his art, preferring to mail out small, envelope-sized samples to a circle of friends. After he relocated to a farmhouse on Long Island in the late '60s, Johnson made even less of his work available, and started teasing the process of arranging ill-fated gallery shows or bulk sales to collectors into subtle forms of performance art. When he jumped into Sag Harbor in 1995, effectively killing himself, Johnson left behind a house full of collages, arranged like a clever art installation: The moment it was disturbed, it lost some of its eerie power. *How To Draw A Bunny* tries to restore a sense of discovery by leaving the storytelling to his colleagues, with no clear biographical structure beyond rough chronology. Shot on video, the documentary is skimpy on details about how Johnson spent his days (save for the odd funny incident), or how he fed himself or paid his mortgage while subverting the traditional artists' marketplace. But the subject of *How To Draw A Bunny* is too strong to be diminished by the filmmakers' deliberately loose, associative, and—thanks to a Max Roach score—jazzy approach. The opportunity to dig into the trove of Johnson's art is an ultimate reward beyond all offbeat attempts to understand the artist himself. At its best, *How To Draw A Bunny* amounts to a shadow history of the American avant-garde. —Noel Murray