

---

Alex Sainsbury

# Ray Johnson: Please Add To & Return

There are myriad Ray Johnsons: feted pioneer, obscure outsider, critic or craver of celebrity. He possessed seemingly contradictory impulses, to be private and public, to guard the exhibition of his work, and to lose it in mass circulation.

In the sixties, Ray Johnson inspired a group of artists to make images for distribution through the mail, eventually generating a vast international network. This became the mail art movement, which counted many hundreds of participants for whom Johnson was the 'sugerdada', but about which he felt ambivalent. As Ina Blom has described,<sup>1</sup> his 'correspondence art' was more monologue than conversation, as much about interrupting as reciprocity. Unlike his co-practitioners who celebrated mail art's erosion of authorship and competition, Johnson admitted the network served his own interests, maintaining himself at the centre of a social world that was the material for his art: 'my correspondence art only exists for one person – me.' Johnson was interested in the way this network of correspondents could inform his own life-art, which was collage.

Johnson constructed art out of social interaction – both real and imagined – gathering celebrities, the art world and friends into his work. He was interested in the links between people and things, by what connected one thing to another – often only by his own eccentric associations – and these relationships were translated into the interconnecting planes of his collages. Between 1965 and 1973 he made these for exhibitions in New York, but he had an ambivalent relationship with galleries and dealers. According to his long-time friend Bill Wilson, Johnson disdained those who benefited from the labour of others, possibly as a consequence of observing the exploitation of copper miners in Michigan amongst whom he grew up. Whatever the reason, from the mid-seventies until his death Johnson kept his collages mostly to himself. And while every week he mailed out hundreds of annotated photocopies, his collages were secreted in his house in Long Island. He would return to them incessantly, re-working and over-laying them, adding dates to record the interventions. They were found neatly stacked in his house after his death in 1995. Thus to the New York art world, despite once counting its stars amongst his friends, siphoning their inventions and social life into his art, Johnson became a marginal figure. The world he retreated from, on his own terms, ultimately passed him over.

## James Dean in the rain

Ray Johnson was born in 1927, the only child of Finnish immigrants. They were Lutheran, and his upbringing was supportive but strictly ordered (which might account for the subversive taxonomies he later relished). He was encouraged in his talent for painting, enrolling at the liberal Black Mountain College, North Carolina, in 1945. Johnson, like fellow student Robert Rauschenberg, was permanently affected by the Bauhaus sensibility that Josef Albers brought to Black Mountain: the use of the grid, the autonomy of colour and the potential of the found image.

Johnson's first interests were in the prevailing orthodoxy of painterly abstraction. At Black Mountain he began a long affair with a teacher, sculptor Richard Lippold, who introduced him to the New York art world and to the American Abstract Artists Group (which included Ad Reinhardt) with whom he first exhibited in 1949. But he soon turned to collage. Scrapbooks from his childhood demonstrate early interest in everyday imagery, but perhaps a period in the late forties on the West Coast amongst collagists such as Wallace Berman and Bruce Conner, with whom he had a life-long correspondence, inspired him. Also influential might have been his day job in commercial design, as it was for Andy Warhol, whom he befriended in the early fifties. Both were in thrall to the hyper circulation of images and became conduits for the mass-media age. But Johnson's work

---

<sup>1</sup>  
Ina Blom, *The Name of the Game: Ray Johnson's Postal Performance*, Oslo: National Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003.

was more about the subjective than Warhol's, a means to record a consciousness embedded within the culture of economic and image consumption. So onto the faces of Elvis Presley and James Dean, ubiquitous representations of glamour, fantasy is projected in a private code of pictograms.

He allowed the shape of his first formal collages in the fifties to be dictated by the everyday, constructing them from the cardboard pieces around which laundries fold shirts. He called these 'moticos', an always-plural word he invented, which he described as meaning fleeting and fragmented. Many have surfaces like the torn posters developed in Paris at the same time by Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé. It seems he did try and sell these, perhaps in galleries, but Lawrence Weiner remembers him offering them for sale from a pavement on the Bowery, where the homeless were known to hawk bits and bobs.

Johnson first used the mail to draw attention to his collages in the mid-fifties, sending small examples to curators and collectors such as Alfred H. Barr, Jr. But since high school, he had enjoyed doodling on letters, so he adapted effortlessly to the postal system and started sending work to his friends as a way of communicating intimately with singular audiences. At that time in New York, living was inexpensive, the art market slow and artists quite often made gifts of their work. In the small collages he sent in envelopes, he could match exacting design with the hilarious juxtapositions and arcane preoccupations of his own set theory. Johnson resented recipients ever selling these, as some later did. Conversely, he resented that the work in his gallery exhibitions rarely sold.

#### The frog is in the snake

Between 1965 and 1973 Johnson developed collages for solo exhibitions. Collage was ubiquitous in New York during that time, and Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns had already propelled it into the Pop age. Johnson embraced it as what Lucy Lippard called 'a life-art'<sup>2</sup> unifying moments of experience for a fugitive instant, stitching together facts to create the fantastical, assembling in order to disassemble. With matchless visual recall, and a practice already centred on art reference, he ran with the forms of his Dada and Surrealist predecessors (although he owed more to Max Ernst, whose son Jimmy he befriended, than to Kurt Schwitters). Johnson's collages are classical in that they are tightly controlled arrangements, rhythmic and proportioned, and organised within a system of grids. They are sometimes architectural and always carefully constructed and assembled. The frames become containers for what his friend the critic David Bourdon described as an 'intricate gossamer fantasy world'<sup>3</sup> analogous to the boxes used by Joseph Cornell, an older artist Johnson admired and sought out.

When he first moved to New York, Johnson lived across the hall from John Cage, whom he'd also met at Black Mountain, and took after his Zen-inspired adherence to indeterminacy and chance. Connecting one collage plane to another by a constant process of free-association could dismantle the dominance of the grid and let spontaneity and chance encounter assert themselves. Nevertheless, all Johnson's work is re-work, a return from somewhere: from the media, from his recall or from the physical remains of previous works. Collages might be modified between one exhibition and the next, and he also recycled old material to include in the new. Fragments of old works were cut into tile-size 'tesserae', edges meticulously sandpapered to give each its own frame, and applied to the surfaces of new work. Perhaps originally inspired by the attention given to Mayan symbology at Black Mountain College, he also drew pictograms onto collage surfaces, which he explained as miniaturised silhouettes of past works. Thus the viewer is sent on a wild

---

<sup>2</sup> Lucy Lippard, 'Special Deliverance', in Donna de Salvo and Catherine Gudis (eds.), *Ray Johnson. Correspondences*, Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University; Paris: Flammarion, 1999, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup> David Bourdon, 'Ray Johnson Collages: Valentine/Snakes/Movie Stars', in *Works by Ray Johnson*, New York: Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, 1984, p. 9.

goose chase: there is no need to understand the back stories because the image combinations and pictograms are intended to dazzle without the need for fruitless digging. Only partly comprehensible, Johnson's works hover in their own way between figuration and abstraction.

To veil clues that might divert the viewer from the immediacy of the collage surfaces Johnson draws his figures from a private lexicon. Some references are fairly obvious – dollar bills to art market anxiety or snakes to phalluses and turds – but most are oblique, like potato mashers for instance, to which Johnson dedicated a whole show, at Angela Flowers Gallery in London in 1973. Johnson thought of himself as a masher (of ideas and people) as well as in the old sense, as one who makes inappropriate advances (even through people's mailboxes). There is also plentiful sexual coding in the work; the use of wooden rails and knobs, or the word peaches split into 'pe' and 'aches' and pasted next door to a photo of a celebrity whose last name was also slang for gay sex, Peaches Browning.

Bill Wilson writes that 'for Ray Johnson reality is in coincidental resemblances'.<sup>4</sup> Things and people were interesting to him mostly for what they are like (or look like or sound like) and how they connect or collide (for instance as hybrids, or joined twins), much as fragments do in a collage. Wilson explains that Johnson 'passes the verbal through the visual': one collage has one of Johnson's eyes replaced by their sound-alike, 'ice'. In another collage using the same photograph, his eye is replaced with stars ('stars in his eyes'). In another, the artist's face is literally overwhelmed by cut-up shards of old work ('the artist hides behind his work').

Throughout the time he made exhibitions, Johnson was also sending images through the mail. Whereas in the exhibited collages he was modifying works himself, in the mailings he could elaborate his collage project by including others in what he called his 'game of ping pong'. Some startling collaborations exist, such as the exchange of text and pictograms with George Brecht, although usually Johnson was more conductor than team player. He would tailor mailings to recipients, invoking in-jokes for his friends: thread and curves – symbols of femininity – for Anne Wilson, and a horse (always well-endowed) for Billy Linich. The mailings were also an opportunity for free-play with some of his peers' formal inventions, absorbing and subverting everything with the personal. While Robert Motherwell's abstraction is transformed into a cock and balls, Andy Warhol's name is repeated in Pop art series (he responded to Minimalism in his mid-sixties collages by arranging 'tesserae' in serial squares) and Conceptual art is teased with cut-out dictionary definitions.

After Bill Wilson mailed him image fragments as potential raw material for collages in the late fifties, Johnson started using such enclosures for his mailings as they were quicker to construct than collages. Then he could also manifest his interest in adherence and conjunction, using zippers, buttons and plenty of tape to stick these fragments together. Johnson was also a brilliant writer, free-association and coincidence being good tools for lyricism. Mailings, framed as letters, allowed him to extend the visual-verbal combinations of his whole collage project. He was interested in the arrangement of writing as image, in the page as field, in parallel to the concrete poetry of his Fluxus peers. And for punning and word play, mailings were an ideal vehicle.

From 1960, when friends came to help him, taking mail for covert franking and posting in office buildings, the mass circulation of mailings began. Fluxus artist Ed Plunkett jokingly suggested the term 'New York Correspondence School', conflating the movement of Abstract Expressionism with a correspondence course, and in the spirit of collaborative indeterminacy,

---

<sup>4</sup> William S. Wilson, Foreword to Ray Johnson, *The Paper Snake*, New York: The Something Else Press, 1964.

Johnson accepted it (he had much in common with Fluxus artists, using rubber stamps or instructions and sharing the idea of art as network).

All Johnson's work seems performed, as does his life, but he also made specific performance pieces. As with his collages, spontaneity informed his approach. In 1960 he called his first performance *Nothing*, which he described as 'an attitude as opposed to a happening'. 'Nothing' became a trademark, setting it as a paradox of Zen plenitude alongside the baroque density of his collages. He would sometimes offer to show 'Nothing' in half-interested response to exhibition invitations, once 'filling' a plinth with it. Fluxus artist Alison Knowles describes the anti-strategy of these performances as a way for Johnson to assert his presence. In the seventies and eighties the purpose of Johnson's performances was to gather mail art correspondents. He would invite The New York Correspondence School to 'events' often called after imaginary fan clubs (for Paloma Picasso or David Letterman, for instance). His friend John Willenbecher remarked: 'A lot of them [Correspondence School events] were very boring. They were like cocktail parties without drinks.'

Johnson cited the week in which he was mugged, and Andy Warhol was shot, as the reason he moved in 1968 from Manhattan to Locust Valley, a small town on Long Island. He rarely invited anyone home, which was spare of furniture and crowded with collages. However he was often on the phone, persistently ringing friends, who reported hearing him sandpapering, as ever cutting up old work for new. In the early years of self-imposed exile he continued to produce some of his best work for exhibitions. In 'Dollar Bills and Famous People Memorials' at Feigen Gallery in 1971, the dark planes of the collages become veils and tongue-in-cheek epitaphs for the glamour of celebrity culture, with its lists of forgotten stars.

#### Planet failure

In the mid-seventies Johnson stopped making collages for exhibition. From 1980 he refused regular requests for an exhibition from Frances Beatty, director of Feigen Gallery. When, in 1990, Gagosian Gallery enquired about his collages, Johnson reportedly replied that they were available, but for one million dollars each. It seems he felt more comfortable using the postal system to locate audiences. But deadpan refrains of 'one million dollars' and of 'failure, failure, failure' pervade his later work.

Johnson did have ploys to maintain a living. Once or twice he was contacted by foreign collectors, for whom he especially selected and sold collages from a motel room, rented by the half-hour, usually reserved for sexual transactions. In the mid-seventies he made a series of profiles of friends, collectors and celebrities, which he sometimes offered to sell back to them. The idea of the silhouette, a minimal empirical description, like other tropes of Johnson's, was borrowed from Duchamp, an artist he idolised (regularly using silhouettes of Duchamp's *Étant donnés* as a ground for collages). In *Silhouette University*, 1976, the sitters for these empty portraits are listed and the names, a mix of the well known and obscure, the public and the private, are all levelled with a number, and float free from those they name, to mark a moment in the city's social life.

Johnson's collages became palimpsests, layers over layers. He would often return to re-work them, meticulously dating each intervention. Sometimes he cut sections out of them, to send off to someone. The chaotic overlaying of planes, on which hilarious rhetoric and quotations and slices of mail multiply, is only just held by the overarching grid. Pictograms become ubiquitous,

---

5

Wendy Steiner, 'The Webmaster's Solo: Ray Johnson Invites us to the Dance', in *Ray Johnson. Correspondences*, op. cit., p. 73.

with swans, prawns, penises or faeces sketched onto surfaces with childlike abandon (he once said he 'never got out of childhood'). The final effect is a grand and calculated act of defacement, as Wendy Steiner wrote: 'Johnson stole everything, wrote on everything and defaced everything.'<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile the mail art movement became an international phenomenon, with its egalitarian, anti-market mission circulated from San Francisco, Toronto, Rome, Budapest and elsewhere. If the first generation of mail artists had Fluxus affiliations, the second was more disparate. It included General Idea who started *FILE Magazine*, which denounced as 'quick kopy krap' the photocopies that characterised much mail art activity through the seventies. But Johnson took successfully to photocopying as an extension of the offset lithography he had begun in the late fifties as advertising for his commercial design. In 1977 he rented a Minolta photocopier with a National Endowment for the Arts Award, which enabled him to increase circulation. He used 'letter-size' sheets (the American equivalent of A4) to broadcast with exquisite design the intersection of his imagination with the wider culture. The closer he felt to the recipient, the more he might embellish these mailings: many sheets were sent out with instructions to add to, return or send on. Blank profiles of the artist's head, for example, were circulated to countless artists and would-be artists, to annotate and disperse.

Many of these later mailings relate to the art world and Johnson's ambivalence towards it. This seems not so much an institutional critique (although the works' fun-poking has an element of that) as confessional filtering of his own preoccupations: 'Dear Whitney Museum, I hate you, love Ray Johnson.' (The Whitney had given him a show in 1971 that he gave over to the mail art network.) As always, he appropriates and teases the formal accomplishments of his peers; Carl Andre's serial floor tiles are individualised, and Bridget Riley's Op art lines become a perm for her hair.

Lists of names are the refrain of the work, used like elegies to those remembered and those forgotten, the background hum of our culture as well as Johnson's concerns. In the eighties, the names appeared alongside drawings of elephant heads (like trophies) from which Johnson morphed his last and best-known device, the bunny. The bunnies with their rictus grins are both the signature of the artist and a portrait of everyone, as specific and as general as the face of Elvis Presley.

Ray Johnson's life and art seem a set of opposites, insider and outsider, public and elusive, confessional and obscure. Finally, overlooked by Manhattan's art world in the nineties, but inundated by mail art requests, he must have become exhausted by his all-consuming life performance. On Friday, 13 January 1995, after announcing his best performance yet to most of the names in his phone book, he swam into a freezing sea and was returned by the tide.