

duced to transient quarters in a hotel and in desperate straits, he wrote to Furst, "I find it hard enough to read a book, even in Italian. . . . I don't even know where to keep the books. There's no room for them in the hotel and at the office they're stolen. When I go home, if you can call it that, I have to be a nurse, not reader."

Thus the celebrated poet entreated the obscure American to rescue him, and Furst, fluent in French and German as well as English and Italian, agreed to grind out reviews of authors as radically different as Joyce Cary and Ivy Compton-Burnett, Julien Green and F. Scott Fitzgerald. He also produced critical evaluations in Italian of Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. In fact, Furst was so learned Montale had to caution him to tone it down a notch or two. "Don't display too much knowledge of English and American literature," Montale wrote him. "You should show an average knowledge which could be attributed to me."

Although Montale paid Furst for his efforts, he never publicly acknowledged him, never granted him the recognition that might have made his "negro" a full citizen in the republic of letters. What's worse, Montale appears to have been two-timing Furst. As it was in his romantic life, so it was in his literary life; he just couldn't remain monogamous. He had a second ghostwriter, a woman, who translated English-language books into Italian and let Montale sign his name to them.

The *Collected Poems* contains an essay on "Reading Montale," but it does not mention the contretemps that erupted a decade ago when the novelist and filmmaker Mario Soldati, friend to both Montale and Furst, published a book detailing their relationship. In his volume of reminiscences, *Rami Secchi* ("Barren Branches"), Soldati excoriated Montale for his failure to credit Furst. At the same time, *Il Giornale* of Milan published several letters from Montale to Furst that corroborated the story and divided opinion in Italian arts and letters. Marco Vallora noted in *La Repubblica* that both Alexandre Dumas père and Luigi Pirandello had followed similar ghostwriting practices; Alberto Moravia wrote in *Corriere della Sera* that "it is difficult to justify Montale's conduct, whatever the circumstances in which he found himself."

Many might object that this debate is an inconsequential sidebar. But nobody appears to have seriously researched the subject by following up journalistic revelations a decade old. In a detailed chronol-

ogy, Galassi notes that Montale often averaged a hundred articles annually, a flabbergasting number for a deadline-phobic poet. It wouldn't simply be interesting, it would be intellectually responsible to determine exactly how much of Montale's prose Furst produced.

Moreover, publication of Galassi's landmark volume of translations invites a reassessment of Montale's own translations. Surely anyone who translated Shakespeare, Yeats, Eliot and Faulkner deserves

close reading. How good was Montale's work? How good and how much was actually his ghostwriter's work?

Even assuming that Montale wrote every word of every poem published in his name, scholars should do a textual analysis and set this issue to rest. Why don't the worker bees in what Richard Howard refers to as the "academic cottage industry" of Montale criticism compare the great man's verse with the poetry of his obscure friend? ■

ART

Correspondance School Art

ARTHUR C. DANTO

If we think of a historical period as defined by what the French have usefully designated a *mentalité*—a shared set of attitudes, practices and beliefs—then periods end when one *mentalité* gives way to another. Something like this happened in 1962, when Abstract Expressionism came to an end—not necessarily

because the movement was internally exhausted but because a new artistic *mentalité* was in place. And these *mentalités* tend to rewrite the history of art in their own image. So Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, who would at best have been marginal to the Modernist aesthetic to which Abstract Expressionism subscribed, became the generative figures of the new period. Picasso, who had cast so daunting a shadow over Modernist artistic practice, was now esteemed primarily for having invented collage. Not everyone, of course, crossed the boundary into the new *mentalité* at once. There were many in the art world—artists as well as critics—who continued to frame the meaning of art in terms of the *mentalité* in which they had grown up. They were in, one might say, but not of the new period. It is possible that the new artistic mentality was but part of a larger one—that of the sixties. If that is true, then the transforming forces that explain the uprisings of 1968 must already have been operative in artistic precincts in the early years of the decade. Although 1968 is often explained with reference to a revulsion against the Vietnam War, this reverses the direction of causality: That revulsion is explained by the new *mentalité*. (What explains the *mentalité* itself? I have no idea!)

The new *mentalité* surfaced in 1962, when the artistic practices of a loosely structured group of American, European and Japanese artists began to be referred to as

Fluxus. The name was invented by George Maciunas, the prophet if not the founder of the movement, and it expressed a dissatisfaction with the kind of compartmentalization of artistic endeavors made explicit in the writings of Clement Greenberg. Under Modernist imperatives, Greenberg claimed in a famous essay, each medium must aspire to a pure state of itself, expunging any borrowings from other media. Fluxus works, by exuberant contrast, disregarded the borderlines between music, writing, theater and the visual arts, so that every work of Fluxus art was in principle a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. And the idea of artistic purity was not the only erstwhile value demoted by Fluxus. Its art was ephemeral and irreverent, often trivial and typically took the form of a joke.

What Maciunas designated proto-Fluxus works were created in the late fifties, when Abstract Expressionism was at its peak, so the art existed before its practitioners were conscious of themselves as forming a movement. The two *mentalités* coexisted for some years. The difference in attitude and practice, however, would have made it difficult to imagine that the concept of art was wide and elastic enough to accommodate the characteristic expressions of them both. The paradigm Abstract Expressionist work would be a large, heroic canvas affirming the agony of creation and the tragic view of life, such as Barnett Newman's painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*

(1951). A not untypical Fluxwork would be Robert Watts's *Female Underpants* (circa 1966), displaying a patch of silk-screened pubic hair and worn by performers in a Fluxconcert irrespective of gender. The situation more or less resembled a marvelous scene in Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, in which the tragic heroine shares an island with commedia dell'arte buffoons who try to snap her out of her grief by making faces and performing cartwheels.

Fluxus objects raised in an acute way what Abstract Expressionism took for granted—the philosophical question of the nature of art. Duchamp had raised this question through his ready-mades, which is why he was counted a proto-Fluxus master. And Cage brought to Fluxus a certain Zen disregard for sharp boundaries. Ben Vautier, a Swiss who joined the movement in 1962, declared that *everything* is art and began signing whatever came to hand. (Warhol, too, once said he would sign anything.) Zen, in the form in which the deeply influential Dr. Suzuki expounded it, saw no distinction between sacred objects—like a statue of Buddha—and anything else. The avant-garde of 1962 was accordingly driven by concerns that could not easily be translated back into the problems of Modernism, in part because the formalism that had come to define Modernist aesthetics had no application to, say, *Female Underpants*.

Fluxus was defined less by a style of object than by a sense of performance. Fluxus objects were more or less props for art as a system of performances, rather than focuses of aesthetic contemplation. I was once shown a roomful of Fluxworks, acquired from a collector by the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles. What they had in common was mainly the fact that they would not have been seen as even in candidacy for the status of art before 1962, and the fact that it was almost impossible to understand what they were about without art-historical reference to the actions to which they testified. One can get a good idea of such an aggregate from an illustration in *Fluxus Codex*—a kind of *catalogue raisonné* of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus collection in Detroit—which shows a work of 1965 by Willem de Ridder, called *European Mail-order Warehouse/Fluxshop 1965*. Valises and toyboxes—and a hairbrush—are piled up together with books, journals and posters, with FLUXUS printed on them. The critic Robert Pincus-Witten writes that while “the lion’s share of Fluxus work assumes the form of transient pieces

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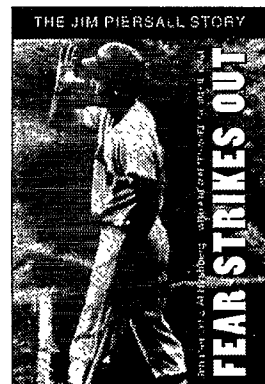
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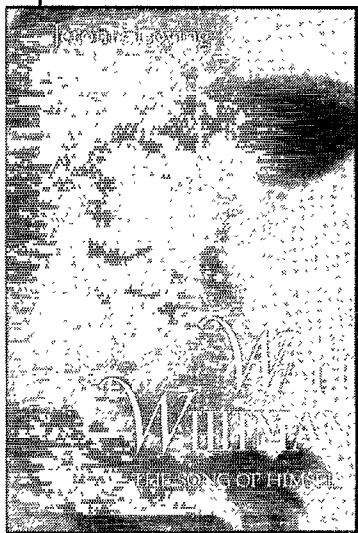


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of paper—handbills and broadsides or boxed thematic accumulations,”

Fluxus is an art jammed chock-a-block with minute containers of all shapes and sizes, little wooden and plastic boxes found in the “for sale” streetside cartons of the Canal Street supply houses—corrugated cardboard, mailing tubes, scraps of paper, plastic indecencies from the local joke or tourist shop, miniaturized Pop gewgaws of prepossessing verisimilitude—cucumbers, fried eggs—ball-bearing puzzles that tax manual skill, articulated plastic and wooden take-apart puzzles and games, meaningless gadgets displaced from household and hobbyist needs, the tiny paraphernalia of the home workshop and playroom.

They are the leavings—behind of an art that did not so much make these objects as ends in themselves but use them as a means of communication with other artists who participated in the Fluxus *mentalité*.

Ray Johnson's work, now on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art (until March 21), has somewhat the look of a Fluxshop's inventory, arrayed in display cases and consisting of postcards, letters, collages, drawings, enclosures and attachments, and envelopes, to and from what Johnson described in 1969 as “several hundred New York Correspondance School International artist and writer ‘members.’” The deliberate misspelling “correspondance” is characteristic of the ludic spirit of The New York Correspondance School, understood, in Fluxus terms, as a verb rather than a noun—as a way of interacting rather than the means by which interaction is achieved. And the idea of a “New York Correspondance School” may have been a jokey transform of “New York School,” the term coined by Robert Motherwell as a label for those who did what Greenberg—hating “action painting” as a term—simply called “New York—style painting.” If The New York Correspondance School was not itself a Fluxus work, it expressed the spirit of Fluxus, whose membership, like the network of New York Correspondance, was in constant, well, flux. Johnson may have been a Fluxus alumnus, like so many artists who participated in its eccentric manifestations—Joseph Beuys and Nam June Paik, for example; Yoko Ono (and, through her, John Lennon), Claes Oldenburg, Allen Kaprow (the inventor of Happenings) and Christo, all of whose works are grounded on Fluxus premises. The movement had no pope, the way Surrealism had Breton, empowered to say

who was or was not a member. So artists came and went.

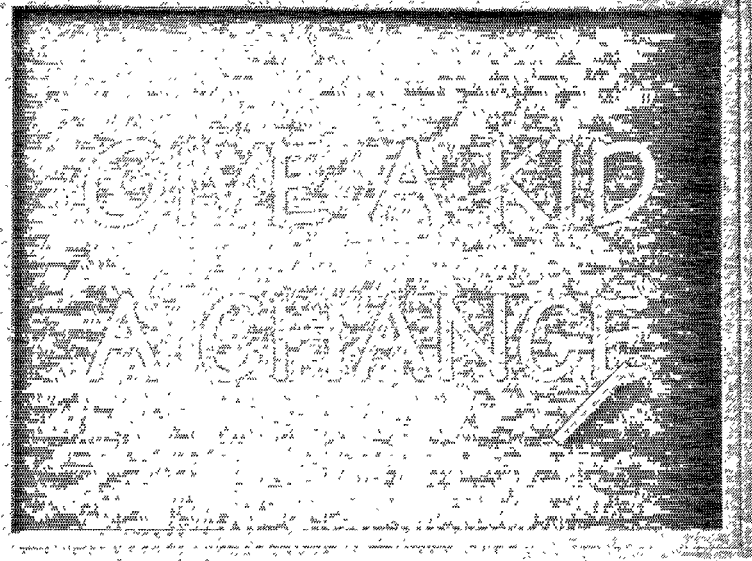
Most of the Correspondance School members are fairly obscure (as were, for that matter, most members of Fluxus). The artist John Willenbecher identified for me the exceedingly obscure Jeter Stalcup, “which only a few initiates might know was the name of someone Bill Wilson's mother, May, found in an early computer-generated dating service shortly before she moved to New York in her 70s.” The letters, often ornamented by simple drawings or by stick-ons, usually instructed the recipient to perform some fairly simple action. The Correspondance School was a network of individuals who were artists by virtue of playing the game. Some of them were what Willenbecher terms “initiates” by virtue of sharing—or at least appreciating—Johnson's sense of humor: a readiness to respond to a certain kind of joke or pun, visual or verbal; to take trivial things as monumentally important; and to profess a fan's dedication to certain borderline celebrities like Anna May Wong or Ernie Bushmiller, who drew the comic strip *Nancy*.

One of the activities of the Correspondance School consisted in calling meetings of fan clubs. In one of the display cases there is a flier, on cheap red paper, announcing an Anna May Wong club meeting at the New York Cultural Center, to take place on June 3 of the year it was sent, from 1 to 3 PM. On it Johnson drew a number of cartoon bunny heads, looking much alike but, in deference to Anna May Wong herself, all with slanted eyes. The bunny head was Johnson's logo, and since the bunny heads on the flier all look alike, the implication of a common *mentalité* is graphically conveyed. The heads designated the putative members of the fan club—fifty-two by my count. I think of it as a kind of class picture of the school's more faithful members. I know—or know of—perhaps eighteen. I suppose that what one did at such a club meeting was to compare Anna May Wong's roles with one another. Or is it possible that no one turned up at the center, and the meeting consisted in just its own announcement?

I expect that every letter Johnson ever sent was part of the New York Correspondance School archive, but the characteristic communication would have been addressed—in all senses of the word—to an individual who could be counted on to perform the simple task the letter enjoined (which sometimes consisted in sending the letter on to someone else) or to connect the dots in such a way as to reveal the joke. Sometimes the letter is generic, implying,

with qualification, a bulk mailing. In one letter—to someone named “George”—Johnson described spilling boiling water on himself, causing him to take a tetanus shot at the emergency clinic. He asks George to photocopy the page, “sending one copy to Andy Warhol at 33 Union Square, New York City. I could use about forty-four xerox pages for N.Y.C.S. mailing.” It is signed with a bunny logo, interestingly rotated, as in Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit puzzle. One can see the quality of Johnson’s wit when one considers that the horizontal ears make the logo look like the two-fingered victory sign turned on its side. Not unexpectedly, he writes “Peace” just above the logo. The letter is dated April 22, 1969, so the rotated bunny is a muted political gesture. Johnson’s basic form of perception consisted in seeing what Wittgenstein called “aspects”—the duck in the rabbit (or vice versa), the peace sign in the victory sign rotated, the way “PALS” and “SLAP” are anagrams, as if there were some deep truth about friendship hidden in this fact. To appreciate the disclosure of these meanings qualified one as a member of the NYCS. To continue the play required that one did not suffer, to use an expression Wittgenstein associated with the duck-rabbit, “aspect blindness.”

It fits my historical schematism to perfection that Johnson should have begun the Correspondance School in 1962. Others before him had certainly modified postcards and letters in ways that would be appreciated—perhaps uniquely appreciated—by their intended recipients; Mallarmé, for example, found witty ways of addressing envelopes. But such poetic spillovers would not have been seriously considered as art until the concept of art was transformed—by Fluxus, among others. It also fits my sense of Fluxus that The New York Correspondance School belongs only incidentally to what came to be known as “mail art” later on. At one time Ida Applebroog printed up a number of pamphletlike books, which she mailed to various persons in the art world. She called them “performances,” and they typically consisted of an image repeated several times, like a comic book in which every panel shows the same thing. In *Now Then* (1979), the same man is shown seated in the same way, frame after frame. After three frames, there is a subtitle: “Take off your panties.” There follow four frames exactly like the last one—though the words now enable us to describe the man as looking at someone he humiliates through his gaze. The subtitle transforms the iterated frames into a narrative—it removes our aspect blindness. So they have the structure of NYCS jokes. Applebroog



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had an address list, but she did not have a network. The booklets were, so to speak, self-advertisements, giving her a way of getting recognition until her work was accepted by a gallery. Though Johnson had gallery shows—and was exhibited at the Whitney in 1970—he would not have regarded the gallery as his destined locus. The New York Correspondance School was not intended as a means to anything beyond its own continuation—though it was so integrally expressive of Johnson's artistic personality that no one appears to have succeeded him after his death.

The work tends to split the Whitney show's viewers into two classes. One class consists of those "hundreds of artists and writers" who received letters and did whatever they were asked to do, whose lives were infused by the sensibility the letters express. The other class consists in the rest of us, who must take what pleasure we can from what remains public and accessible in the assembled letters and collages. I am impressed that most of the essays intended for the catalogue of the show were written more or less as reminiscences of Ray Johnson by people who were, or might have been, members of the Anna May Wong Fan Club. That means there are not as yet real Johnson specialists, who have done research time in the scrapboxes of Johnson's studio in Locust Valley, New York, and are able to annotate the letters, identify the recipients, tell us from what issue of what magazine a given picture was scissored out, draw to our attention hidden meanings that have inexplicably not been noticed by the learned Professor X in his definitive (ha!) catalogue.

Perhaps because I once held the Johnsonian chair in philosophy at Columbia University, I received a few mailings from The New York Correspondance School, which I dutifully modified and returned—though I have no idea what Johnson would have wanted done with them. I did not especially share the prerequisite sensibility, though when we met we found we had certain things in common. We both grew up in Detroit, where we discovered the Danish Sportsman's Club as a neat place to drink, and we had moved to New York in the same year. I did not hear from him for many years after that, until a piece of mail arrived late in 1994. It was a drawing of a faceless woman. We were (I am certain I was not the only recipient) to answer the question "Who is this curator?"—and were given some of the letters of her name. I quickly saw that it was Donna De Salvo, a curator of the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, who in fact curated this

fascinating show at the Whitney. The press opening for it took place on January 14, 1999—almost four years to the day after the artist's suicide by drowning in the chill waters off Sag Harbor, Long Island. A suicide note would have been too portentous for the New York Correspondance School. There are, however, a number of what may be clues if we want to think of the drowning as a last performance—a way of communicating with everyone through the obituary

pages of the major newspapers. The Correspondance School is a Fluxus masterpiece, if that makes any sense. But its countless scraps and scribbles merely express its spirit, which can hardly be put on view in a vitrine. Spinoza made a distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*—between the world as a system of objects and the world as a system of processes. What we see in the display cases is *Johnson johnsonata*. The art was *Johnson johnsonans*. ■

FILMS

Too Many Cigarettes

STUART KLAWANS

THE OTHER SISTER • 8MM • 200 CIGARETTES • SIX WAYS TO SUNDAY •
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Monday: Screening of Garry Marshall's *The Other Sister*, which seems to be about a goldfish. Whenever the characters have to make a decision, the film cuts to a close-up of the cute little fella swimming in his bowl. Since the picture was photographed by Dante Spinotti, the background pebbles are of a blue so luscious as to be edible. But distractions multiply, keeping me from entering into a meditative union with the fish. Snatches of pop music keep drifting onto the soundtrack and off again, as if someone on the set had been having trouble tuning a radio. And then there's the plot.

The Other Sister claims to be concerned with a plucky young woman named Carla (Juliette Lewis), who is determined to lead a full life despite being (in the current phrase) mentally challenged. While attending a technical college in San Francisco, she meets and falls in love with Danny (Giovanni Ribisi), who is similarly challenged. He also faces a second hurdle: Unlike Carla, whose family rolls in money, Danny is scraping by. I think this is a fine subject for a film—but by Fassbinder, not Garry Marshall. Given his emphatic style, you'd think Carla and Danny were not just the protagonists but also the intended audience. I wonder what they'd make of all those goldfish shots.

I also wonder what they'd think of the role of Carla's mom, which has been fixed on Diane Keaton like a curse. During the early scenes, Mom is so cold, commanding, heartless and manipulative, you keep expecting her to offer Carla a poisoned apple; and at the climax, when (for comic effect) she's doused by the sprinklers on the country club's golf course, the only thing miss-

ing is a strangled cry of "I'm melting!" Considering the movie's nonstop lectures about granting people their dignity, perhaps Marshall might have reined in his get-Mom urges. He also might have granted some dignity to the black people in the movie, who exist solely as background, except when they step forward, minstrel-style, to entertain Carla and Danny.

Instead of leaving with an inward promise to respect the mentally challenged, I go out brooding on the Return of the Strutting Negro.

Tuesday: Screening of *8MM*. The soundtrack throbs with Arab music, laid on to lend an atmosphere of spice and danger to what the press notes call the "garish red-light district in Hollywood." As the notes go on to say, "there is no such district." But what the hell—what are set designers and Arabs for, if not this?

I find I can mull over that question, watch Nicolas Cage stroll through entire basements full of Threatening Negroes, Mexicans and Filipinos, and still have plenty of leisure to review the history of film criticism. It was in the fifties, as I recall, that certain critics adopted the habit of interpreting films as the self-dramatizations of their directors. Where exactly would we discover Joel Schumacher in *8MM*?

There's a clue in those invaluable press notes. Nicolas Cage describes the character

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