

# Friends of Ray, and Audiences of One

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basically it doesn't happen. In Ray's case, since his suicide he has become far more interesting to the art-world establishment. Without it, would he be getting all this attention?

We used to talk usually every week. When I told him I was doing an Artist's Choice show at the Modern ["Chuck Close: Head-On/The Modern Portrait," 1991], which consisted of portraits by artists in the museum's collection, he was devastated, because he didn't have a portrait in the collection.

So, the first thing he thought about was would the museum buy something? Not likely. Then: what if he

got a collector to give something? But the wheels of an institution like the Modern grind very slowly. So Ray, in his perversely subversive way, knew that Clive Philpot, the librarian at the Modern, never threw anything away. And if Ray began to correspond with him, this guy would compulsively log everything in and put it in boxes, which would circumvent the problems of getting into the collection. And Ray would get in through the back door.

So I call up Clive and say: I understand you have some Ray Johnson. So I selected a black-and-white Xerox of a bunny-head drawing, supposedly a portrait of Bill de Kooning but, of course, all the bunnies look exactly alike. I wanted to pick one that stood for Ray's correspondence because it was as correspondence that it got into the museum. It didn't have all the elegance and likableness and the craft that go into Ray's work, because that's not how it got into the Modern. I wanted it to stand out for its difference.

So I selected this 8-by-10-inch Xerox that cost maybe two cents to make and prominently put it into the exhibition next to extraordinarily expensive pictures by van Gogh and Picasso. It was a great triumph for him, and I think the people at the Modern got a kick out of it too.

**ARTHUR DANTO**, *philosopher, critic.*

I think he was the arch-insider, to tell you the truth. He was so involved with so many people who defined an art world at that time. What I think has to be brought out: there is genuinely a gay aesthetic in that operation,

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Photograph by Andre Grossmann/Collection of Christo and Jeanne-Claude, New York  
*A Detail of "Christo Two," 1967, by Ray Johnson.*

the fanlike attitude toward movie stars, the prizing of camp sensibilities, and I think he was very widely connected with a lot of people who knew the answers and could see his references and illusions. The Correspondence School was a tremendous breakthrough. It enabled him to make art of the kind he wanted for the people he wanted.

**FRANCES BEATTY**, *vice president of Richard Feigen & Co.*

I met Ray probably 20 years ago, when I was I doing my Ph.D. on Surrealist imagery, so you can imagine how interested I was in him. I lived in this little apartment, and on the wall I had 200 postcards of art from the 19th and 20th century and the Renaissance that I was using to study for my orals.

Ray walked in one night and he named practically every one of them; you knew this was a man who had absorbed all of art history. I joined the Feigen Gallery in 1980, and Richard and I tried for 17 years to do a Ray Johnson show. Ray was totally ambivalent. In the mid-1980's he said, "I've got it, Frances, we'll have," pause, "Nothing in the show." He wanted to be famous, but he realized if he ever was famous, it would be the end of his activity as an artist.

He called me about five days before he died, and he said: "You know, Frances, I think I'm finished doing this Nothing I'm involved in. I'm going to do Something, and you're going to be able to do the show." And he laughed this sweet Ray laugh, and then he jumped off the bridge. It was a complete performance. □

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