

# Send Letters, Postcards, Drawings, and Objects . . .

## The New York Correspondence School

The New York Correspondence School has never claimed to be an innovation, but rather intends if anything, to carry on a tradition that goes back to primordial times. Examples of communication as an art form can be cited throughout history. Cleopatra had herself rolled up in a rug and presented to Julius Caesar. In the Middle Ages, Charlemagne received an elephant from Haroun al Rashid (the Caliph of Baghdad of Arabian Nights fame). During the Renaissance, courtiers might present each other with cakes in the form of palaces, inhabited by dwarfs. Charles I of England, and his Queen Henrietta, were favored by the Duke of Buckingham with a pie that contained a famous midget. Today's heads of state take their communications more seriously, even if they miss the Dada aspect of much of it.

However, for the past 20 years, many artists have renewed the art of correspondence. It is an ephemeral, evanescent business that disdains description, but there is one central figure and possible founder—the artist Ray Johnson.

I first heard of Johnson through David Herbert, who had been with the Janis Gallery and had just then—1959—opened a gallery of his own. David was receiving in the mail small collages or non-specific art works from Ray Johnson, things that might be considered conceptual art in today's terms. Ray referred to some of his mailings as MOTICOS. These were small calligraphic, caricature-like abstract forms done in pen and ink. Ray had offset prints made of these configurations and mailed them off to various acquaintances or non-acquaintances in the art world. I was impressed by what David Herbert showed me and I was fascinated with the concept of mailing things to an unknown but possibly appreciative audience. I had been using the mails myself to dispatch odd postcards or small objects and clippings to friends. But Johnson's mailings were not restricted to friends, and thus were not necessarily in-jokes limited to personal experiences.

I was soon sending things to Ray and then began to receive mailings from him. The envelopes contained tidbits of disorganized collage scraps or proto-pop elements such as labels and pictorial material from the comic strips or newspaper pix,

PAXTON #14, 529 Broome

NAME AND ADDRESS	DIALING CODES	TELEPHONE
Fred Pendexter 2	54 W 47	CO 50124
Pat Passtiff 89 E 105 St.		OR 43864
new Departures Gab	erbecobus	Common
Room 42a Formosa	St. W. 9.	London
Klaes Oldenkamp	330 E 4	GR 54681
Ken Parker 21 Perry	St #1	NY 14
Yoko Ono 112 Chambers	St	WO 24191
<b>ROLF</b> <b>LY</b> <b>51779</b>		<b>Wh. 31764</b>
Gargine Oase	85 Barrows	NY 14
store	OR 407 80	GR 52207
Phoenix		GR 52795
Mike Revello	4 Linden St	
	Rockland, Maine	
Pam Gencapeliery	Madawaska,	
	Maine	
Larry 120 Pearl St		NY 9176
	HA. 533 95	NY. 455 95
D.P. 394 E 8		OR 42643
Klaes 107 E 2		
Pokey DOT + Melissa		NY 83137
George Larson	Charles	130 Pacific
Ed Plunkett 303 E. 76	NY 21	KE 47748
Benedicte Poite Le Point	Clairmont	
3 rue Cardinale	1 Paris	VE
LG Nordström	Johannes, Bonn	Key

\*For Area Codes used in Direct Distance Dialing and other special codes when specified in your directory.  
 Gerine halorn Preston (Phoenix) 48 E 3 St

N.Y.C.S. address book, c. 1950s.

often transformed with drawings. Usually there were instructions to mail certain things to other people. Thus my mailing list expanded. Further, when I sent things to unknowns, they responded with mailings to Ray, or to other unknowns. Now I was corresponding with people I did not know and possibly was never to meet. It was possible to communicate with someone on one level without knowing them on any other, and this added to the mystery of it all. For the most part, the members of this not-too-secret society were artists, or poets, or dancers, though occasionally there would be someone from the "other side."

*Meeting Seating*

DIANE ARBUS	DORF ASHTON	BETSY BAKER	MARY BAUERMEISTER	LAVRA BENSON	CAROL BERGE
PAMELA BRANCO	HELEN GARLEY BEDORN	RHETT BROWN	JEAN-CLAUDE CHRISTO	SUZANNE DE MARIA	VICKI DOUGAN
NANCY DOWD	LOTTE DREW-BEAR	VIRGINIA SWAN	SUSAN ELIAS	SANDRA FEIGEN	SEVIM FESCI
VIRGINIA FRITZ	SUZI GABLIK	WANDA GAG	CHARLOTTE GILBERTSON	LILA GOODMAN	NANCY GRAVES
MRS RONALD GROSS	HANNELORE HARN	TINA HAHN	PIRI KALACZ	MRS DAVID HARE	MARCIA HERSCOVITZ
EVA HESS	ALISON HIGGINS	HELEN IRANYI	HELEN JACOBSON	PATRICIA JOHANSON	MARGUERITE JOHNSON
JILL JOHNSTON	SACRA KOLIN	JILL KORNBLEE	CHRISTINE KOZLOV	ALICIA LEGG	RUTH LEVI
MRS JULIEN LEVY	IRIS LEZAK	LUCY LIPPARD	POLLY MARSTERS	SYLVIA HILGRAM	MARTA MINUJIN
MITSOU	KARLA MUNGER	ALICE NEEL	BABETTE NEWBURGER	BETTY PARSONS	LIL PICARD
H. PIETKIEWICZ	VERONIKA PIETKIEWICZ	PRIMAROSA	FRANCES X. PROFUMO	ROBIN RICHMAN	BARBARA ROSE
LINDA RESENKANTZ	BROOBY SIEBERLING	FLO SPIELMAN	TOBY SPIELMAN	N. STRUTZ	KAY SUSSMAN
MARCIA TUCKER	JORANNA VANDERBEEK	MRS. JAN VAN DER MARK	ELAYNE VARIAN	ULTRA VIOLET	DIANE WALDMAN
ELFANOR WARD	ANNE WERBER	HANNAH WEINER	WILLIAM WILEY	ALABYON WILLARD	MAY WILSON

*Ray Johnson 1968*

Original drawing for *Meeting Seating* at Finch College, 1968.

About a year after my first mailings to Ray, I arranged to meet him. On a warm spring day in 1962 I went down to the lower-lower East Side to his place on Suffolk Street off Delancey. I had been expecting something as cluttered and contrived as a Schwitters Merzbau, but to my amazement, the place was empty of everything but a chair, a bed, a stove and refrigerator, and a few boxes containing collages. Nothing on the walls, nothing on the floor—just two or three nearly empty tenement rooms. About a year later I discovered that Ray had prepared his apartment the evening before I was expected. He packed up everything and stuffed it into the

room of his across-the-hall neighbor, Dorothy Podber. This was a trick Ray often played. Another time, while receiving a visit from Sam Wagstaff, Ray's closet door opened and out came a young lady, Malka Safro. This so startled Wagstaff that he fled the premises. (Ray's collection of acquaintances were apt to be unusual. La Podber, for instance, often appeared wearing several pairs of shoes at once. How she managed, I've never learned: one shoe inside the other . . . likewise with sleeves which she would peel off, one at a time, in a sort of mini-happening.)

Ray's propensity for empty space was echoed in one of his early meetings, a "nothing" event which took place in the late spring of 1962. It was sponsored by George Maciunas, and occurred at a gallery that was in the process of relocating and was empty of all but some construction materials, bags of plaster, and some boards and saw horses.

There had been a notice in the *Village Voice* stating that Ray Johnson would be performing a Nothing. This, of course, was at the high moment of Happenings. At Ray's meeting nothing happened at all until the end when Ray took a large box full of wooden spindles that he had found somewhere and threw them down the staircase leading up to the gallery. These spindles covered the steps and made climbing up or down very precarious. But up to that time, visitors would enter the bleak gallery, look a little bewildered and finally ask what was happening, only to get a succinct reply, "Nothing!"

Ray was eventually to stage numerous meetings at a variety of locations. (The meeting idea was taken up later by other correspondence groups. One such elaborate meeting was the Decca Dance in Los Angeles in 1975.)

Through Ray's meetings I was to meet numerous artists and characters. I recall that Ad Reinhardt was at the early Nothing, as was Robert Buecker. A number of these people were as yet unappreciated underground movers of the avant-gard of those days. One of these was Sari Dienes. Recently, when a young interviewer asked Jasper Johns if Rauschenberg hadn't been a significant influence on his early years, Johns replied, "No, it was Sari Dienes." To which the interviewer, no doubt, replied "Sari Who?"

A few of my earliest correspondences were with Buecker, Richard Craven, Michael Malc , the late James Waring, and also George Brecht and Bob Watts of the Fluxus group. By the mid-1960s I introduced Chicago artist Karl Wirsum to the game. Also about then I ordered a rubber stamp that read "New York Correspondence School of Chicago."

Before 1962-63 there was no specific term for mail art. I began calling it the New York Correspondence School for this reason: Abstract Expressionism or Action Painting was then often referred to as "The New York School" so I merely inserted "Correspondence" into the term. This name caught on, despite the fact that Ray chose to spell it "correspondance" and chose to kill it in 1973 with a letter to the obituary column of the *New York Times*—a dead letter. But the term and the concept have persisted and expanded, first to the West Coast and to Canada, and finally internationally and intercontinentally.

Ever since the late '60s there have been any number of correspondence shows throughout the world, even in remote places like New Zealand. The Canadian Government has given money for a Toronto group to publish *FILE* magazine, which gives listings of mail art people, as well as what



Helicopter event for 7th Avant-Garde Festival, Ward's Island, N.Y., 1969. (Box of 60 foot-long hot dogs was dropped from helicopter.) Photo: Ara Ignatius.

they want to receive. Thus, the correspondence wave continues and thrives, and no doubt will do so until postal rates make it prohibitive.

—Edward M. Plunkett of the Max Ernst Fan Club

## Ray Johnson

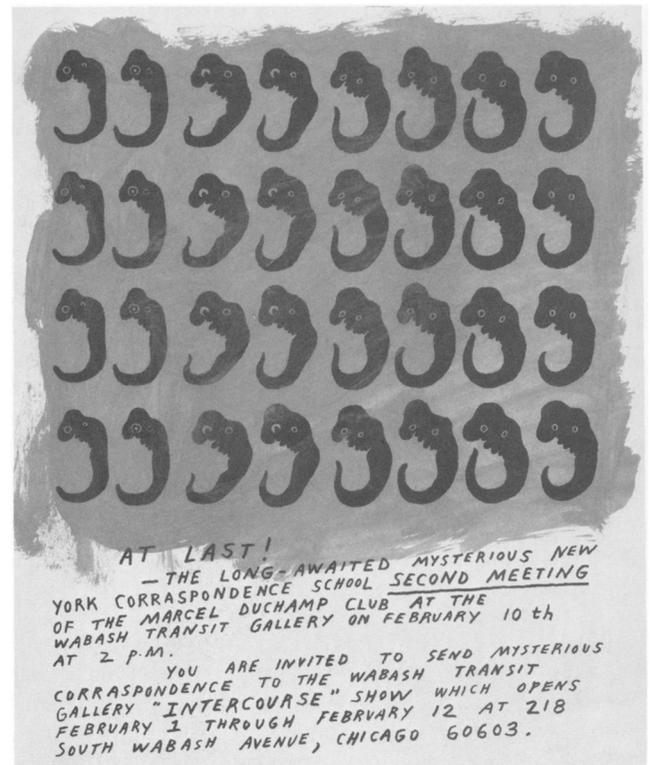
Technically the art of Ray Johnson can be viewed as a special kind of collaboration. It can take the form of unilateral appro-

priation, in which case the originator of a quote or reference may never know of his or her contribution. Or it can take the form of an invitation to the recipient of one of Johnson's letters to respond, to continue the action. The letter can be sent on to a third party, on Johnson's instructions, or on the initiative of the respondent. Or you can write back. Nicolas and Elena Calas have commented that "Ray Johnson is to the letter what Cornell is to the box." Both artists come out of the collage tradition but both have expanded it drastically. Johnson's original letters often consist of several loose bits and pieces. In collages, including Johnson's own, these are pasted down onto a single plane, but in their envelopes the pieces are discrete, sorted but not joined.

The sense of the temporary containment of diverse parts corresponds to the scatter of Johnson's recipients, all of whom see the work on a one-to-one basis. His letters obviously depend on that section of the communication system administered by the Post Office. Now that his work is better known it has entered a second stage in the system, that of multiple reproduction, notably in *Correspondence*, the catalogue of last year's exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Art. In reproduction the separateness of parts is lost though the works become more consultable. Dick Higgins' annotations in the catalogue are very useful in the decipherment of what are, after all, other people's letters. "From 1959 to 1964 Johnson inventoried and otherwise used the theme of



The Marcel Duchamp Club, 1971.



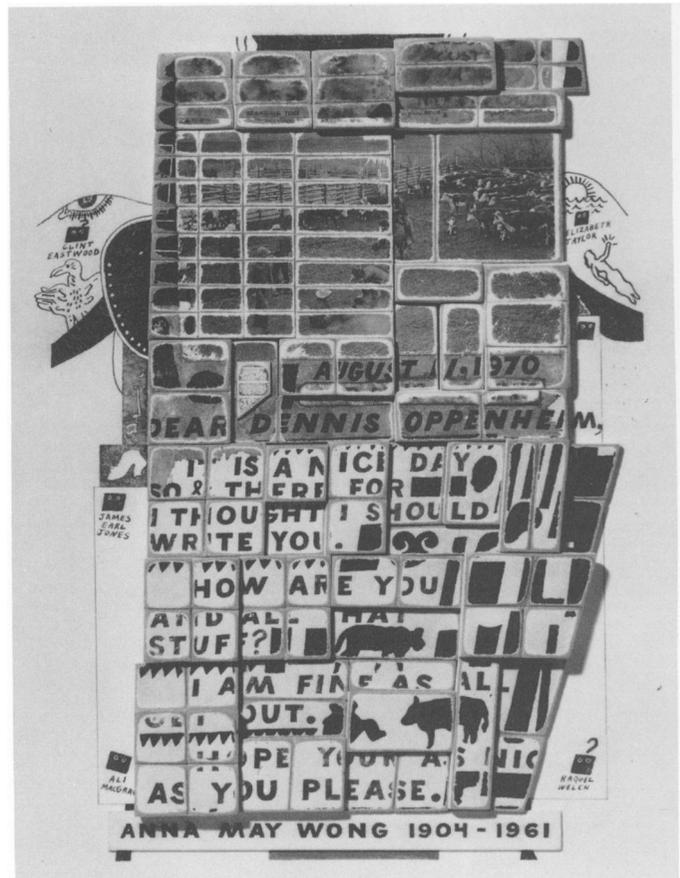
neckties for a number of works. . . . The necktie theme was transferred to the neck, which he represented as a letter V. . . . Instead of inventorying his neckties, he then inventoried his necks (or Vs) for a while."<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago I started to write about Johnson but I got so confused by glimpses of such themes as Higgins states clearly, in bundles of letters spread all over the city, that I gave up, to my regret now. In 1971 Johnson said of his correspondence school that "it is secret, private, and without any rule," but there is a disconcerting precision in his letters. Recognition of his sinuous continuities is not the only way to appreciate Johnson, however, especially as the letters are being published and the epistolary becomes public property.

Johnson's art arises from the texture of the New York art world society. He has referred to a collage series of 1972, *Ray Johnson's History of the Betty Parsons Gallery* as "name dropping." The names are from Johnson's lexicon of friends and from a cast of hundreds in the art world. Consider his rows of elephant heads or shoes or benign killroys or stereotyped heads (derived from classic comic strips), captioned with such names as: "Sari Dienes, Robert Rauschenberg, Chryssa, Edouardo Paolozzi, Tako Sinoda." These names are of artists who have shown at Parsons, but without that fact the words are as exotic as a Babylonian laundry list or an Ellis Island register. Johnson's collages are intricate and discursive, a nest of associations and clues. They are to be read, no less than his letters.

The kind of discourse that Johnson developed has been picked up widely, in the U.S. and in Europe<sup>2</sup>, but his work has a specific character. He has resisted the clichés of post-Minimal documentary, of topographical charts and schedules that dominate Mail art. Johnson has instead forced us to accept a graphic style and a personalized sociology that do not depend for their justification on the current operating procedures of art. His art is independent and not peer-oriented despite the shower of peer-names. Hence Johnson's ability to celebrate is not merely an optimistic reflex but a disciplined choice. Thus to view his work, zigzagging among amiable, intimate, and personal matters is to watch non-*ressentiment* as a policy, as the key to a bright labyrinthine discourse.

Ray Johnson can be regarded as a poet of non-*ressentiment*, a term which covers all the strains between individuals and the social institutions they regard as hostile or repressive. On the contrary, he celebrates the interconnections between himself and his respondents, between himself and various layers of information that emanate from different institutions. He draws on a blyth spectrum of Americana, gossip, and mass communications. His correspondence school spans the mailing lists of the art world and the exchanges of chatty friends; he goes from straight quotation to parodistic babble. His allusions vary from nostalgic to clanish, from cryptic to topical. Word games throw up coinages like "Taoist toast." Professional conversations, youth culture references, and nursery animals collide in a way that cuts across the tastes of any one of these groups taken singly. He has a sharp eye and a neat hand for what passes as current in signs and symbols. This power to condense topical images opposes the risk of diffuseness in his capacious sources. The nonchalant pact of visual and verbal references conceals a play of recurrent allusions and motifs, but also embodies



Ray Johnson, *Anna May Wong*, collage, 21<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" x 18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub>", 1971. Whitney Museum of American Art.

effervescent profiles of everybody in a message-rich, post-*ressentiment* society.

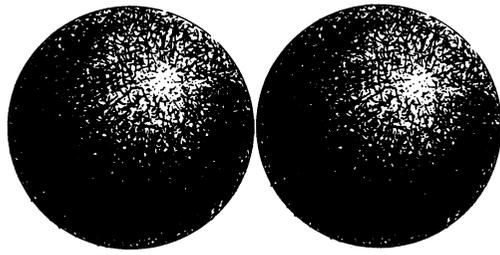
<sup>1</sup> *Correspondence: An Exhibition of the Letters of Ray Johnson*, North Carolina Museum of Art, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Marc Poinset, *Mail Art*, Editions CEDCI, Paris, 1971.

—Lawrence Alloway

Ray Johnson in his work has an ideal generosity. He also has, of course, an impeccable if strictly mercenary partner in the U. S. Mails. At any given moment in the year this partnership is in operation round the clock. Mailmen are on the move, Ray Johnson stays home, more work gets done and in due time is distributed. What survives intact from the whole operation is the letter, but "the art" is the completed process: the writing, the franking and directing, the walk to the mailbox, the loyalty of the unknown henchmen, the act of delivery, the opening, the perusal, the perceptions made and rejoiced at. In this way there comes into being a continuum of human contacts, a secret and pacific society which exists for the reception of signals which (like the music on Prospero's island) "give delight and hurt not."

The exhibition at the North Carolina Museum of Art made clear three quite separate aspects of Ray Johnson's art: his delight in the quirks and oddities of his friends, his readiness to monitor the commercialized image in all its aspects, and his discreet knowledge of all that has been done, alike in Europe and in the U. S., to foster an art that is lightweight in



Offset of collage *Send Slips to Lucy Lippard*, date unknown.

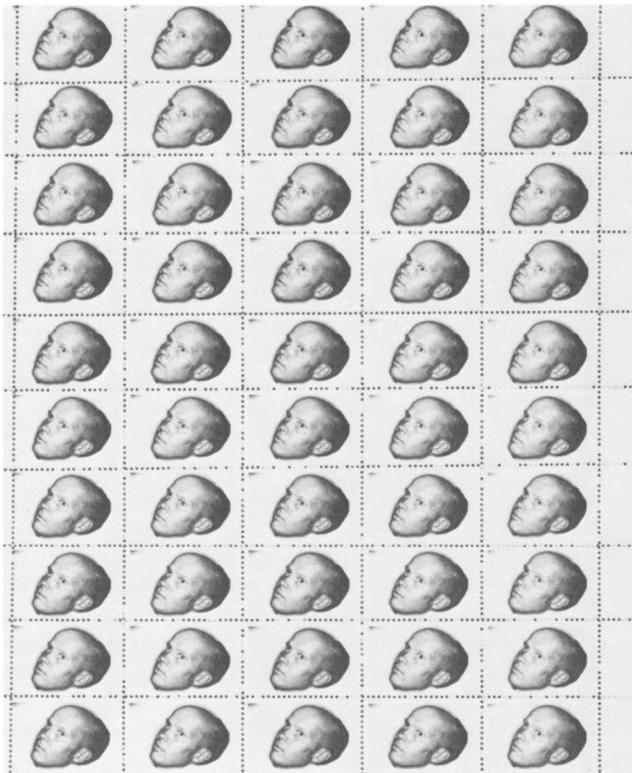


Photo postage stamp design of Ray Johnson, 1974. Photo: James de Sana.

its physical structure but gives out nevertheless a pure bell-note of meaning that can linger with us for years.

It also touched upon, without in any way exhausting, the resourcefulness of Ray Johnson the writer. Some of his most memorable contributions have been made with language alone. Lists, addresses, dates, ephemeral allusions, turns of speech that soon went out of style—all these turn up in Ray

Johnson's letters, where dead words get up and dance and the small change of human communication is dipped in gold.

It would be a pity, though, if people took the Correspondence School to be Ray Johnson's main claim to our attention. The collages should come first. Johnson has never tried to put them forward in any but the most modest way—as when he would install them on the steps of a convenient brownstone for the pleasure of anyone who happened to pass by. But a retrospective of those collages (or a show of new ones) would give us quite another view of this harmonious blacksmith. His anvil may not be the largest model, but how the sparks fly upward!

—John Russell

Any portrait of Ray must be a swash, buckling story. Everyone knows, for instance, that he has got a smattering of French and takes snuff à *la mode de France*, but values himself chiefly upon his skill and dexterity in hairdressing (without a comb). As for his thighs, they are long and slender, like those of a grasshopper, and his face is, at least, half a yard in length, with projecting cheekbones, small bluish eyes on the greyish hue, and a large hook-nose (Silhouette University). There is also that enviable compound of beady-eyed detachment and sympathetic understanding, without social hypocrisies.

On the occasion of your birthday, he'd as well pack an elephant gun as hire a skywriter. Or he might send you, as a token, Bridget Riley's turkey-shell comb, Betty Grable's toilet paper roll, Andy Warhol's or Batman's mother's potato-masher, some comparative rainfall figures, 100 cupids, tattooed soap bubbles, Leo Castelli's spit, or a sermon upon the nothingness of good works. His management of the *chiaro oscuro*, or light and shadow, especially gleams of sunshine, is altogether wonderful. He uses paste quite a lot. His favorite pun, however, never idles for long in its holster.

The spirit of contradiction is naturally very strong in him, but he is not a man to be taken in by cultural fudge, ancient or modern. Like Dr. Williams, he sees the germ on every flower. His peculiar turn of thinking and his pack of knowledge made up of the remnants of rareties renders his conversation desirable. When he was 16 years old, he was a Christian Scientist. Now, without fantasies of martyrdom, he still thinks there is something splendid about being sewn up in a sack and thrown into the Bosphorus.

Ray Johnson is the art world's Won Ton Ton, the Dog Who Saved Hollywood. You can't wrap his rococo imagination in herringbone tweed. "Given the prevailing murkiness," he says, "if I choose to dress like Marlon Brando, it does not mean that it is thanks to him that I do not go around naked. Besides, you are supposed to be confused. It is the way they are running the century." Like Velazquez, once past his adolescence he never considered painting as a profession, but he continues to maintain a certain hooligan element together with a very large mailbox.

—Suzi Gablik

## Reference and relation

Allowing that we remain in the quandries of nihilism, the artist, living two lives, the life that makes no sense; and the

life of art that makes sense out of the other life, has the choice of going for everything, to fill up the emptiness, or going for nothing. The apparent choice of Ray Johnson's work, whether in collages, correspondence, or meetings, is everything. For two thousand years in several civilizations complex systems of correspondence were set up, analogies were established, until the great fragmentations of the modern period. Ray Johnson's first response to this nihilism is to include references to everything: his work would eventually mention everything in the world through a chain of resemblances, although the resemblance might be arbitrary, not socially established. This chain of resemblances constructs a structure that has no foundation, it stretches across emptiness, but it stands, a fullness that eerily reminds one of the emptiness it is supposed to divert attention from. The more minute and concrete the cross-references of the dense specific references, the stronger the construction, but it remains groundless. One could, in some desperation, argue that a construction such as Ray Johnson builds constructs its own ground under it, but that would be a premature attempt at consolation and would falsify the meaning of groundlessness, which in Ray Johnson's work is the ultimately groundless emotion, love.

Now if Ray Johnson's work on the surface is a tissue of resemblances and references, in its depths it is abstract relations, and the relations of relations, and these abstract relations, which interrelate in more and more complicated relations, recede toward an infinity, which is empty, or toward a oneness, which is the same as nothing. So the nothingness or emptiness, obscured by the references to references, is found again in the relations of relations. The everything of references includes the truth of the nothing of relations. In the 1960s Ray Johnson did some performances which were entitled *Nothings* ("an attitude as opposed to a happening," as he defined a *Nothing*, January 10, 1977), and he mailed out printed sheets called *The Book about Death*. At the most abstract level of meaning, his work is about love as reciprocal references, an emotion constructed of references to references, and his work is about death as the most abstract of relations, and so his work defines life as correspondences between love and death.

Reference: Elizabeth Sewall, "Everythingness, Nothingness, and Poetry," *The Structure of Poetry*, London, 1962, pp. 102-112.

—William S. Wilson

I met Ray Johnson in the winter of 1961 at the apartment that Bill and Ann Wilson had on west 92nd Street. I had driven down from Maine with two large baskets of lobsters; Ray came out to help me carry them in. We opened the trunk of the car and the lobsters were moving only very slightly, packed in green-brown seaweed. Under the neon lights the scene was strange and eerie and beautiful in a way I wasn't accustomed to noticing. When the lobsters were cooked, Ray remarked that the car and the lobsters were now the same color. Ray has been sending me references to lobsters ever since.

I got to know Ray better when I moved to New York in the fall of 1963. We lived right around the corner from each other and one day he phoned to ask if I'd like to go to the eye

hospital with him. He had a slight conjunctivitis. Everywhere we went, in the bus, on the subway, in the streets, in the hospitals, Ray turned my eyes to literally hundreds of images related to eyes and in the evening we went to a Spanish restaurant where the *paella* was arranged in the shape of a face in which the eyes were open clams.

In 1968, Ray and I once went for a walk on Long Island and found a large dead halibut stranded on the beach. Ray took me to dinner at a seafood restaurant where a stuffed Marlin with shiny glass eyes was hanging over the doorway.

This last spring I took Berty Skuber to visit Ray at his house in Locust Valley. Ray phoned on Sunday and said to come on Wednesday, called back on Tuesday and said Friday since preparations were very complicated. The house is at 44 west 7th Street in a middle-middle-class neighborhood that brought to mind the neighborhood where René Magritte lived. It's a tiny two-story grey shingle house with a gabled roof, white windows, white shutters, a white railing around a grey porch with grey stairs and a blue storm door. Ray calls it "the pink house." The paint everywhere is a little weathered. There's a small tree on the left of the steps to the front porch, on the right of the house a driveway that leads to the side kitchen door to the right of which is a small white tile decorated with a motif of blue flowers and in the middle an inscription, perhaps a name, written in Arabic. It was through the kitchen door that we entered.

The kitchen was a fairly ordinary kitchen with lots of pots and pans but rather more phonebooks than one would expect. On top of the refrigerator and next to a quart of India ink were several very large and very naked hamburgers that Ray was planning a little later to cook for lunch. The next room, though, was entirely empty except for two tables one on top of the other and against a wall. In the front room there was nothing but a red rug with a circular blotch of white on it, not quite in the center, and about 18 inches across. On the far side of the room was a flight of stairs that led up to the second floor. Ray informed us that the spot on the rug was a can of paint that had been turned over by the ghost of Janis Joplin.

Even though it was a bright sunny day, the light in the house was a pale yellowish brown since all the shades were drawn. Ray disappeared into a closet and came back with three small objects about eight inches long that he laid on the floor. He showed them to us one by one, shuffling them back and forth. There was a deer's foot fitted out as a bottle opener, there was a dried lamb's fetus, there was an Australian Devil Fish, cut and shaped into the form of a demon. This was the real beginning, or perhaps the center, of our visit. Ray shuffled the objects back and forth on the floor as though he were casting a spell.

Everything that wasn't downstairs was upstairs—which is why it took Ray a week to prepare for this visit. The only room that could be entered with ease was the bathroom; the rest was an enormous clutter—the remains of Ray's correspondence show at the Whitney, boxes full of junk and trivia that come into and out of his life through the Correspondence School, literally hundreds of collages. Ray was up and down the steps all afternoon showing us collages in groups, in pairs, one at a time. Our reactions to one piece would make him decide about what to show us next.

Ray Johnson's work is about relationships between people

and about the objects that mediate relationships between people. And he assumes a relationship wherever he sees a possible mediation. There are ways in which his universe is full, ways in which his universe is empty. Things come and things go. What's interesting, what's beautiful, is the process of their coming and going. Everything is a part of some other something, and by detaching things from the arrangements in which they present themselves, Ray discovers the possibilities they contain for new attachments and new arrangements. The emptiness is the space of availability in which things can happen, in which things can get sorted out, in which meetings can take place. A Ray Johnson envelope or a Ray Johnson collage is something that has crystalized in this space or non-space and then been returned to the circumambient universe. A personal involvement with Ray gives one the experience of helping to catalyze these crystalizations. The arrangements that Ray creates, destroys, and enlarges are mental arrangements as he perceives them in his own or other people's minds.

—Henry Martin

Ray Johnson asked me this November whether he might draw my silhouette for Silhouette University. Since Ray and I have been in touch—though hardly in close communication—for about a quarter of a century, I was happy to answer affirmatively to his request, knowing all the while that my silhouette, were it ever limned, would look like that evolution from duck to bunny to pussy cat to guppy-like creature, all bearing the somewhat nervous speedball penpoint delineation of Ernie Bushmiller's characters—Nancy, Sluggo and Fritzi Ritz. So, turning to my pile of *deeply important postcards*, I found a fellow with a small Edwardian mustache and broken boater-brim—a “real” silhouette of the estival kind that were made in boardwalk stalls or in European spas at the turn-of-the-century—and noted how happy I would be were he to do my silhouette, even though I knew. . . . Then a return phone call (alto woodwind voice) saying how appreciative he was of my *deeply important postcard* and how since he knew me so long, even though we see each other so rarely, how paternal he felt towards me. I stiffened slightly since I have never thought of Ray Johnson in a paternal light but rather, if anything, as an older step-brother with whom one has a relationship, neither close nor formal, but, then again, not totally devoid of elements of concerned familiarity. We remain to one another the people we were when first we met—give or take some wrinkles, some hair, some *avoir-dupois*.

All this, of course, put me into a retrospective frame of mind and I pondered how and when it was that I came to know Ray Johnson. He said, please Robert, don't remember how he and Lippold, Johns, Rauschenberg, Cunningham, and Twombly used to drive around the city in an old black hearse—so I won't since I already have, in an old review. I remember being in high school and hanging out with dancers and across one of them, Scipio Africanus Wallen, I must have been introduced to Ray. There was something about a girl; she had black hair and her name was Isabelle; she danced and she knew Scipio and she knew Ray; there is more about a New York adolescent winter and the Village and Washington Square and bare November trees of the very early 1950s, and Ray is somehow in that sooty memory.

Some of this has got to be right because I look at the earliest envelopes and letters that Ray sent me concerning the New York Correspondence School (the leaflets and announcements I've saved over the years go back to 1965 when the envelopes were stuffed with collage detritus and expressionist punning, Merzbilder materiel, as it were, come loose from its background) are all addressed to me in my boyhood nickname, a form of address that only someone who knew me then would naturally use.

The letters and announcements, the xerox sheets, the clipped newspaper and magazine illustrations, the recycled envelopes themselves, the sheer fallout of white collar pilferage, the occasional squib, all this is multipliable by the numerous correspondents with whom Ray has entered into communication—the sheets and pieces of ephemera must amount to the hundreds of thousands.

All of this, when laid out, unexpectedly, is liable to a formalist description. The earliest letters are the most expressionistically handled, with the greatest amount of cropped and cut and eccentrically shaped clippings. By the 1970s, a much greater reliance on the xerox machine, on neat folding and stuffing, of bunny faces or Cheshire grins in minimal grid sequence as it were, each identified with those bizarre aristas that make reading names such fun, especially were one to find one's own name as caption to the animal mask. These rosters were (and remain to the present) of a certain mannerist profile; while birth and rank are surely *lettres de patentes*, Johnson's sense of loyalty and royalty will often lead to his own suites of underground and above-board mix. There is a smudging, inescapably self-serving tone of funny snobbishness.

Since it was not deep friendship, our acquaintance was able to survive strains of disloyalty. I find letters from the beginning of the decade inquiring after possibilities of bunny lists; I know that I did make up one such list but can well see that perhaps the Who's Who of Rosicrucian art of the 1890s was, even for Johnson, a smidge too esoteric and beyond the pale of bunny delineation, the heavy symbolist evocation in his work notwithstanding—Johnson's work often invokes a cult for *les maudits*, notably the boy Rimbaud.

Often enough Ray's resilience transformed adversity into triumph—though for Ray there is no real adversity, except perhaps that of aging. In a more pedagogic mood I rendered account of the comparative ranks of the great figures who emerged from the *déconfiture* of Pop sensibility, noting in terse phrases the positionings of Lichtenstein, Warhol, Rosenquist, Oldenburg, and Jim Dine. Offhandedly I dispatched Wesselmann, Indiana, Marisol, and Johnson to the status of evaporations. That assessment appeared in May of 1970 and by the very end of that month, Johnson had already had a rubber stamp made up which read “evaporations by Ray Johnson” with which he franked all of the letters of the New York Correspondence School as well as a whole set of pictorial referents using that term.

The send-up is hard. In a funny way Dada postcards saying “I love Ray” or some clever quips for which I have little gift, avoid the problem of coming to terms with his work in an historical or critical way. By contrast to the monolithic masters of the '60s and '70s who have no truck with the seemingly trivial, Johnson's career has made a fetish of the trivial and the transitory, leading to an important misapprehension—

that his work is somehow tainted, is trivial. Quite the opposite. There is a strong formal thread in his work and there are repeated analytical keys – the work is assimilable of formalist analysis, though his would be the first voice raised quietly to self-mockingly demur.

Risking bathos: Johnson has a kind of real staying power that enforces, if not today, then someday, the obligation of serious analysis. But for a long while before that monograph, the art world will make do with his indefatigable, if capricious, moral example.

–Robert Pincus-Witten

One day in late October I went to my gallery to connect with my work adorning the walls. I was told that an artist had been in to see my work and left something for me. A house key in an envelope. No message only an address:

Ray Johnson  
 Locust Valley, New York  
 11560  
 New York Correspondence School

Keys are such provocative objects. They unlock innumerable fantasies. I fantasized: He thinks I am bright and beautiful, but does he know I'm married? Does it matter? I arrive at his door radiant and trembling. Or, was this the key to my work? A direct message that he understood, that I had opened his mind to a new way of seeing? No!

The key was something Johnson had found on the way to the gallery; an accidental, incidental object to provoke a response. The key is to respond—to connect. How to respond was the most difficult decision. Who was I responding to? No clue. No key except the brass one in the envelope. I answered with self-conscious whimsy.

Two days later I received a thank-you typed on a collage, with instructions that I send it to a third party. Connection!

I experience the New York Correspondence School as the literal embodiment of Virginia Woolf's assertion that "...all human beings are connected . . . that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art."

–Karen Shaw

Dear Correspondence School

I wish this were a postcard or a letter instead of a magazine, but at least it's some comfort to think that before you got to read this, it had to go through the mails to individual *Art Journal* subscribers. Still, it's unsettling to find anything about Ray's art so settled. I like to think of it in perpetual transit, in pneumatic tubes, in mail bags. How about all of us Ray Johnson fans tearing out these printed words and mailing them again? Who wants to stick pins in postal butterflies?

–Robert Rosenblum

Dear Ray . . . . . love, Lucy:

Dear Ray, How are you? I am fine. Once you sent me a gold paper fish which hangs over my desk in Maine next to another gaudy oriental cutout of a woman in swirling robes that Ree Morton sent me after I had my uterus out. Once you sent



Dec. 20, 1976

Dear Diane Kelder,

Here's my Ray Johnson contribution:

Devilish <sup>(#)</sup> irrepressible prankster <sup>(#)</sup> gets his kicks <sup>(#)</sup> screwball mailings <sup>(#)</sup> masterminding <sup>(#)</sup> kidnapping <sup>(#)</sup> ditching victims in strange places <sup>(#)</sup> always on best behavior <sup>(#)</sup> courteous <sup>(#)</sup> well-mannered <sup>(#)</sup> seraphic expression <sup>(#)</sup> spanking clean <sup>(#)</sup> blue jeans <sup>(#)</sup> colored T-shirt <sup>(#)</sup> black leather jacket <sup>(#)</sup> studs <sup>(#)</sup> blue knit cap <sup>(#)</sup> Finnish features <sup>(#)</sup> a good listener <sup>(#)</sup> gadabout <sup>(#)</sup> ubiquitous <sup>(#)</sup> social connection <sup>(#)</sup> calculating <sup>(#)</sup> pursues journalists <sup>(#)</sup> until they holler <sup>(#)</sup> uncle <sup>(#)</sup> publicity <sup>(#)</sup> buffoonery <sup>(#)</sup> flattery <sup>(#)</sup> Bunny List <sup>(#)</sup> Honeybun Liszt

A modest effort, to be sure, but hopefully useful.

Cheers,

David Bourdon

me an old brown formal portrait of a miserable-looking family; the photographer's address was the Bowery where I lived then. Lots of times you've sent me rabbits. We all know how they proliferate. My Funny Uncle Jud has always drawn similar rabbits on his letters and on his walls. He is a physicist. What do you suppose that means? He also loves puns, but he doesn't make collages. So your rabbits were very familiar when they first scurried out of my mail box. Is a rabbit a universal male symbol? Is a mail box a contradiction in terms? Wishful thinking? Rising postal rates?

At one point lots of people sent me slips because you sent them from your stamping grounds on Suffolk a curious breasted drawing telling them to send me slips. There were many between the cup and the Lip—some silk, some sleezy, some good paper, some bad, some incoherent, some intelligent. Your offerings are usually intelligent, or seem to be. Your friends' or offspring's offerings are, alas, usually less interesting. I have boxes of them. Slips were sent because I didn't wear one and loved to dance and so needed a correspondence course, even a slipshod one. Sometimes I've followed your instructions and dutifully forwarded esoterica around the city or the block or the world. Other times I've kept what was supposed to go on to someone else and if I didn't like that person sometimes I threw it away. Other times I was opposed to doing what I was told. I've always had an authority problem.

In any case, Ray, you are An Original, and now there are too many too quick to copy, though I have to admit I've touted the doddering democracy of the mails myself and am probably also to blame for the proliferation of rabbits, though not as much as you are. You have quite a few debts to pay to society, having introduced mail art (sexist!) and en-

couraged the birth of the conceptual mutant and mystified the Post Office and dematerialized materialism and set certain schools on their two long ears and—the punultimate evil—enjoyed yourself, made others enjoy themselves, made art enjoyable. Love, Lucy.

—Lucy R. Lippard

Dear Diane:

Ah sure am glad to have this opportunity to loud off a bit about my pal, Ray Johnson, and hiz baby, The New York Correspondence School.

I guess it all started one pea-ripper day some years back when I innocently opened a letter and found detailed (sort of) instructions, with pitchers, on how to draw a rabbit and the message “Welcome to the New York Correspondence School” signed by ole Ray hizself. I wuz delighted.

Naturally I’d heard of Ray and his school for years. You might say that at that time we’d howdied but we hain’t shook yet and I’d be stretchin the blanket if I didn’t confess to feeling like I wuz in high cotton, just miratin’ on my good fortune on being asked to be part of Ray’s school.

I’ve seen Ray’s collection of snakes, guzzled six packs with him in the big apple, received notices of meetings of the Buddha University, The Blue Eyes Club, the Spam Belt Club, the Dead Pan Club, The Marcel Duchamp Club, The Paloma Picasso Fan Club, etc., etc., etc., and just missed out (Drat!) on a trip to Scarsdale with Ray who wuz going to do a sell on a lady collector who wanted a beauty parlor-hair-boat-swimmin’ pool, which no doubt would fotch a mighty figger on the market these days.

One day not long ago in Soho old Ray and I wuz jest a messin’ an’ a mullin’ about when we heard of a fella that was hold out over on Mercer Street involved in a long hair-ritual piece.

Well we hauled on over there and I’ll be John Brown if there wasn’t old Geoff having hiz beard and hair cut and asking fer a bit of ours in return. We wuz delighted.

I leaned over and let them whack off a good bit of my curley locks, but old Ray, being clean on top had to give hiz hair up from a place considerable south of hiz head if you’all know what I mean.

Anyway, all that don’t make no never mind cause whut Ray Johnson is is a guy that’s swung a wide loop and heard the hoot owls hoot in a lot of places and i guess that folks that don’t know of Ray’s importance by now are as scarce as a side saddle.

Yes sir, I didn’t pick up no crooked stick when I got up with Ray Johnson, the snake man.

Cheers,

—Tommy Mew, The Mad Diarist  
Mount Berry, Georgia

*THE FIRST MEETING OF THE NEW YORK CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL* took place on April 1, 1968 in the historic Quaker Church on Rutherford Square in New York City. It was based on the ritual of Shaker dancing. Since then there have been thirty New York Correspondence School Meetings and Lectures by Ray Johnson in churches, schools, galleries, museums, theaters, and parks.

*MEETING SEATING* at Finch College, New York City—a seating chart for 77 women and one man, dead, alive, famous and

unknown: *A MEETING FOR ANNA MAY WONG* at the New York Cultural Center, New York City—the role of Anna May Wong was played by Naomi Sims; *A MEETING FOR DIANE FISHER* in Sheridan Square, New York City—the role of Diane Fisher was played by Ultra Violet; *A MEETING FOR MARY JOSEPHSON* at the Paula Cooper Gallery, New York City—Mary Josephson did not appear; *A MEETING FOR RUTH FORD* at the Whitney Museum, New York City—Ruth Ford made a gracious appearance with Rex Reed; *A MEETING FOR CARRIE SNODGRASS* at Finch College, New York City—participants carried one another piggy-back; *A MEETING FOR DAME MAY WITTY* at the David Whitney Gallery, New York City—May Wilson had been taken to see “The Lady Vanishes.”; *A MOMENT OF SILENCE FOR TIGER MORSE* at Max’s Kansas City—Ray Johnson observed midnight by asking Nam June Paik’s cousin the time.

*A PALOMA PICASSO FAN CLUB MEETING* at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York City; *A SHELLEY DUVALL FAN CLUB MEETING* at the Iolas Gallery, New York City; *A BLUE EYES CLUB MEETING* at the Jill Kornblee Gallery.

*A BUDDHA UNIVERSITY MEETING* at the Onnasch Gallery in New York City.

*A STILT WALK MEETING* in Central Park in cooperation with the New York City Parks Department—participants walked on mirrored, painted, carved and plain wooden stilts; *OH DAT CONCEPT ART MEETING* at the Rene Block Gallery, New York City—participants walked to a bathtub and back; *WHEN IT RAINS IT POURS MEETING*—at the School of Visual Arts, New York City.

*A MARCEL DUCHAMP CLUB MEETING* at the Church of the Holy Trinity, New York City; *SECOND MEETING OF THE MARCEL DUCHAMP CLUB* at the Wabash Transit Gallery of the Art Institute of Chicago.

*SPAGHETTI*—a lecture at Oberlin College, Ohio, which was “chaotic”; *EXQUISITE CORPSE*—a lecture at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore—a naked streaker named Sam kidnapped the Spam Radio baby; *A DUCK NAMED ANDY*—a lecture at the University of California, *SACRAMENTO*—an exhibition of correspondence—a live duck was raffled which turned out to be a live rabbit; *GRANOLA—ELMER’S GLUE*—a lecture at Columbia University, New York City—Granola boxes were karate-kicked at Jackson MacLow; *SNAKES ESCAPE* at the Whitney Museum Studio School, New York City—a large drawing of a two-headed snake was burned; *RAY JOHNSON’S HISTORY OF YOKO ONO AND JOHN*—at the Institute of Technology; Old Westbury, N. Y.; *THE NYCS GOTHAM ART THEATER PERFORMANCE*—a wordless play on stage. Jim Rosenquist retorted “what pathos!”

*NEW YORK CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL EXHIBITION* at the Whitney Museum, New York City, 1970—contributions from 106 participants. Curated by Marcia Tucker. *CORRESPONDENCE—AN EXHIBITION OF THE LETTERS OF RAY JOHNSON* at the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina, 1976—Thirty-five years of letters by Ray Johnson from the collections of 100 lenders. Introduction to Catalogue by William S. Wilson.

*EACH TIME YOU DRAG ME THIS WAY—A MEETING FOR KATHERINE.KUH AND MORRIS GRAVES* on West Broadway, New York City, December 1976.

—Toby R. Spiselman