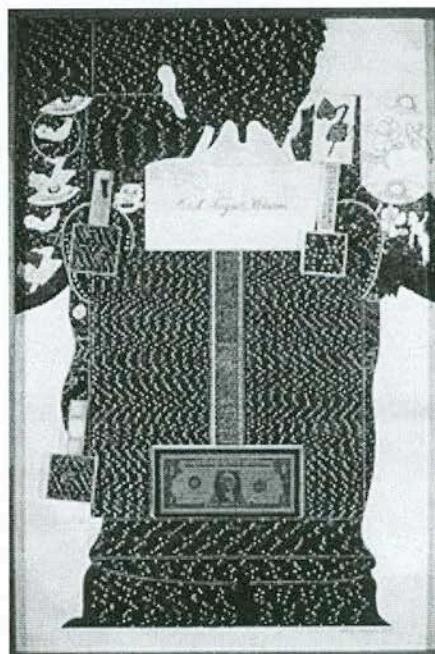


# BLASTITUDE

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## RAY JOHNSON AND THE NUMBER 13

by William S. Wilson

The power of a number, as with a lucky number, is a form of iconicity. I spell "icon" as "ikon" to separate my uses from the misappropriations that are scattered around us. In my sense, an ikon is an object that is involved with action-at-a-distance, perhaps receiving or sending spiritual energy, like an ikon of a saint. Imagine that numbers exist in a transcendental continuum, infinite and eternal. In some faiths an entity in the transcendental continuum, a power like a saint or a number, can act within the world, through the medium of an ikon. Many people believe that numbers have the power to act in the world as causes of events, or as benevolent or malevolent powers.

Like the letters of the alphabet used to spell "thirteen," numerals have no intrinsic size. Anyone writing the number 13 is not representing a physical entity, but is working like an abstract artist, arbitrarily choosing sizes as well as colors. Because the

shape of a number or a letter is not absolutely determined, but has "a freedom of form within form," a person, especially an artist, can express a whole range of meanings through size, shape, color, and any other sensory qualities. The number 13 becomes what we do with it. As we learn about an invisible world of meanings, we become acquainted with numbers, and as with human acquaintances, we can feel friendly toward some numerals, especially if they seem friendly to us. Other numbers can seem unfriendly, or at least have a reputation for heartlessness, like 13. Arnold Schoenberg, born September 13, 1874, spelled the name "Aaron" as "Aron" so that the title of his opera, *Moses und Aron*, would count out as 12 letters, not 13. How many people listening to an opera are going to count the number of letters in the title? Schoenberg, incidentally, died in 1951 in Brentwood Park, Los Angeles, July 13.

Ray Johnson wrote an essay about Marianne Moore, whose name has 13 letters. He mentions Marilyn Monroe, another person with the initials M.M., and with 13 letters in her name. Standing the M.M. on its head to get W.W., he used the name William Wilson, also 13 letters. But understand that Ray said that he did not regard the number 13 as unfriendly. He was not superstitious, but he was aware of superstitions. He wanted to use 13 casually, unselfconsciously, but he couldn't point toward 13 and say that it was the same as other numbers, because after all he was pointing toward 13. What he could do, or attempt to do, was to use 13 aimlessly. His response to our pathlessness was his disciplined aimlessness.

Nam June Paik interviewed Ray Johnson by submitting ten handwritten questions which I typed and mailed to Ray. He then typed out those ten questions, but wrote responses to thirteen questions. He wrote: "13. I wait, not for time to finish my work, but for time to indicate something one would not have expected to occur." His drowning on Friday, the 13th of January, 1995, was astonishing. I would not have expected it to occur, proof that I was not paying attention. Ray certainly had chosen the date long before, rigging it to coincide with his age, 67, or  $6 + 7 = 13$ .

Many people tried to read numerological meanings in area codes, zip codes and license plate numbers, searching for clues to a malevolent power. Ray rented a motel room in which to compose himself before drowning. If he had a choice among rooms in the motel, and chose room #247; and if he dropped himself into the watery system at Sag Harbor at precisely 7:15pm, the motive would include the 13 implied as the sum of the digits. To combine several images which have a common identity, so that they can be used to point toward 13, is an example of the movement of the mind as Ray encouraged continuities among separate images.

In his life and in his art, Ray collected or constructed constellations of images with a common theme so that the mind could move among them, both setting in motion the images and being set in motion by them. The parallel is with the movies which have many discontinuous frames. When the separate frames of a movie begin to move through the projector, an illusion of continuous movement is experienced. The celluloid as it is set in motion produces a conscious experience of motion on the screen,

but the only movement is within such consciousness. Ray often used stationery from the movie projectionist's union, aware as he was of images projected into the darkness.

Once Ray dated an item the 39th day of the month. He saw a film by Alfred Hitchcock, whether or not he read the novel by John Buchan: "The Thirty-Nine Steps."  $3 \times 13 = 39$ . Next,  $4 \times 13 = 52$ , the number of cards in a deck. Within a deck, the most versatile is the Ace, because it has two functions, as 1 or as 13. 1 and/or 13. One, or the other, or both. An Ace is both, that is, it is one object with two functions, depending on its position in a structure. Thus the value of an Ace detached from its deck, in a collage by Johnson, or in a painting by Picasso or Braque, can't be decided on. As either 1 or 13, it represents the power of changing identity according to use and context. Like so much in Ray's life-poem, an Ace does not do what it does because of what it is; it is what it is because of what it does (credit to Max Jammer). Ray's attraction to the Ace combines with his preference for a person, place or "thing" that has at least two functions, or two identities. His interest in the penis included an interest in that one structure with two conditions, detumescent and tumescent. Such a twoness underlies his fascination with the male urological system, where the penis is a structure that serves two functions, the ejaculation of semen and the discharge of urine. Ray was almost as fascinated with the flow of menstrual blood and of urine in biological females. I would quote William Butler Yeats often enough: "For Love has pitched his mansion/ In the place of excrement."

Do artists think with images such as the double function of the Ace? Well, in his poem entitled "Aeinander," Paul Celan writes, "the card-reader slain/ cleaves to/ the ace of hearts," or: "die Kartenschlägerin klebt/ erschlagen hinterm/ Herz-As." The title of the poem suggests together, just as two meanings or uses are together in an Ace, #1 together with #13. This reference to Paul Celan bears on Ray because Celan drowned himself in the River Seine. Ray had made mailart using a newspaper clipping about a drowned corpse pulled from the Seine wearing cowboy boots. In one of his favorite films, Jean Renoir's "Boudu Saved from Drowning," a man is rescued from drowning himself in the Seine, but later he fakes his literal drowning, trying to rescue himself from metaphorically drowning in bourgeois proprieties. The River Seine is "the River Net." Ray's linked images were like a seine, a net. Such nets of ideas and images, like webs, could catch related images, as in like attracts like. In 1956 Ray designed a book-jacket for a mystery written by C. Day Lewis: *A Tangled Web*.

The number 13 was like an art-supply, that is, an image that would combine with other images in his life-poem, joining a collage or montage of visual ideas and images. When he saw two objects that were separate, he looked for a motive and a means to combine them into one object. 13 is one number constructed with two arabic numerals, 1 and 3. Squeezing the 1 and 3 together, he got B. Therefore, in his logic, the capital letter B was a mashed 13.

When Ray saw one object that seemed autonomous or self-

contained, he looked for a seam where he could split the object into two parts. While the number 13 can be divided in an infinite number of ways, the simple  $6 + 7 = 13$  usefully opens toward an expression, "to be at sixes and sevens." The theme of "at sixes and sevens" reaches into Ray's characteristic mode of looking. He attended to possible matching between the unmatched, and to possible unmatching between the matched. We talked more than once about names with five letters each, Nosey Flynn, James Joyce, and Greta Garbo. Garbo's initials would lead toward his friend Gloria Graves, and then to the sisters with the palindrome, Roberta and Wanda Gag. Greta could also reach Gretta, a character in James Joyce's story, "The Dead," in the book with the self-exemplifying title, *Dubliners*. Gretta (6) had been loved by Michael (7), but was married to Gabriel (7), so that the story shows a woman and two men at sixes and sevens. Joyce's book of 13 poems, "Pomes Penyeach," was printed in a special edition numbered 1-13.

The implications of numbers will combine with other images and ideas. The combinatory power of numbers are so strong that anyone writing naturalistically, trying to summon no powers or causes that science can't explain, has to be aware of such implications in order to avoid them. Look out for chapter 13, for it has an aura before it has been written. The hotel room can't be on the 13th floor, and no character can arrive as the thirteenth guest at a party. In the manned-space program, NASA did not skip 13 when enumerating the missions to the moon, hence when Apollo 13 got into trouble, every number around the event was investigated for links to 13. The problem is that any number exists within a field of infinite relations with an infinity of other numbers. A writer who decided that 18 was significant for Barnett Newman soon found that  $2 \times 18 = 36$ , a measurement Newman used, and then a length of 72 inches also became significant. However 72 doubled is 144, but that is also  $12 \times 12$ , a significant number in some systems of mythic thought. Newman did not think with images of popular superstition, therefore he had to avoid 13.

Ray's choice of the 13th day of January exposed his final event to misunderstandings. The confusion results from not seeing his perspective. From Ray's point of view, 13 did not have a malevolent power, and to him, his drowning was not a tragic or evil event, it was a fulfillment of the governing images of his life and art. I would say that he wanted 13 simply to take its place within the order of numbers, to be on the same plane of visibility and meaning. If he could use 13 unselfconsciously, the problem was less with 13 than with consciousness.

The problem of consciousness is the problem he solved with his drowning, the act by which he intended to become water-in-water. Walking on beaches or gazing into the sky, he had been an observer, even a participant observer, but rarely was he a fully unselfconscious participant in a field of cosmic forces. In some erotic events he had been able to submerge mind and body in a field of oceanic forces. But he was 67 years old. After at least fifty years of sunlight near the water, his face presented unsightly symptoms of disease.

Ray needed to subtract his consciousness from the Cosmos so

that the Universe would no longer be Universe + Ray Johnson. The principle is clarified by a sentence from Henry Adams: "The universe that had formed him [Henry Adams] took shape in his mind as a reflection of his own unity, containing all forces except himself." Ray restored the unity of the universe by withdrawing his consciousness, that "rupture in the order of things." He had for decades meditated on stars and the sea, trying to matter to the stars, trying to belong with the water in the sea. William Blake expressed the hope of such an indweller of the Cosmos: "He became what he beheld." But that oneness didn't quite happen because of self-awareness. In the Cosmic Field, Ray was the impossibility of seamless unity. As Samuel Hoffenstein wrote, "Wherever I go,/ I go too,/ And spoil everything." Ray's friend May Wilson had once copied that poem, with a brash error, on a trash-basket in her son's bedroom.

Contrary to his plan to disappear, like a drop of water dropped into water, Ray did not dissolve or evaporate. His body washed ashore. But what of his consciousness? Although Norman Solomon and a few other people phoned me to describe the experiences of a drowning person, we can't know, yet we can follow some images of consciousness as a bubble on a stream. A cursory glimpse into the Internet yields: "We know that water bubble is born in water, sustained in water and ultimately merges in water. Similarly, man has come out this bliss, is sustained in bliss and ultimately merges in bliss" [sic].

No evidence links Ray with any particular philosophy or religion except a generalized Buddhism, but he had studied widely. Whenever he demonstrated proofs of his life-world, water was his axiomatic image. With his mind concentrating on water, with the hope that "he became what he beheld," he acted on his desire to become water. The logic of water has been worked out in some religions: "As pure water poured into pure water remains the same." "Water in water, fire in fire, ether in ether, no one can distinguish them..." Ray had been summoned by water long before I met him in 1956.

Ray answered the call for him to come home to water, and so to become fully immanent. That transcendental continuum I mentioned in paragraph one, and those ikonicities, were false. Because of similar false perceptions and conceptions, the number 13 is a snag, resisting the flowing stream of numerals. It is merely one example of the distortions of consciousness. Ray had often been at a place in his spiritual adventures where any consciousness is false consciousness, distracting from the unity of the Universe. The only way to overcome the false consciousness of himself, as well as lies about #13, was to overcome consciousness itself. The point at which the resistance of consciousness is overcome is precisely where the sublime begins. For Ray, his sublime began after he left room #247, when, at 7:15 or was it 7:51?, on Friday the 13th, he reached his point of no return, for him his point of resistancelessness. He had at last arrived at the drowning he had promised himself. He swam like an integer toward his continuum.

6/30/2002

click here for

# 13 PHOTOS OF RAY JOHNSON

© William S. Wilson

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A GALLERY OF LETTERS by Ray Johnson

# JOHNSON THE PARIS CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL

Ray Johnson: New York Correspondence School (Whitney Museum, 45 Madison Avenue)

Dear Ray Johnson, I think your show (the letters, the postcards, the envelopes, the scraps of paper, the messages, the pictures and drawings and, above all, the cryptic enclosures) are startling, informative, dazzling, exciting, hilarious, daring, delicate, involving, endearing, fresh, stimulating, imaginative, delicious, diverting, delightful, mysterious, ambiguous, dizzying, alive, transparent, ephemeral, effervescent, playful, spontaneous, joyful, crazy.

John Green

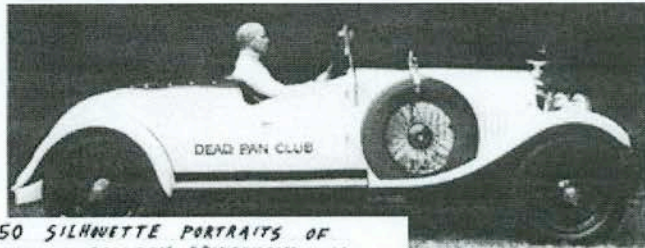
NEW YORK MAGAZINE

OCTOBER 5, 1970

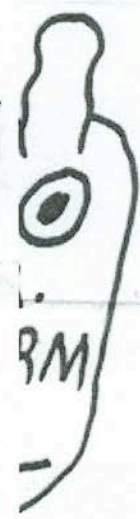
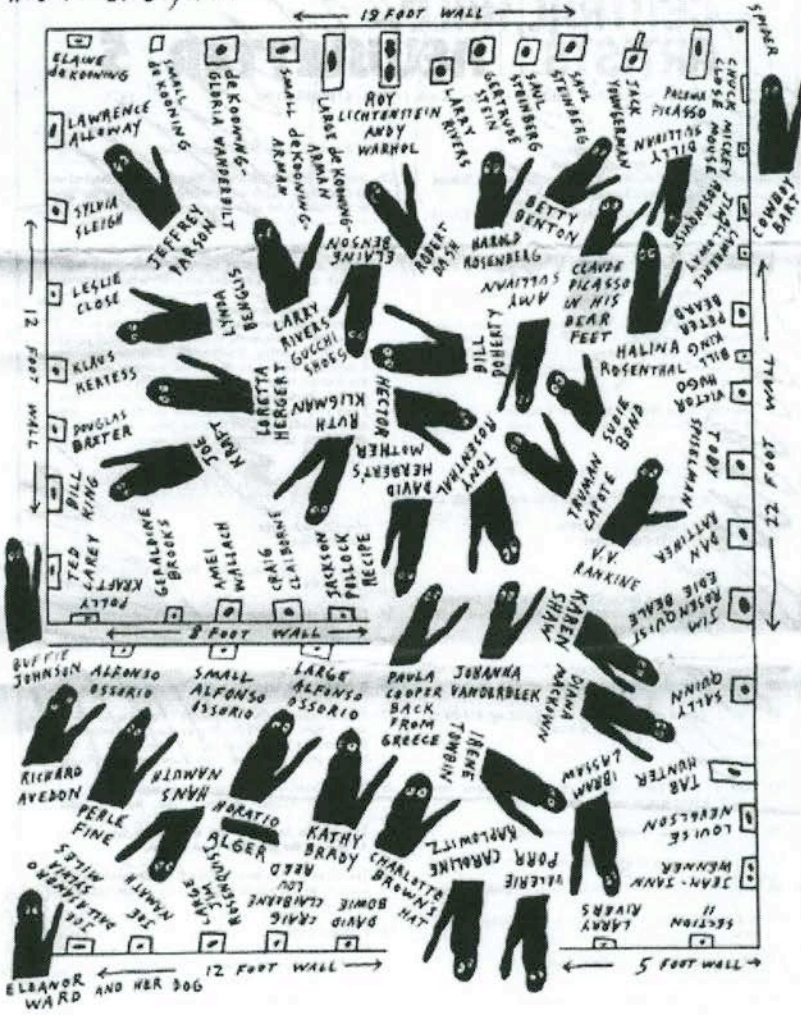




JOH



RAY JOHNSON ONE-MAN SHOW OF 50 SILHETTE PORTRAITS OF EASTHAMPTON ARTISTS & WRITERS - BENSON GALLERY, BRIDGEHAMPTON, AUGUST 20-30, 1977



MORE MAIL ART:

[crosses.net](http://crosses.net)  
<http://home.actlab.utexas.edu/emma/>

When Arnold Schoenberg composed, although he didn't complete the composition, his opera about Moses and his brother, Aaron, he titled it "Moses und Aron," misspelling Aaron so that he would have 12 letters rather than 13.



With 12 he got to participate in the 12 Tribes of Israel, the 12 stones of Joshua, and a dozen or more other 12s. Yet as I recall he died on the 13th day of a month. When Barnett Newman constructed his painting, "The Wild," 1 1/2 inches wide, and 96 inches high, he could calculate 144 square inches:  $12 \times 12 = 144$ . Armin Zweite, a German curator, gives the measurements of "The Wild" as  $95 \frac{3}{4} \times 1 \frac{5}{8}$  ins, intended as objective (and the painting might have been restretched & measured with a laser!). But Newman thought with numbers and with powers that are conveyed through numbers, not so much as quantities as qualities. In Selected Writings p. 271, Newman himself states that the dimensions of "The Wild" are  $96" \times 1 \frac{1}{2}"$ , but the scholar corrects him, destroying meanings as he goes. "Dimensions are....": I try to translate the word "are" into "set in motion," so in my translation, the dimensions of the canvas set in motion the numbers which permutate into 144. When Newman priced The Stations of the Cross, he priced the 14 paintings at \$12,000 each. Lithographs were as I recall \$1200. Would he have thrown in a 13th for free if one bought a dozen? [When Harry Abrams bought ten collages from Ray for \$100.00 each, he asked Ray to give him an extra. When I picked Ray up with my car after his meeting with Abrams, as I drove away he put his head in my lap and sobbed.] The meaningfulness of the price is itself priceless because it is a gift. One can't buy and sell significance. If a person bought a painting, on one plane a material object (commodity), then with philosophic mischief Newman threw in a meaning as a gift that, once having been received, cannot be sold, although it can be given to others without being diminished or depleted. Meaning is a gift that keeps on giving. With 144 one thinks of a gross; with 13, one thinks of the baker's dozen. Once when a baker gave Ray Johnson an extra bagel, a 13th, making a baker's dozen, Ray threw the 13th bagel back at him, saying, "If I had wanted it, I would have paid for it." [I used to remember him as having said, If I had wanted it, I would have asked for it. But now I remember differently. So much for my memory, but I do sense when a change is a correction that realigns an anecdote with the governing principles of Ray's thoughts. In case these numbers seem remote, look around: 7th Day Adventists have believed that only 144,000 souls will be saved, following a hint in Revelations, and adding the legend that each of the 12 Tribes of Israel was represented by 12,000 people at the Crucifixion, which gives the "demonic" 144,000 who shall be damned, countered by the angelic 144,000 who shall be saved. That number is an open wound in some Christian sects because not many people are going to make the cut. Whatever else he did, Ray counted.

### **Ray Johnson's BOOK ABOUT DEATH 1963-1965.**

I believe that I have now determined the contents and order of the pages of Ray Johnson's Book About Death, though, as with most things Johnsonian, the case in not

quite closed.

A Boop About Death [Page 1] "Mary Crehan, 4, choked to death..."  
3/8/63  
[Book About Death] Page Two "Cigar Bands from the Diane..." 3/15/63  
[Book About Death] [Page 3] "8AbABY" 9/10/63  
[Book About Death] [Page 4] "8 Ton Show ... Robin Gallery" 10/22/63  
A Book About Death Page 5 "Andy Warhol" 11/5/63  
[Book About Death] Page 6 "Michael Malce. Portugal Anesiapinto ..."  
3/17/64  
B[ook] A[bout] D[eath] Page 7 "Anne and Bill ... The Bad Ara ..."  
4/17/64  
[Book About Death] Page 8 Zuckermann Harpsichords 5/8/64  
[Book About Death] Page 9 "Cara Men Nda Mara" 7/8/64  
The Book About Death Page Ten "Send 96 ... A Brick Snake ..." 10/1/64  
[Book About Death] Page 11 "Cigar Band from the Ami Lowell ..."  
11/11/64  
The Book About D[eath] [Page 12?] "Send 96 ... Fred Herko ..."  
12/22/64  
Boom About Death Page 15 "Boom ... Papa R Snake ..." 2/19/65

[Square brackets enclose added information.]

The pages were printed in chronological order, and since "Fred Herko" was the only page printed between Page 11 and Page 15, Page 12 seems a reasonable choice for it. Perhaps Ray deliberately skipped Page 13, but why no Page 14?

(Each of the thirteen pages listed above was reproduced in the 1976 North Carolina Museum of Art exhibition catalogue in section 13 - items lent by Richard Craven - confirming what Ray told me on the phone in 1992, that the Book About Death was included in this publication.)

The order and contents of the list above draws on three sources: a photocopy of a photograph of the "original art works", i.e. mechanicals, that Ray sent me in 1992; a package of mechanicals titled "Book About Death please do not open" found by Muffet Jones in the archive at Richard Feigen; and crucially a folder of printing invoices that Ray kept, also in the archive now at Richard Feigen. (A quantity of offset printing plates kept together by Ray is in the archive too, though presently unavailable, these may throw a little more light on the case.)

There is a lot still to be said, but this can wait for the near future when I hope to write more about the Book About Death. Meanwhile I am wondering about a facsimile edition?

Clive Phillpot 2002/3/9

**"Grass grows green, and sap begins  
To tickle trees about the shins..."  
Samuel Hoffenstein**

dear Mr. Wilson,

John Held, Jr gave me you email-adress. i am a curator

from berlin and i am very much intersted in the (to me still quite complicated) story all around the death of ray johnson. and i would be very happy if you could help me with a few informations.

i am preparing an exhibition on "artistic gestures of disappearance". the exhibition will for the first time bring together Bas Jan Ader, Chris Burden, Arthur Cravan, Ray Johnson and Lee Lozano. to me Ray Johnson raises the question if he in a way "expressed" or "articulated" his death, his suicide, by sending last "mail art pieces" or by arranging his last day as a "last performance". it is hard for me to get a clear understanding of this, because the sources i could find differ very much and i hope that you, as a friend of ray johnson, can help me any further.

if in fact Ray Johnson gave visibility to his suicide or to his simpaty for others that faded away that way AS AN ARTIST, i would be very glad to tell this story in my exhibition, which means to show at least a few copys of works that have to be seen in relation to his death.

do you see any possibility to help me advancing my project? as unfortunately the opening of the exhibit will be on may 22nd already, i am a little bit in a hurry. if you want to have a look to the exhibition concept and context, i can mail you further information.

best regards,  
Alexander Koch

Alexander: Ray copied a poem onto a photograph of an egg that is just beginning to be cracked open by a chick. He does not name an author. With total uncertainty, I venture the hypothesis that the poet is Antonio Machado. I do feel certain that the date is 1954-55. The last line, "Will carry me forever/ towards somewhere else," seems so apt for Ray's disappearing and evaporating that many people who read the poem both saw its bearing on his final event, mailing himself into the sea, and judged that he had written it. While I am proposing evaporating as one of his primal images (what Binswanger calls an existential a priori), at the same time, with no contradiction, another of his governing images is at work in his desire to become water-in-water, following an ideal in Zen of becoming one with everything, and not having self-consciousness prevent a person from absorption in the Cosmos. Ray was not killing himself: he was performing other actions that inadvertently entailed his drowning. He was a fish out of water until he returned to his one true home, where he might have found, January 13, 1995, in Sag Harbor, that he had at last come home, yet would not be able to live there. His dying was not a work of art because it is categorical, not hypothetical, like a work of art as an aesthetic illusion, semblance or schein. But the themes, the ideas and the images, were similar, coinciding and overlapping, in his

religio-philosophic thoughts, in his erotic life, and in his drowning. The Oneness of the person with the Cosmos does seem to entail the end of consciousness, because our consciousness of the Cosmos locates us outside it. In a key sentence in the American sensibility, Henry Adams wrote: "The universe that had formed him [Henry Adams] took shape in his mind as a reflection of his own unity, containing all forces except himself."

### Unidentified poem in collage:

#### *Flowing Water*

I like the water which does not last  
Which never ends a sentence  
Which never has the same belly  
The same voice

One day I will wind myself in its skirt  
And be lost  
Like a baby chick  
In its shell

And I'll be the tiny autumn leaf  
The color of sun  
Of blood  
Of already not  
Making itself light and obedient  
So that the sea and the wind  
My loves  
Will carry me forever  
Towards somewhere else.

The work belongs to the Estate of Ray Johnson, Richard Feigen Gallery, in N.Y.

**With Ray**, a person meditating on his art must be prepared for montages of the mind. When he did a collage for my palindromic daughter Ara, he made an anagram: The Bad Ara. The anagram was used to point toward THEDA BARA, whose name was decoded as an anagram for ARAB DEATH. Not an individual collage, but the movement of the mind within his images and among his collages, is like a film in this sense: the still frames of the film become an illusion of movement within the consciousness of the spectator for whom the film is projected; and the real relations among Ray's separate pieces are not an objective actual object, but are constructed within the consciousness of the mind as it moves among the images. (Such interrelations, entirely mental, are weightless, and exist only in their perception (*esse est percipi*), hence when no one is conscious of them, those relations disappear and/or evaporate,

becoming Nothing). The poignancy of film is that when the film has been projected, afterwards, it has disappeared, because it certainly isn't in those still frames of material celluloid. Movies evaporate and become as though nothing. As Shakespeare wrote, "Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream" (Sonnet CXXIX). I have a photo of Ray performing his 2nd Nothing (1962, Spring), as the photo was mounted for display at the Whitney Museum and at the Wexner Center. My assistant is going to gather material he thinks could matter to your themes. Any more specific statements of your concept would sharpen the focus of my responses. In Italy, the American critic Henry Martin owns an important Ray Johnson collage picturing James Dean. -- Bill

#### TO RAY JOHNSON

I can't imagine what you thought you were doing  
what was the point of jumping off that bridge  
after so many years of playing it cool  
w/yr mail art & collage  
N.Y. success & enigmatic smile

I remember you once painted yr apartment white  
the floor the -ceiling the windows all yr collages  
all the same size in stacks all painted white  
wasn't that enuf?

I think I hate you.  
Your no-note, yr 3rd cousins claiming yr work &  
leaving yr body for weeks in a Long Island morgue

What was the point? Did you want us to notice  
to talk abt it? We did, you know.  
It turned us a minute away  
from the work we thought to be doing  
before we died.

Stop grinning.

—Diane di Prima, 1995

(to be published in the forthcoming *Death Poems for all Seasons*)

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