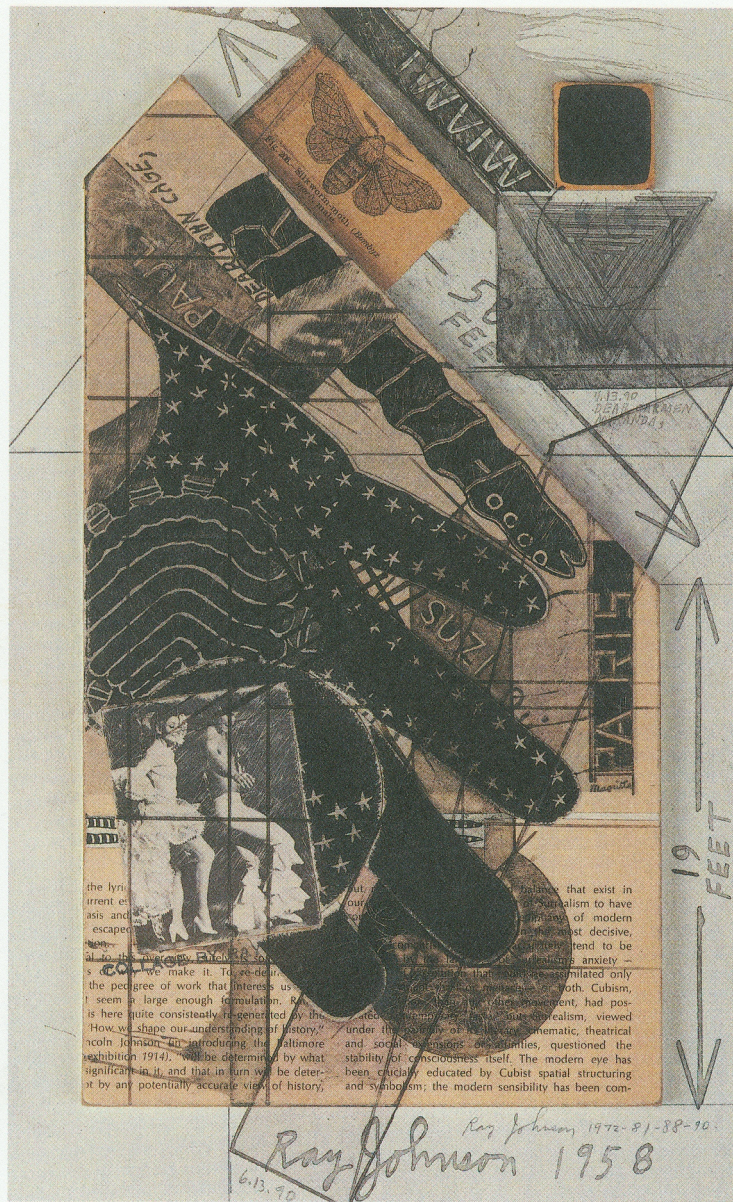


RAY JOHNSON



Ray Johnson
the cult of celebrity

June 8 – July 15, 2000

Opening Reception

Thursday

June 8, 2000

5 – 9pm

Cover:

Untitled (Hand Flamenco Dancers), 1958-72

Ink, paint, paper, print, printed text,

rubber stamp on board, 17 1/2 x 12 1/4 inches.

MANNY SILVERMAN GALLERY

Ray Johnson, collagist extraordinaire and founder of the New York Correspondance School is often referred to as the most famous unknown artist in the art world. He arrived in New York City in 1948 after having spent three years studying with Josef Albers, Ilya Bolotowsky, and Lionel Feininger at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. He soon became acquainted with Merce Cunningham, John Cage and Willem deKooning.

Johnson's earliest works were intricately painted boards which reflected the influences of Albers' color theories. He then began creating elaborate collages using images from popular culture, thus establishing himself as one of the earliest Pop artists. By the mid-1950s, without the aid of computers, scanners or Photoshop, Johnson was slicing and dicing images of Shirley Temple, James Dean, and the like, mixing them with text in a manner that would foreshadow Andy Warhol's investigations of celebrity. Johnson liked to say that he didn't make Pop art, he made "Chop Art." His "Chop Pop" was very painterly – the elaborately textured surfaces speak of Johnson's awareness of the lessons of the Abstract Expressionists. In the 1960s, Johnson began to write poetic texts and letters which integrated language and a unique system of signs into this work. These obsessive but extremely artful mixtures of images and texts were his hallmark.

Johnson's relationship to galleries and the formal art world was brief and problematic. His first solo exhibition in New York was in 1965 and his last in 1973. In 1968 after his friend Andy Warhol was shot, Johnson abruptly withdrew from Manhattan for Locust Valley, Long Island where he sequestered himself and his art away from the public. He rarely showed but continued to produce extraordinary works while simultaneously sending more and more "mail art" to friends, acquaintances and famous people he admired. These letters, collages and small assemblages (which he had been mailing out since the 1940s) formed what he called The New York Correspondance School (spelled this way) which was formally baptized in 1961. Ray was its president and one only had to respond to enroll. The organization grew to hundreds, and by the 1980s, Johnson was a legend in the artistic community though the general public had virtually no exposure to him.

For the last thirty years of his life, Johnson had confounded critics and friends alike by withdrawing from the Pop art scene which he had helped to create. He reemerged in the spotlight again in 1995 when his body washed ashore in Sag Harbor, Long Island. His apparent suicide was considered by many who knew him to be his final performance piece.

This is the first exhibition of Ray Johnson's work in Los Angeles. It is held in cooperation with Richard Feigen & Co., New York and the Estate of Ray Johnson. We also would like to extend our gratitude to Frances Beatty and Muffet Jones for their enthusiasm, scholarship and assistance with this exhibition.