Ray Johnson Mail Art

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Ray Johnson Mail Art

Collection number: MS 310

Title: Ray Johnson mail art
Dates: ca. 1990-1994
Collection number: MS 310
Creator: Johnson, Ray
Collection Size: 3 folders
34 items

Repository: University of California, Santa Cruz. University Library. Special Collections and Archives
Santa Cruz, California 95064

Abstract: This collection includes 10 letters and 24 items of mail art created by Ray Johnson.
Physical location: Stored at Special Collections and Archives: Advance notice is required for access to the papers.
Languages: Languages represented in the collection: English
Access
Collection open for research.

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Preferred Citation
Ray Johnson mail art. MS 310. Special Collections and Archives, University Library, University of California, Santa Cruz.

Acquisition Information
Collected by Rita Bottoms.

Biography
"The most famous unknown artist in New York" - this is how Grace Glueck, a New York Times reporter, characterized Ray Johnson after his collage exhibition in 1965. He was called the father of mail art, one of the first performance artists, a precursor Pop Art, and he is rarely absent from studies of fluxus. His connections extend beyond even these movements through his global postal performance, the New York Correspondence School.
He was born in 1927 in Detroit, Michigan, to Finnish immigrants. A world of possibilities was opened to the gifted student when he spent three years in the liberal atmosphere of Black Mountain College, a progressive institute in North Carolina, where he studied with Joseph Albers, Robert Motherwell, Mary Callery, and Lyonel Feininger. It was Albers who influenced him the most, encouraging his development in the direction of the Bauhaus-like, elegant abstract.
But at Black Mountain he also became acquainted with John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, and their influence can be seen in a freer form of expression that allows for "chance", as expounded by Cage, and that goes beyond the severe forms of the Bauhaus.
In 1948 Johnson moved to New York where he painted with intricate geometry, and where he showed with the American Abstract Artists group. He chucked abstraction only in the mid-fifties, when under the influence of Rauschenberg and Cy Twomby he started to produce the hundreds of small collages that he called moticos, which were in fact a combination of irregularly shaped ink drawings, newspaper clippings, and portraits of stars. Many people see the iconography of these collages as prophetic of the great Pop Art myths, although Johnson didn't respect the conventions of advertisement art in his compositions.

He continued working with the collage, finding enough inspiration in it for the following two decades, while at the same time this genre fertilized another domain of his activity. Johnson developed a specific kind of collage technique: first he cut a coherent image into strips and then rearranged them either using the strips as constitutive pieces or layers for new collages, or by sending them to friends and acquaintances. The idea of this alternative distribution of art work quite possibly generated the most durable invention of Johnson: the New York Correspondence School (NYCS). The Correspondence School was a more or less ironic - although not completely frivolous - denomination for the correspondence of a network that comprised artists in both loose and strong contact. Its origin, according to Johnson, stretched back to the period before Black Mountain College, when he had already begun to use the post as an artistic medium in his correspondence with his friend, Arthur Secunda. But mail art, built as a parasite of the postal system, which in return influenced its instruments and its ideology, began to exist as an autonomous form of artistic expression only at the beginning of the sixties. The characteristics of the mail art genre, its favouring communication over artistic originality are the direct influences of Johnson's personality.

The basic concept of mail art is bilateral communication in the most sincere sense of the words, why the letter carrying the personal message is at the same time an art work sent as a gift. Johnson played variations on the theme of giving. Sometimes he demanded that his partner take part in the collaborative creation with the command "Add to and return to...", resulting in a shared artwork that challenges the most carefully watched criteria of classical aesthetics: originality. Sometimes he forwarded the parcels to his correspondents through an intermediary. This third participant was sometimes an onlooker, a professional voyeur in the process, committing an infraction of privacy in communication, while another time he would play an active role in the formation of the art work.

Johnson's personality defined the policy of the mail art exhibitions as well. The exhibitions were public forums for the artists involved in the correspondences, but they differed greatly from classic exhibitions. Everybody was free to announce such an event, anybody could determine the subject, but all received work had to be shown, and the documentation of the exhibition had to be sent to all participants. The most remarkable mail art exhibitions of the NYCS were those in the Whitney Museum in 1970, and at Western Illinois University in 1974.

People put various dates to the inception of the NYCS. Mike Crane dates it from 1962, according to Johnson, it already functioned in the fifties. But the name, given by Ed Plunkett (New York Correspondence School), gained recognition only at the end of the sixties, mostly due to the increasingly regular meetings organized by Johnson. In the fifteen years between 1968 and 1983, Ray organized more than fifty meetings, heterogeneous in aspects and goals. These were usually assemblies dedicated to legendary artists and media stars (like the "Paloma Picasso Fan Club Meeting", the "Shelley Duvall Fan Club Meeting", the "Marcel Duchamp Fan Club Meeting", or the "Meeting for Anna May Wong"), but the events based on conceptualist ideas were also essential (like the "Snakes Escape", the "Stilt Walk Meeting", or the one titled "Oh Dat Conset Art"), as well as the events where nothing happened besides being together (Johnson called these "Nothings", in response to the happenings of the fluxus artists).

Though Johnson wrote a NYCS obituary for the New York Times in 1973, the school continued its activities under the names of different clubs and universities. The Buddha University and the Taoist Pop Art School were the most important among its incarnations.

In addition to his mail activity, Johnson continued to make collages, but simultaneously, he was careful to run contrary to the few exhibition forums and traditional art venues still open to his "serious art". Maybe this explains why his life work was not presented in contrast to his correspondents working in the field of Pop Art and fluxus. Johnson's public was gradually restricted to his correspondences and the meetings under the aegis of the NYCS. He retired to live in the privacy of his Locust Valley house, where he spent ten to twelve hours a day sorting the letters received and assembling his own mail. Reflections - sometimes blent with offended overtones - on contemporary art became a recurrent subject of the meetings. In his mail and phone conversations of the eighties, he was occupied with travesty, fakes, and subversion. His last important exhibition was during the mid-eighties in the Nassau County Museum of Art. As he gradually departed from the official art scene, he organized more and more Nothings, and encouraged the spread of his rumoured death. It's symbolic that one of his last possible public appearances - Michael Corbett, without Johnson's knowledge, had entered their shared work entitled "Condom Man" in the "In the Spirit of Fluxus" exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum - was disallowed through censorship. "I'm often killed", he wrote in his piece for the Uppsala Mail Art Display in 1994. In December 1994 he announced the death of bunny, the figure which had almost become his travesty.
On January 13th, 1995 he executed “the greatest performance in his life”, he jumped into the water from a bridge in Sag Harbor, New York.
(Klára Kiss-Pál, 1997)

Title: Correspondence Art of Ray Johnson

Scope and Content of Collection
This collection includes 10 letters and 24 items of mail art created by Ray Johnson. The correspondence includes one
"Thank you" note to Lou Harrison and nine letters to Rita Bottoms, then UCSC Special Collections Librarian.

Indexing Terms
The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.
Johnson, Ray--Archives
Mail art

Box-folder 1:1-2

Correspondence 1993-1994 n.d.

Physical Description: 10 letters
2 folders

Scope and Content Note
This collection includes one letter written to Lou Harrison and nine letters to Rita Bottoms, Special Collections Librarian

Box-folder 1:1

"Dear Lou, Thank You for "Joys and Perplexities." Ray J" 1994

Scope and Content Note
Note:"Lou gave this back to me after reading it for his archive" - Handwritten note on bottom left corner

Box-folder 1:2

"Please send to Rita Bottoms - Ray Johnson, 44 West 7 Street, Locust Valley, New York 11560" n.d.

Box-folder 1:2

"Rabbit Ray Johnson New York Notes on a letter head David Bourdon" [photocopied article] n.d.

Scope and Content Note
"Rita - I painted Calm Center when I lived across the Hall from John Cage = When he was writing the Music of Changes. The Painting was my Mandala." [holograph note on bottom of page]

Box-folder 1:2

"July 8, 1993, Rita Bottoms, My friends Phyllis Stigliano and Janice Parente are working for Nink Niki de Saint Phalle, 49 Rue Boissonade, Paris 75014" 1993

Note
[fragment of page]

Box-folder 1:2

Postcard to: Rita Bottoms Special Collections; From: FaGaGaGa box 1382 Youngstown ohio 44501 usa 1994

Scope and Content Note
"May 16, 1994, message left on our answering machine by Ray Johnson: ‘Woof, woof, woof’"

Box-folder 1:2

Postcard to: Rita Bottoms, Special Collections - “Rita, Wishing you a happy Ray B-Day.” Stamp: October 16 Happy Birthday Ray Johnson 1993

Scope and Content Note
[color photocopy of Ray Johnson & FaGaGaGa - Nothing]
Correspondence 1993-1994 n.d.

Box-folder 1:2

1 white sales bag, 6" x 9.75" The University of Michigan Museum of Art, printed on front - Containing: 1 blank postcard of Mount Hood from the Dales by John Mix Stanley; 1 note: "9.25.93 Rita, I'm going to Europe for three weeks. Please send me M. Patchen's mailing address" Sept. 25, 1993

"The Locust Valleyer - 7.7.93 Rita Bottoms, Today is Shelley Duval's Birthday. It Really was nice to talk with you today. Maybe you are someone who 'could work' with me?? Since I seem to be impossible to work with. Ray J." July 7, 1993

"Rita, Soon it will be show time again (on other side of this page) is by Kenneth Patchen. Maybe that could be our theme soon for Ohio song soon " October 7, 1993

[Side 1] "Pop Art 1958, Bill Wilson, 166 Park St, New Haven, Connecticut"
[Side 2] New York Correspondence school How to Draw a Tender Button - "Rita - Bill Wilson has fifty just framed Ray Johnsons all ready to go off to a museum exhibition. = He said today " n.d.

Box-folder 1:2

[Rita, Soon it will be show time again (on other side of this page) is by Kenneth Patchen. Maybe that could be our theme soon for Ohio song soon " October 7, 1993


Box-folder 1:3

"Shelley Duval Fan Club; Rain-Rein or Shine, 2nd New York Correspondence School "

"IDA FINE SELTZER, JOHNSONS" n.d.

[Side 1] "VOICE CENTERFOLD A Valentine for Shelley Duval "This declaration of valentine love is the latest work of Ray Johnson, founder of the School of Correspondence Art "

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "Cezanne's Bicycle Seat. Please add to & return to Ray Johnson "
[Side 2] "Ray Johnson. Please send to Jackson Pollock" n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "Lee Hall Bill de Kooning Please add to & return to Ray Johnson "
[Side 2] [Dot-screened image of woman's face, no text] n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "Please send to Leon Trotsky Tobias Max Hutchinson gallery 127 Greene Street, New York February 21 to March 12"
[Side 2] "Ear Diary, by Monte Zuma" n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "Yin Yang of the Month Club "
[Side 2 - blank] n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "Fake Ray Johnsons Bill Dobbs Gallery New York City"
[Side 2] [copied pattern - no text] n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "Shelley Duval Fan Club Correspondence Art Exists For Only One Person. ME Mimi Grooms Please add to and return to Ray Johnson"
[Side 2] "IDA FINE SELTZER JOHNSONS" n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "Pop Art 1958 Bill Wilson 166 Park St. New Haven, Connecticut"
[Side 2] "New York Correspondence School How To Draw A Tender Button " n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "Twelve O'clock in a cuckoo shop - Albert M. Fine Spring Lake Ranch, Cuttingville, Vermont U.S.A."
[Side 2] [copied pattern - no text] n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "1970 Dear Robert Pincus - Ray Johnson Letters to Robert Pincus written $5,000 EACH"
[Side 2] "Art in Contact Bill de Kooning's Bicycle Seat - Please add to & return to Ray Johnson" n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "Photo by Andy Warhol"

Box-folder 1:3

[Side 1] "People are talking about - Ray Johnson, centre, and the exhibition of his New York “Correspondence” School at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York - Vogue Magazine October 1,1970 - NUTSY"
[Side 2] "Ray Johnson" n.d.

Box-folder 1:3

Mail Art ca. 1990-1994

Physical Description: 1 folder 24 items
Scope and Content Note
This series includes twenty four samples of Johnson's mail art.
Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “TOARTD LERS
JOHNSON LETTERS
HAVE SOLD RAY
OF PEOPLE WHO
ME THE NAMES
PL SE SEND”

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “Max Ernst”

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “NOTHING O HI O
The Butler Didn’t Do It
Art International Summer 1972”
[Side 2 - blank] n.d.

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “Art in America : May-June, 1973
NOTHING O HI O
The Butler Didn’t Do It”
[Side 2 - blank] n.d.

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “JAMES DEAN ELVIS PRESLEY”

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “Ray Johnson The Most Famous Unknown Artist in America Agnes Martin ”

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “Letters $10,000 EACH Dear Brice, Dear Bruce ”

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “International Mail Art Exhibit During July 2-31, 1983 - Oh Dat Monthly ”
[Side 2] “Collage by Sherrie Levine - The Goldie Paley Gallery at Moore College is showing the work of Ray Johnson, probably the most famous unknown artist alive today.” n.d.

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “Photo by Edward Weston”
[Side 2 - blank] n.d.

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1] “New York Abstract Expressionist Correspondence School, Tides Motel Meeting, Bayville, N.Y. August 1, 1993 ”
[Side 2 - blank] n.d.

Box-folder 1:3  [Side 1 - photocopied b/w image of man seated in a touring car - no text]
[Side 2 - blank] n.d.