

Ray Johnson

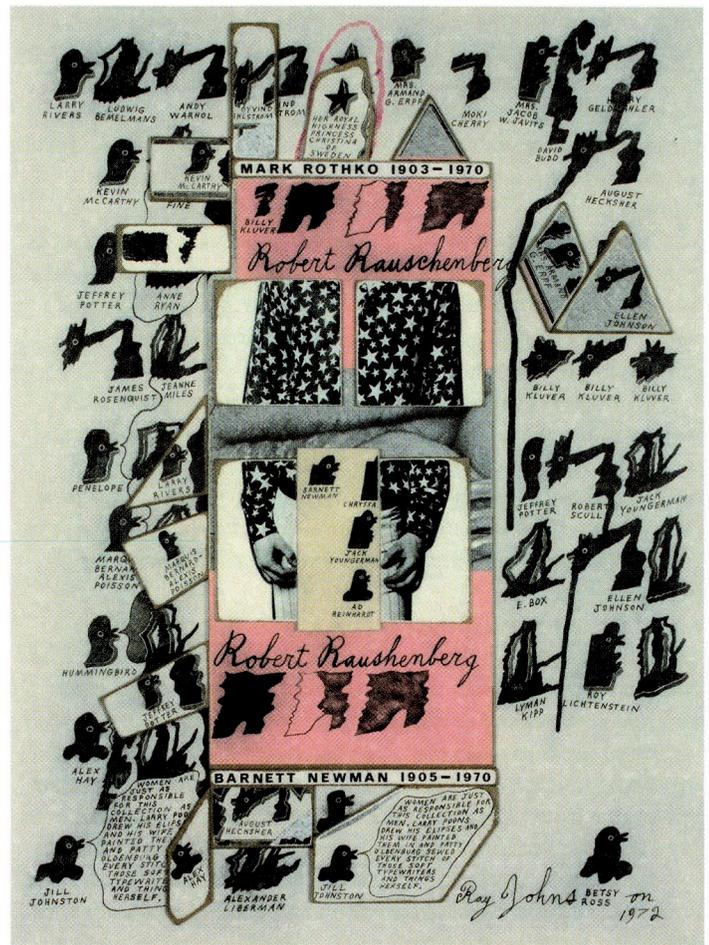
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6 November 2009 – 10 January 2010

Mostly collages, small object drawings and works of mail art, the production of North American artist Ray Johnson (1927–1995) evidences his relationship to the art world. The scale of his works, as well as his materials and methods, attest to a highly contemporary practice: mainly, attempting to understand the functioning of the art community. His work can be described as proto-Pop art, though that would suggest it never fully ripened and, for that reason, did not enjoy the visibility of the work of other artists. The real reason for this, though, lies in his method: Ray Johnson attempted to slip into intermediate spaces. His work aspires to an unusual level of intimacy (its subject is the filter and the outcome). It is, to a degree, folklore-like (in the most critical sense of the term), which also serves to remove it from the logic of production and mass consumerism.

The son of Finnish immigrants, Ray Johnson was encouraged to take an interest in art from a young age. In 1945, he enrolled in Black Mountain College, where he came into contact with artists like Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Josef Albers. Indeed, Albers was the one who introduced Johnson to Bauhaus, a school that would heighten Johnson's interest in the use of networks, the autonomy of colour and the power of images found by chance. Richard Lippold was one of Johnson's professors at Black Mountain College; he introduced Johnson to the New York art world and the group of abstract North American artists with whom he showed his work for the first time in 1949. That event would mark the rest of his career. New York, and the creative, aesthetic and political effect it had on the artist, would prove crucial to structuring Ray Johnson's work for more than three decades.

Shortly after that exhibition, Johnson – perhaps influenced, like Andy Warhol, by his work in commercial design – began to work in collage. These early collages are highly influenced by the formal education he received at Black Mountain College, and a concern with daily life runs through them. To make them, for



RAY JOHNSON, *Robert Rauschenberg*, 1972. Private collection. Photo: George Eksts

instance, Johnson used the pieces of cardboard employed by dry cleaners to fold dress shirts. He called these works *moticos*, a word he created to describe something fleeting and daily.

In the mid-1950s, Ray Johnson started using the mail to draw attention to his collages, sending them along with small messages to curators, collectors and friends. One example of this work is the series called *The Luckies* (1959–61), which is Johnson's response to a poem about Charles *Lucky Lindy* Lindbergh that his friend Gerald Ayres had sent him.

Starting in 1960, he began to engage in mass mailings and, hence, his work began to circulate on a much larger scale. The Fluxus artist Ed Plunkett jokingly proposed calling this movement the *New York Correspondence School*, a term that Ray Johnson immediately adopted.

In 1960, Ray Johnson also began to do performances, beginning with *Nothing*, whose origin, according to Johnson, lay in the intention to oppose to art happenings, that is, to oppose the idea that something happen. Indeed, *Nothing* was, on many occasions, the artist's response to offers to show in galleries. In any case, most of his performances from the 1960s and 1970s were associated with the *New York Correspondence School*. Their titles were based on imaginary fan clubs, like, for instance, one in honour of Paloma Picasso.

From 1965 to 1973, Ray Johnson, like many New York artists, created collages for his solo exhibitions. The formal structure of Johnson's collages from those years is similar to the ones he produced in the 1950s; their content mostly revolves around artistic references. These collages were constructed with great skill and precision. They display an interest in indeterminacy and chance inspired by the Zen philosophy he learned from John

Cage. Indeed, his collages could change from one exhibition to the next, and he sometimes made use of materials recycled from earlier collages. In them, Johnson created complex surfaces. These works lurk between figuration and abstraction; their meanings are interconnected and sometimes hidden in the form. Their range of references is rich, from the personal to the more general.

Another constant in Ray Johnson's collages is his interest in language and puns. The fragments of the collages are an excuse to explore the relationships between things and persons, and the verbal serves to reinforce the visual: the puns help us to understand the images' varied associations.

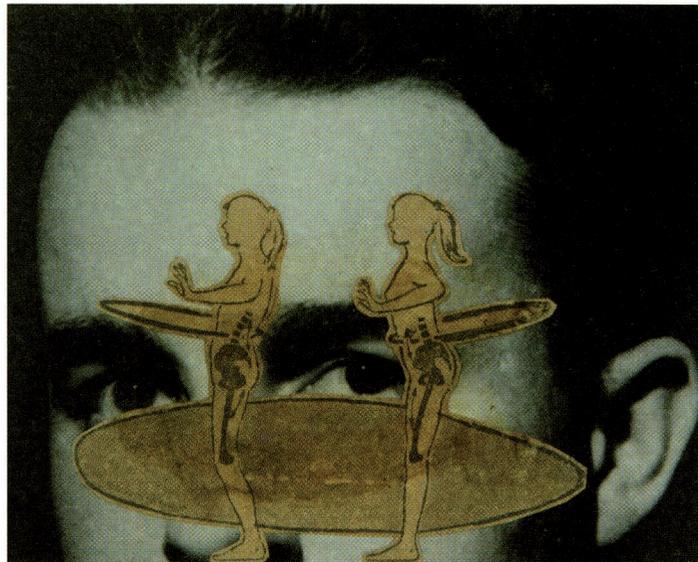
Throughout this period, Ray Johnson continued to send images in the mail. If in his collages he was the one to alter the works, in his mail works, those alterations were effected by others, generating an exchange based on intervention, what he called *a game of ping-pong*. These mail works were often customised for the recipient, alluding to private jokes that gave rise to the exchange.

In the late 1970s, Johnson stopped creating collages for exhibition, rejecting all offers to exhibit that came his way. The collages he produced in those years had more and more layers, and Johnson worked meticulously on pre-existing collages. This increased the importance of superimposition. The collages' contents grew increasingly more complex, with interconnected quotations from different moments. On occasions, Johnson even cut out entire sections of his collages to send them to someone.

Meanwhile, mail art had become an international phenomenon. Ray Johnson began to use the photocopy as a prolongation of the cyclostyle lithographs he had started making in the late 1950s, using letter-size paper (the North American equivalent of A4) to distribute his works. The content of these works combines Johnson's imagination, personal references and elements taken from general culture. The closer the artist felt to the recipient, the more he would embellish the dispatches: many were sent with instructions to add something, return it to the sender or forward it to someone else. The blank profiles of the artist's head with the indication that the recipient write something down and send it on, for instance, eventually reached countless artists and would-be artists.

Many of these late mail art works were connected to the art world and Johnson's ambivalent relation to it. They entailed not so much a criticism of art institutions as a reflection on their concerns. One example is the letter *Dear Whitney Museum: I hate you. Love, Ray Johnson*. In 1971, the Whitney held an exhibition of Johnson's work that he dedicated entirely to mail art. In his work, he also appropriated the formal achievements of other artists, like Carl André, and lampooned them.

Throughout his work, Ray Johnson created a new economy of messages, a very personal and ambitious form of concrete poetry. Even before the Pop art movement, Johnson's work evidenced a fascinating anthropological dimension that dealt with his perception of the society of distribution and consumption, as well as shrewd references of the question of gender in culture at that time.



RAY JOHNSON, *Untitled (Twin Hoops)*, 1963. Courtesy The Estate of Ray Johnson at Richard L. Feigen & Co. Photo: Bill Orcutt.

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Activities

Friday 6 November

7 pm Lecture by Ina Blom (Oslo University), author of *The Postal Performance of Ray Johnson* (MIT Press, 2003). Debate with the participation of Alex Sainsbury, exhibition's curator, and Chus Martínez, MACBA chief curator. MACBA Auditorium. Free admission. Limited seating

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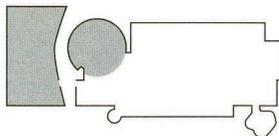
Ray Johnson. Please Add To & Return. Barcelona: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009. With texts by Ina Blom, Chus Martínez and Alex Sainsbury. Catalan Edition (with Spanish and English translations)

Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona
Plaça dels Àngels, 1
08001 Barcelona
www.macba.cat

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