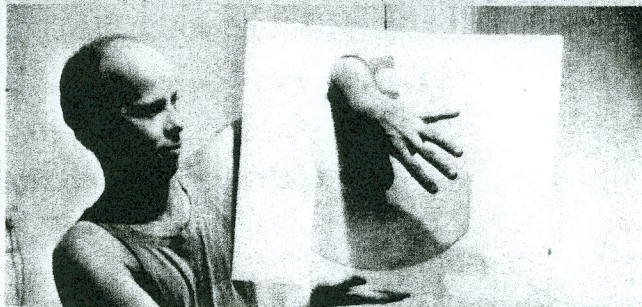


## Tails from the dark side

*How to Draw a Bunny* outlines sketchy artist Ray Johnson By **Brett Martin**



**LIFE AND LIMB** Ray Johnson and his art become one in John Walter's chronicle.

**A**rt versus commerce; the relationship of one's public persona to one's private life; the fine line between integrity and fanaticism—all are great preoccupations of the art and film worlds. Rarely, though, do they come together in one neat package—as they did when the body of Ray Johnson was dragged from Long Island Sound on Friday, January 13, 1995.

Johnson, 67 years old and an apparent suicide, had been a fixture on New York's art scene for four decades and was credited as a father of Pop and performance art—yet few people outside that realm knew his work. The new documentary *How to Draw a Bunny* investigates the odd life and death of the man who was often called “the most famous unknown artist in America.”

“I went to every bookstore in the city and there was almost nothing written on the guy,” says John Walter, 36, who directed the documentary. “But it seemed like everybody knew him. I was fascinated by that contradiction.”

The result is a profile-cum-detective story that begins with the artist's death. Walter, who never met Johnson, has consciously created a kind of Soho *Citizen Kane* in which interviews with Johnson's friends and acquaintances—including such art-world luminaries as Christo, Roy Lichtenstein and Chuck Close—slowly reveal a portrait of the artist.

By conventional definition, Johnson's primary art form was collage—densely packed creations that he produced by the thousands, often with repeating imagery, such as his signature pictogram of a bunny. But Ray Johnson's true magnum opus, says Walter, was Ray Johnson himself. To a sometimes frightening extent, the artist's life was indivisible from his art. “He was constantly orchestrating his life in the same way he orchestrated his artwork,” Walter says. Johnson appears to have been a cipher even to those who knew him best. According to Andy Warhol Factory veteran Billy Name, Johnson even made Warhol look normal. “At least Warhol was a person making art,” he says in *Bunny*. “Ray wasn't a

person; he was a sculpture, or a collage or something.”

Eschewing galleries, Johnson distributed his work largely through the mail in what he called his “New York Correspondence School.” The very act of buying a Johnson work became a performance. Like Monty Python's pottery salesman in *Life of Brian*, he would demand that you negotiate, until the haggling became part of the artwork itself.

“People who were interested in marketing Ray's work felt like he constantly undermined his success in the art world,” explains Walter. “People who were closer to his sensibility thought that he didn't aspire to that kind of success.”

Says John Malkovich, who was impressed enough with an early edit of *Bunny* to sign on as executive producer and help search for distribution, “It's about questions of, what is art? What is the marketplace? Where do they intersect? And do they have to intersect? Ray Johnson believed there didn't have to be an intersection, and I think that's kind of great.”

Of course, what seems like purity now was often maddening at the time. Many of Walter's interviewees tactfully imply that the artist could be a royal pain in the ass and worse. And it's hard to believe that the stress of remaining always “on” didn't contribute to Johnson's suicide—an event that, complete with clues and numerological significances, seemed as calculated as the rest of his life.

“I think it was conceived and orchestrated with the same aesthetic sense with which he lived his life,” says Walter. *Bunny* refuses to draw any other conclusions about its fascinating subject's final act. “In the end,” Walter says, “the mystery of his death is subsumed by the mystery of his life.”

Besides, he adds, “My least favorite part of *Citizen Kane* was always Rosebud.”

***How to Draw a Bunny* is now playing at Film Forum. See also Art Listings for a Ray Johnson exhibit currently at Feigen Contemporary gallery.**