

THE RAY JOHNSON HISTORY OF THE BETTY PARSONS GALLERY

BY LAWRENCE CAMPBELL

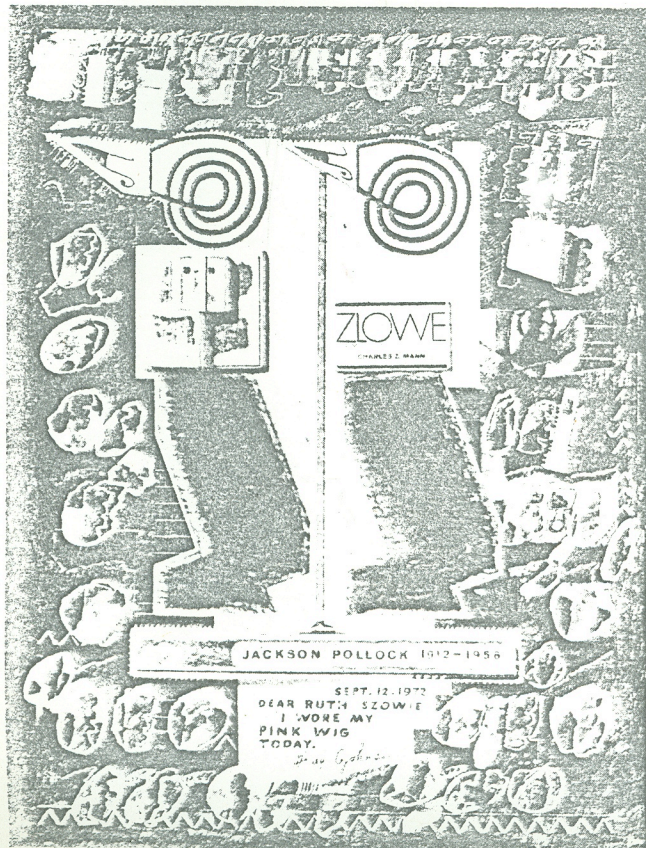
The 25th anniversary of the Betty Parsons Gallery is upon us, and in its honor Ray Johnson, celebrated collagist and founder of the New York Correspondence [sic] School, which adds to the burdens of mail-carriers throughout the world, has produced the "Ray Johnson History of the Betty Parsons Gallery" (Jan. 9-Feb. 3). This production, or one-man show, is more than a series of glass windows

into the past—it is as if a thousand dark emeralds had been thrown from a space capsule. It is about the names of the artists associated with the Betty Parsons Gallery; it is also about their scandals, whose embers still glow, ready to be fanned into flame at the breath of the visitor poring over the works, and it is about the freaky world of Ray Johnson.

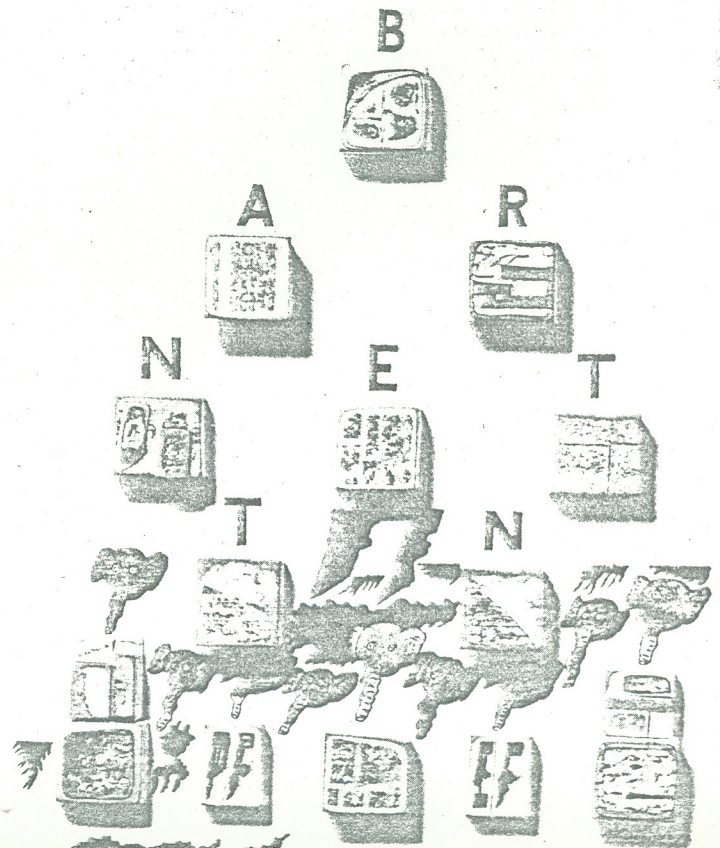
How many artists have been introduced or represented at different times by Betty Parsons? The total must come to about 225, if the years between 1940 and 1946 are counted—for before the Parsons Gallery proper, Betty Parsons was director of the Wakefield Gallery and the modern department of the Mortimer Brandt Gallery. And we should not forget Section 11, the annex of the Betty Parsons Gallery which, in 1958-61, introduced numerous young (now famous) artists.

No gallery anywhere has equalled her record. She has always selected from the point of view of an artist, never of a gallery director. Somehow she has managed to keep her own career as a painter alive (her recent show at A.M. Sachs was a revelation). A visitor to the Parsons Gallery is immediately struck by a mood unlike that of a commercial art gallery. It is more like an artist's cooperative, except that the spectrum of styles and talents is much wider than most artists' juries would permit. It extends all the way from primitive and folk painting on one side to the most extreme kinds of Minimal expression on the other. The names of the artists she has represented, now or in the past, are enclosed in Ray Johnson's curlicued writing, or lettered to look like the kind of impersonal sans-serif type that was *de rigueur* with avant-garde exhibitions when the gallery first

Ray Johnson: *Dear Ruth Szowie*, 1972, 20 by 15 inches. Joseph H. Hirshhorn collection.



Ray Johnson: *Barnett*, 1972, 26 by 19 inches.



opened in 1946.

Some of Johnson's collages consist largely of lists of names. Others are "portraits" of people such as Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Paul Feeley, Bradley Walker Tomlin, Joseph Cornell. (But where is Mark Rothko? asked one visitor.)

Although some names are missing, this does not take away from the enigmatic Ray Johnson's version of history. It simply makes people look and search with greater thoroughness. Names have always interested him. Richard Bernstein, writing for Andy Warhol's *Interview*, an underground newspaper, quotes him as saying: "I'm intrigued and interested in an incredible galaxy of people. My reason for being interested in people is their anagrammatic names. Since I cut everything up they're all people like in a kaleidoscope, but a person is many-faceted, like a crossword puzzle. One person has so many possibilities of games to play with their name, and what they do, and these are all cross-references to other people. The Correspondence School is related to the collage work and all these images, conversations, complexities or what for me I'm trying to make meaning out of."

The Correspondence School is Ray Johnson's own invention, and it takes up a large part of his life. He corresponds with

people all over the world, and the people on his list get involved with each other as well as with Johnson, which enormously complicates their lives. Periodically the Correspondence School holds meetings where the members get together, and sometimes there are fictitious meetings that are never actually held.

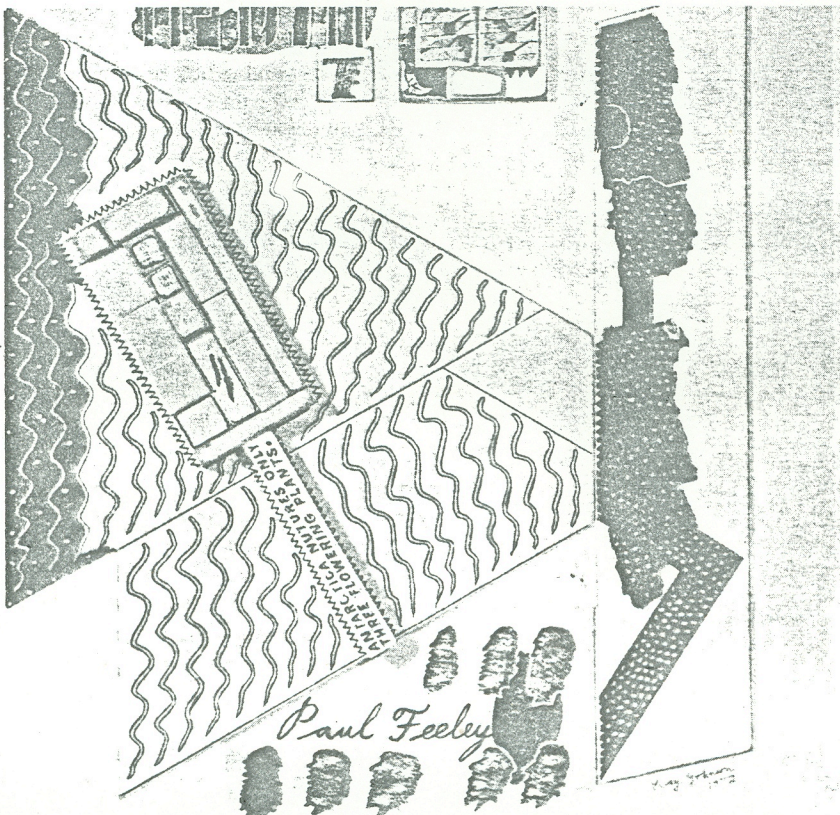
When, in the early 1950s, *Harper's Bazaar* decided to do something about the new art that was jumping into focus all over the place, one of its editors asked Ray Johnson to describe the kind of artist he thought he was, and his reply was: "When I go walking down the street/All the little birdies go tweet-tweet-tweet." No wonder *Harper's Bazaar* was shocked, and even then Pop Art was years in the future.

He was asked by the present writer if he thinks of himself as a collagist in the tradition of Schwitters. He replied: "I would not be a collagist, I would not be a Surrealist, I am a Sandpaperer." And like the sandman who throws sand in the eyes of children to make them fall asleep, Johnson rubs sand into his images so that they look like the battered dominoes or building blocks that children play with before bedtime. Sometimes these sandpapered images repeat themselves in collages, or get into the Correspondence School.

To describe these bits and whispers of information—arranged, cut up, rearranged, glued, then cut up again, then re-glued—these picture postcards, names, misspellings, flowers, stars, quotations from such people as Jill Johnston, would take a master pen. But what words can compete with these incredible works (which are themselves mostly words to begin with), with beauty thrown in like salt from a salt-shaker? On the one hand, Betty Parsons and her associate Jock Truman, and their incredible record on the other, the incredible game of Ray Johnson and his windows, which really reflect the viewer's face as he looks over these magical puzzles and tries to decipher them.

P.S.: Diane Arbus is in the show, although she never exhibited at the Betty Parsons Gallery. Joseph Cornell's portrait is in the form of a valentine. The equilateral triangle in the Newman portrait is a shade off the equilateral. The Baba elephants in the other Newman portrait are a pun on the sound of the first part of his name. The spelling of the word "nutures" (instead of "nurtures") is a reference to the sky goddess Nut. The pink wig that keeps getting into the collages is fully documented in Bernstein's article in *Interview*. Ray Johnson does not lack seriousness. He talked seriously during an interview about the anatomy of starfish. ■

Ray Johnson: *Paul Feeley*, 1972, 15 inches square.



Betty Parsons, with one of her recent abstractions (photo Alexander Liberman).

