

RAY JOHNSON

correspondences

Exhibition organized by **Donna De Salvo**

Edited by **Donna De Salvo** and **Catherine Gudis**

Wexner Center for the Arts

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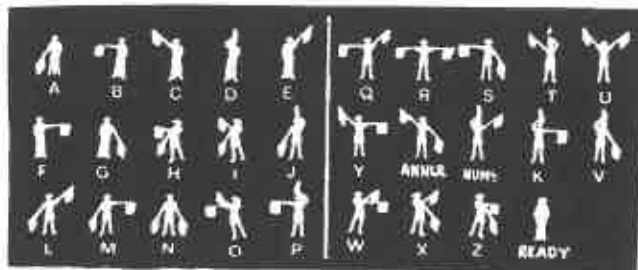
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Front cover:
Untitled (Woman in Carriage),
ca. 1957–58 (detail)
11 x 7¼

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CORRESPONDENCES

My work is like driving a car.

I'm always switching gears.

—Ray Johnson

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RAY JOHNSON VIEWED THE WORLD as a series of endless correspondences, and over his nearly fifty-year career created a chain of works that succeeded in blurring the categorical distinctions between life and art, fact and fiction, abstraction and representation. Adopting a nonlinear, stream-of-consciousness stance, Johnson crafted an approach that allowed the random, coincidental, and ephemeral to occupy the same plane of critical consideration as more traditional and universal concerns. His prodigious output—the full extent of which is not yet fully known—included collages, sculpture, books, performance events, correspondence art, music, photographs, and graphic design. All were essential parts of a whole, threads of a complex web of events woven to wed the otherwise disparate elements representative of life's lived experiences.

Because Johnson so freely moved from one idea to the next, his body of work, as well as the man himself, have resisted categorization, especially in terms of a single genre or approach. His primary medium, however, was collage, and his raw materials were the planned and unintended correspondences he observed—formal, conceptual, and social—between images, objects, people, and events. Through a daily ritual of collage-making, or what he once referred to as the “ceremony,” Johnson produced thousands of complex collages, laboriously gluing, painting, and sanding them, and then sending them out into the world.¹ In these works, he

Letter by Ray Johnson to
Arthur Secunda, 1943
Arthur Secunda



reflected upon the banal and extraordinary elements of everyday life and people and the subjective associations that interconnect them. All was grist for his mill, worthy of commentary, parody, a short riff, or a recurrent visitation. Tracing the comings and goings of his mind, his work was a chart of his own subjective associations, as well as his reflections on the preoccupations of twentieth-century popular culture in general, including its obsession with celebrity, myth, glamour, information—all subjects of particular interest to many other artists in the postwar era.

Considered by many as a paradigmatic medium for the twentieth century, collage became for Johnson the ultimate metaphor for the way he experienced the world. Through collage, he created a seemingly unending array of juxtapositions using the material evidence of the world—what he would find in newspapers or on the street, receive through the mail, hear in a phone conversation, or come across in a motel room on his way to give a lecture about his work. As his friend William S. Wilson has written, his “collages resemble moments of meaning in life.”² The visual and verbal ensembles in these collages, as well as in his mechanically reproduced mailings and commercial design work, could be highly playful, with a powerful graphic immediacy, but they just as frequently functioned as enigmatic allusions or messages, oblique references whose meanings relied on the relationships between participants. Merging his correspondence and collage activities, Johnson went beyond Cubist and Surrealist approaches to create a network in which works of art and people become intertwined. In this way, his project can be seen to track the tenuousness of human communication, the poetics of exchange, and the relationship between the artist and his audience. By examining specific aspects of this production, it is possible to see how Johnson ultimately extended the possibilities of collage as system by expanding the compositional network beyond the parameters of an individual work and into the world at large.

For Johnson, collage functioned not only as a structural system, but also as a paradigm for communication. As early as the 1940s, when he was a teenager in Detroit, he used the collage process to offer up an embellished view of his adolescent experiences. In a series of letters and postcards he exchanged with his high-school friend Arthur Secunda in 1943 (above), the young Johnson’s written report of neighborhood news and his latest movie star loves is juxtaposed with illustrations, newspaper clippings, and other collaged fragments.³ The diaristic nature of these early letters, with word and image functioning equally as transmitters of information, foreshadows his later collages; indeed, he would refer to his correspondence with Secunda as marking the start of his career in correspondence art. And although he had yet to evolve a formal structure that seamlessly integrated word and image, these early missives suggest his awareness that combining the two produced something more compelling than either one alone.

Untitled, 1953

8½ x 10

Richard Lippold



Johnson's understanding of collage as a structural system was influenced by the formative training he received at Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the late 1940s, under the tutelage of artists such as Josef Albers, with whom he, as well as Robert Rauschenberg and others, studied design, painting, and color. Expanding the visual field and the material realm that they were asked to consider as source material, Albers trained young artists to analyze and apply color and form as expressive properties unto themselves. His pedagogy was distinguished by rigorous exercises that reinforced an awareness of what

could be discovered in the everyday. For instance, he asked students to draw from memory a familiar motif, such as a Coca-Cola logo or a label from a cigarette pack. For his legendary exercises in color, later published as *The Interaction of Color*, Albers also had students select from his collection of colored papers (kept in a suit box) and create compositions from the interplay of the individual elements.⁴ Both Johnson, and fellow artist Ruth Asawa, were admiring students of the elder artist, and it has been reported that Johnson took copious notes in Albers's class, which he burned sometime during the 1950s.⁵

Under Albers's influence, Johnson created a series of paintings in which he experimented with formal arrangements of patterns and colors. His early paintings were highly formal, geometrically structured abstractions that he exhibited with the American Abstract Artists group, along with such artists as Ad Reinhardt, Leon Polk Smith, and Charmion von Wiegand. These paintings included works such as *Seven Centers of a Ladder* (ca. 1950) and *Calm Center* (ca. 1951, p. 30), both of which are complex systems of overlapping and interrelated parts based on square units (the grid would always remain an important structural device in Johnson's work). He produced these paintings, which were often made not with a brush, but with a palette knife, in a methodical manner; at times it would take him several months to complete a single painting. These works also reflect the influence of his friend, the sculptor Richard Lippold. The two had met at Black Mountain, where Lippold had been invited to be artist-in-residence during the summer of 1948. At the time, Lippold was already producing the constructive wire sculptures that later became the hallmark of his work.⁶ After Johnson settled in New York in 1948, he shared an apartment with Lippold, in a building on Suffolk Street known as the Boza Mansion, named after the building's landlord. Their neighbors across the hall were Merce Cunningham and John Cage.

Cage's pervasive influence was equally formative to Johnson's early work, yet more difficult to pinpoint. By the time Cage had arrived at Black Mountain, he had already begun

studying with Daisetz T. Suzuki, who introduced Zen philosophy to the United States. Ultimately, Johnson absorbed many of Cage's ideas about chance and indeterminacy, philosophies that contributed to the formation of Cage's revolutionary experiments in music during this time. While Albers's teaching offered his students a discipline and control over materials, Cage opened up ways of working that allowed spontaneity and randomness to become valid aesthetic processes. Cage's influence on Johnson is suggested by his approach to collage as a performative act, and an awareness of the world itself as a collage in time and space.⁷

18 In the early 1950s, after he had moved to New York, Johnson destroyed most of his paintings and cannibalized the fragments into other works. Around this same time, he also began creating and mailing collaged postcards using fragments from magazines and comic strips.⁸ Much about this period in Johnson's life remains unknown, including what led to his dissatisfaction with painting. One can speculate that it was a necessary rejection of his experience with Albers, especially as Johnson began making irregularly shaped works, in contrast to the gridded structures of his earlier paintings. It may also have been a result of his exposure to Cage and his own developing interest in Zen philosophy. In addition, it may have reflected a broader generational shift. During this period, Johnson was not alone in gravitating toward collage as his primary medium. Wallace Berman, Bruce Conner, Richard Hamilton, Al Hansen, George Herms, Allan Kaprow, and Robert Rauschenberg were just a few of the artists in the United States and Europe who were beginning to turn toward collage and assemblage at this time. These mediums were understood as an implicit counter-response to Abstract Expressionism, the era's dominant artistic movement, which signaled the triumph of abstract gestural painting. Breaking free of the limitations imposed by this type of painting, collage made possible the reintroduction of referential images that also functioned as formal elements. It also served as a mode of reconnecting with the stuff and actions of everyday life, in contrast to the loftier ideals of Abstract Expressionism, yet did so without resorting to the kinds of narrative associated with representational painting.

Nevertheless, Johnson's experiments with collage were distinctive. A comparison between his work and that of Rauschenberg is particularly illuminating in this regard. In spite of the great similarities between Rauschenberg's and Johnson's work, the two took the medium of collage as an organizing principle for their production in radically different directions. As Charles Stuckey has written, Rauschenberg's "art of parts" was deeply antithetical to the Abstract Expressionist conception of the pictorial surface as a unified whole; the same could be said of Johnson's.⁹ Yet, in addition, the work of both artists reveals an essentially formalist concern with structure, as well as a simultaneous tendency to invest structure with elements of the personal and the autobiographical. Both artists also desired to work in what Rauschenberg described as the gap between art and life, evolving formal devices that engaged and acknowl-

Installation of *moticos*, ca. 1955



edged the spectator. But if collage was an essential element in the development of Rauschenberg's Combines, as well as in the equally revolutionary development of Johnson's correspondence art, herein lies an important difference between the two artists.

Rauschenberg's Combines were made primarily for the context of the gallery and museum, while Johnson has been described as "the master of collage on a portable scale." Johnson's radical contribution was to expand the compositional network beyond the confines of a single collage and take it to the world. If Rauschenberg introduced life into art, Johnson introduced art into life.

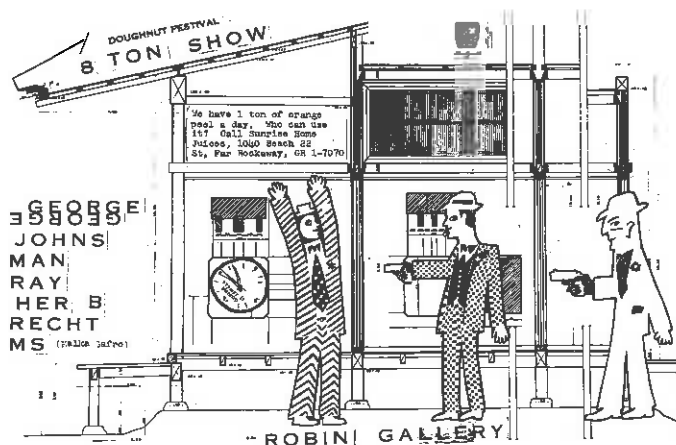
The desire to work in the gap between art and life inspired a variety of neo-avant-garde practices in the 1950s and early 1960s. These ranged from the Happenings of Kaprow, Jim Dine, and Claes Oldenburg, which merged the discrete work of art with the larger environment of which it was an integral part, to the collaborative projects of groups such as The Living Theatre, opened by Judith Malina and Julian Beck in 1951, which conflated the spectacles of theater and life through a wide array of experimental productions. These practices expanded the performative gestures of painting and of the theater more forcibly into public life and offered critiques of the institutions responsible for artistic interpretation. Johnson's activities, like Happenings, Fluxus Events, and Living Theatre productions, placed new demands on their audiences, who now became not just passive receivers but active producers of meaning.¹⁰

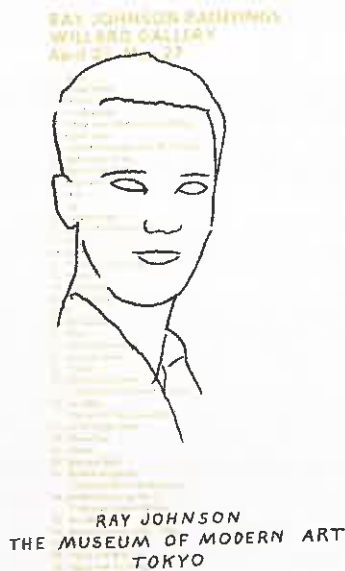
After his abandonment of painting, Johnson's first collages were irregularly shaped works made of cut-up strips of paper and found materials, such as *Untitled* (1953, p. 17). This work is comprised of several parts that have been attached with string. Although its overall form is abstract, it retains certain representational elements noticeable only on close inspection, as their text is partially obscured by paint. In effect, Johnson emphasized the abstract nature of both word and picture. Increasingly, Johnson collaged onto these irregularly shaped supports images from magazines, newspapers, and other sources. These were shown in informal, and usually private assemblages, installations, and performances. For example, he displayed them in groups on the walls of his apartment or in installations in other untraditional spaces, as when he inserted them between the floorboards of a downtown New York warehouse in 1955 (above). He brought them into the outside world by placing them on doorsteps or by using them to cover the body of a friend, the art critic Suzi Gablik.¹¹ And, as in his earlier exchanges with Secunda, he also sent these composite works to people through the mail. In fact, decrying the need for a pure logic to his activities or evident reason for his distribution schemes, he used the U.S. Postal Service to distribute thousands upon thousands of letters and mailings. "A correspondence will reassert itself," he claimed, and his spontaneous gestures served as the vectors that

created new relationships and new players with whom he exchanged words and images, and through whom he continually expanded his network.¹² This move was as significant to his practice as Kaprow's transformation of his action-collages into Happenings.¹³

Johnson's ambivalence for the institutions of the art world and marketplace led him to develop other ways of circulating and exhibiting his work, either through the mail or in performances and installations on the street or elsewhere. For instance, he might agree to show someone work at a stop off the Long Island Expressway, the highway connecting his Locust Valley, Long Island, residence (from 1968 to 1995) to Manhattan. Like a traveling salesman, he was known to meet a client somewhere with a suitcase full of collages in hand, or to visit the home of a potential collector, and one by one, present a selection of works chosen specifically for that individual. When he did agree to exhibit his work, he favored highly pristine and carefully chosen installations. These machinations, as well as his sharp-witted commentaries in his works, drew attention to the systems of the art world—the power of the dealer, the critic, and the museum—to not only institutionalize art, but to mold it to fit prefabricated expectations.

Indeed, throughout his career, Johnson created his own systems of distribution, promotion, and commentary, thus subverting the conventional channels of the gallery and the museum. He created mythical exhibitions at nonexistent galleries that were nevertheless based on factual events. In 1961, he participated in *Gang Bang*, a group exhibition at the Batman Gallery in San Francisco, which also included works by Conner, Jay De Feo, Herms, Mike McClure, and others. Later that year, with the participation of Dorothy Podber and other artists, he invented the mythical Robin Gallery (below) and distributed authentic looking announcement cards for fictional exhibitions. The name was partly a response to the Batman Gallery, as well as a play on the famous Reuben Gallery, where numerous artists associated with Happenings and Pop art exhibited. (Johnson had been included in *Below Z*, an exhibition presented at the gallery from December 18, 1959, through January 5, 1960, but he later renounced his participation.) He often sent out mailings that mimicked the promotional materials often written by galleries about their artists, with the effect of creating an aura of mystery





Mailing, ca. 1970s

about himself. For his 1966 “retrospective” at the Willard Gallery, he produced a mailing that took one bit of factual information as its basis, the exhibition’s checklist. But he transformed this checklist by overlaying onto it the phrase “The Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo” (left), again referring to an institution at which he had never shown. In the 1970s, he superimposed over this already altered image a line drawing traced from a

high-school photograph of himself. Reminiscent of the earlier art comics of his friend Ad Reinhardt, Johnson also offered his own histories of the art world, remarking, “history is a very loose subject in which anybody can declare that anything happened at any time at all.”¹⁴

In this regard, the critic Harold Rosenberg’s discussion of collage is worth considering. As he wrote in his essay, “Collage: Philosophy of Put-Togethers,” in 1975, “The mingling of object and image in collage, of given fact and conscious artifice, corresponds to the illusion-producing processes of contemporary civilization.” Rosenberg went on to suggest that “in advertisements, news stories, films, and political campaigns, lumps of unassailable data are implanted in preconceived formats in order to make the entire fabrication credible. Documents waved at hearings by Joseph McCarthy to substantiate his fictive accusations were a version of collage, as is the corpse of Lenin, inserted by Stalin in the Moscow mausoleum to authenticate his own contrived ideology. Twentieth-century fictions are rarely made up of the whole cloth, perhaps because the public has been trained to have faith in ‘information.’ Collage is the primary formula of the aesthetics of mystification developed in our time.”¹⁵

By 1955, Johnson had arrived at a standardized size for his collages, as well as a new name. Using sheets of discarded shirt cardboard measuring 11 x 8 inches, the dimensions of a standard sheet of paper, he created compositions that included fragments from magazines and newspapers. The resulting collages typically feature logos from Camel and Lucky Strike cigarette packs, Chinese ideograms, maps, and menus, among other images. Searching for a new term for these works, he asked his friend Norman Solomon what word he was reading in a dictionary. The word was *osmosis*, the meaning of which suggests permeability and flow, qualities that could describe the collages themselves, which, as Johnson wrote, “continually change, like the news in the paper or the images on a movie screen.”¹⁶ From this word, Johnson created *moticos*, an anagram of the word *osmotic* (the adjectival form of osmosis). He created lists of individuals to whom he mailed printed flyers announcing the availability of his moticos—the lists included museum curators, directors, dealers, and others—and they



Broadside, ca. 1955
Frottage, 11 x 8½
Judith Malina

were also the subject of a 1955 article in *The Village Voice*. Johnson would use this word, as well, to signify the invented language of abstract marks he used in many of his works.

The meticulously crafted surfaces of Johnson's moticos present viewers with images spanning the beautiful and the grotesque, the ideal and the reviled, the popular and the esoteric.

Continually updating his inventory of fragments from existing information systems—newspapers, magazines, tabloids, photographs, and comic strips—and those of his own making, he devoted much time and labor to making these complexly structured objects, which ask for prolonged engagement with the viewer. Most of them manifest a striking formal integrity, a sense of order that belies the morass of stimuli they contain. In Johnson's world of moticos, literary figures such as Eudora Welty (p. 33) stand side by side with celebrities such as James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Marilyn Monroe, just as they might on the page of a newspaper or magazine.

Constructed from the simplest of materials, the translucent, mute, even deadpan surfaces of these collages comment on the abstract nature of words, pictures, and communication. *Untitled (Easter)* (1955/85/88/89/94, p. 41) is one such work. It features an engraving depicting a man using a chisel-like tool to carve into the surface of a rock, though the words he has recorded remain a mystery. (In 1982, Johnson discovered that Joseph Cornell had used the exact same engraving in a 1933 collage, a correspondence he relished.)¹⁷ The collage also serves as a record of actions, ranging from the discovery of the engraving that has been pasted down, to the sanding, painting, and scratching, mimicking writing, that forms the surface of the work. Several years later Johnson reworked the collage, each time adding a new date to record the action.

Johnson's collages also present networks of individual signs capable of multiple interpretations. For instance, *Movie Star with Horse* (1958, p. 14) is comprised of found materials as well as painterly marks. For this tightly engineered work, Johnson collaged fragments of paper, some cut from magazines and newspapers, onto the cardboard support. He created the surface through delicate washes of paint and further modulated it with sandpaper, which he used the way most artists might use a brush. He assembled many things—images of a movie star in



Book jacket design, 1956

NEW DIRECTIONS PAPERBOOK \$125

Window display, Bonwit Teller,
New York, ca. 1958

classic “cheesecake” pose, a telephone, a pictogram, a horse, and a series of moticos, all transmitters of messages, communication networks waiting to be decoded by whoever should come across them.

Glyph-like moticos such as those in *Movie Star with Horse* appear in many of Johnson’s collages of this period; they cover photographs of figures such as Elvis Presley, James Dean, and Eudora Welty, among others. Suggestive of writing, they are, in essence, an index to his collages, silhouettes he traced and reduced from the irregular shapes of his cardboard forms. They are exceedingly cryptic, and when combined with photographic images, the abstract nature

of Johnson’s moticos seems to define the photographic image not as a purveyor of truth, but as a signifier of fantasy and myth, its meaning continually subject to manipulation. Johnson had become acquainted with the possibilities inherent in reprographic techniques through his work as a free-lance designer. In 1956, he created a cover for an enlarged and expanded edition of Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* (p. 22), published by New Directions, in which he enlarged the photograph of the poet so as to reveal its underlying structure of Ben-Day dots. *Untitled (James Dean in the Rain)* (ca. 1955–58, p. 32), combines moticos with photographic images that offer two versions of the tragic star, small and large. Conflating the visual and verbal in this way, Johnson further blurs the line between fiction and fact.¹⁸

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One of Johnson’s most often reproduced collages, *Elvis Presley # I* (ca. 1956–57, p. 94) also combines an appropriated photograph of a pop hero with moticos.¹⁹ Wilson has discussed this work, which has also been exhibited with the title *Oedipus*, as the artist’s response to Abstract

Expressionism. About the work Johnson himself has said, “I’m the only painter in New York whose drips mean anything.” His challenge to the heroic mythos of Abstract Expressionism is somewhat analogous to Larry Rivers’s parody of the macho hero in *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (1953). It may also reference an increasingly mythological role for the artist created through popular magazines, such as *Life* and *Harper’s Bazaar*, which regularly reported on the comings and goings of the art world. (*Life*’s pages featured numerous artists, including an infamous portrait of Jackson Pollock painting with the subtitle “Jack the Dripper,” and Johnson himself had been featured with his Boza Mansion group in *Harper’s*.)²⁰



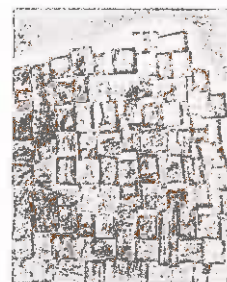
**Correspondence by Ray Johnson
to Andy Warhol, 1956**

The Archives of the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh;
Founding Collection, Contribution
The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

The conflation of the private language of mark-making with the more common experience signaled by the publicity photograph also suggests other readings of Johnson's *Elvis*. It is worth comparing Johnson's image with Andy Warhol's collage of Elvis (ca. 1956), in which he appears as a gold boot, beneath which is written Elvis's name. The two artists knew one another from their work in commercial design, and Johnson mailed a work to Warhol entitled *A Hebrew Shoe for You* (above) in response to Warhol's portfolio, *A la Recherche du Shoe Perdu* (1955). Warhol targeted his collage of Elvis to several subcultures, including his customers in the shoe industry, as well as, and perhaps simultaneously, his gay friends. Johnson's *Elvis* equally functions on dual levels. Selecting a photographic and a public image, he used the mythic hero of Elvis to address the death of the mythic hero of Abstract Expressionism. The image also has a charged eroticism—a homoeroticism that seems quite at odds with the machismo of the New York School. Ultimately, each artist retains in the image of Elvis the sense that it is a mirror on which viewers may project their own particular desires.

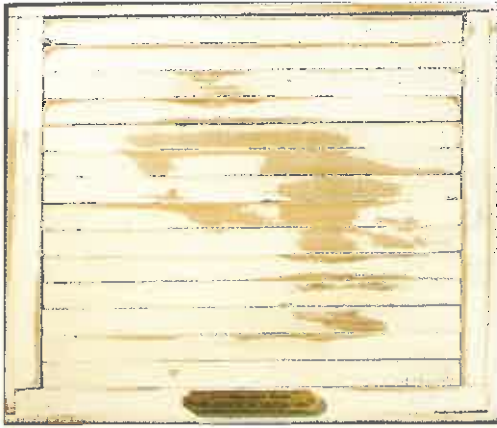
By the late 1950s, Johnson was increasingly erasing much of the informational content of his collages by superimposing patterns over images, as in *Untitled (Woman in Carriage)* (ca. 1957–58, p. 35), or by applying paint washes to the pictorial surface, as in *Untitled (Motico 30)* (ca. 1955–60, p. 36). These techniques largely transformed the underlying collage elements into shapes not unlike his silhouetted moticos. *Side by Side* (1959, below) juxtaposes printed silhouetted moticos with slightly raised counterparts, signaling a shift toward increasingly abstract works. In these, as well as in many works of the 1960s, cardboard components, which have also been referred to as tesserae, form the basis for the work. He arranged these individual units to form larger collages, some suggestive of his works of the early 1950s, such as *Untitled* (1953). Beyond the overall shape of the collages, their individual components are painted and heavily sanded, some retaining the ghost of a Lucky Strike emblem (p. 36) or the silhouette of a motico. These abstract constructions eventually served as the background on which Johnson would explore an enormous array of themes, especially the complexity and tenuousness of identity.

In many ways, Johnson's kaleidoscopic vision of the world as seen through collage seems best suited to explore the subject of human identity, a theme he pursued



Side by Side, 1959

18 x 22



Balshazzar's Feast, 1964

Construction of wood, paint, and metal,
18 x 18 x 3

with great fervor. The same visual strategies that created permutations of Lucky Strike emblems and moticos were now pressed into service to transform people into dollar bills (pp. 110–115) and potato mashers, as well as silhouettes drawn from life. Johnson also continued his use of photographic imagery. In 1967, he produced the first of

many works including a photograph of himself, *Mask I* (p. 160), *II*, *III*. These collages tell us very little about their subject: although the sitter's eyes peer mysteriously out toward us, the rest of the face is obscured by cardboard blocks covered with the imperceptible language of moticos. The only discernible marks are comb-like shapes referring to the Op paintings of the British artist Bridget Riley and Marcel Duchamp's readymade, *Comb* (1916). To heighten the illusory effect, Johnson has applied a wash over the photographic surface, which he then sandpapered.

One year later, in 1968, Johnson created another portrait, titled *Duchamp with Star Haircut* (1968, p. 27) featuring a photograph of a person wearing a black watchman's cap with a sheriff's badge. In this work, he referred to Duchamp's famous photograph of himself as his female alter-ego, Rose Sélavy, and to Georges de Zayas's 1921 photograph of the back of the artist's head with a star cut into his hair; he partially obliterated the photograph through the sanding process. Since Johnson used various strategies to disguise the individual's identity, it is unclear who the sitter is: Duchamp? Johnson? or someone else? She is actually the secretary of the New York Correspondence School, whose identity might only be discerned by those who were a part of that network and might recognize her from the watchman's cap and sheriff's badge.²¹

With *Rene Magritte* (1971, p. 117), Johnson paid homage to another European modernist, the Surrealist painter who had died the year the portrait was made. This collage, however, uses a photograph of Montgomery Clift as a stand-in for the artist. Johnson's inclusion of Magritte's name suggests his famous statement, "This is not a pipe," further reinforced by the use of Clift's photograph. But in contrast to *Duchamp with Star Haircut*, this collage expands the notion of the network beyond two individuals. It includes a network of names that reads not unlike one of the seating charts from Johnson's NYCS meetings. Littered with the names of film stars, art stars, NYCS members, and literary figures, each is represented by a fetus-like mark—a form on its way to becoming.

Throughout his career, Johnson also further expanded the notion of the network through the repeated use of certain motifs as well as through collages that related to one another. In 1971, he presented a series of collages in an exhibition entitled *Dollar Bills and Famous People Memorials*, which included his rendition of Magritte. This group of collages seems to have



January/February, 1966

30 X 30

The Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society

Purchase, Elinor Kushner Memorial Fund

been inspired largely by the fact that the individuals honored, such as the writer Yukio Mishima and the singer Janis Joplin, had recently died (Mishima committed ritual suicide at the height of his career, and Joplin died of a drug overdose).

Johnson's portrait of Mishima and another celebrity, the silent film star, Anna Mae Wong, are united in their use of text and ink images, as well as the drawing of a man's back, based

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on a photograph of the artist Karl Wirsum, a member of the NYCS (pp. 140, 118, 119). Johnson had held meetings for Wong, in which the fashion model Naomi Sims portrayed her, and sent out printed mailings announcing the event (p. 146). Further extending the connection, he produced a collage entitled *Anna May Wong's Mother's Potato Masher* (1972). These endless levels of correspondences, each impacting on the next and leading to ever new configurations, were the hallmark of Johnson's practice.

In 1972, Johnson produced a series of collages devoted to the theme of "Ray Johnson's History of the Betty Parsons Gallery," which he exhibited at the gallery that same year (pp. 66–68). Each of the collages in the exhibition is named for a specific artist who had shown at the gallery. However, Johnson also felt free to insert one named for the photographer Diane Arbus (p. 69), who had not. Together, they comprise an homage to the legendary dealer, who consistently promoted a range of artists, including nearly all of the most well known Abstract Expressionists. In his review of the exhibition for the *Nation*, the critic Lawrence Alloway wrote: "In Ray Johnson's collages words and images are inextricable; the denotation of proper names and the chains of visual associations tangle and unravel. These collages are not designed to be seen in a single, all encompassing glance, like a Motherwell collage; on the contrary, they are intricate and discursive, a nest of clues that solicit attention. Johnson merely explained the work by saying he was name dropping."²²

During this same period, Johnson began to develop other ways of connecting with people, beyond the NYCS. For example, he mailed individuals letters enrolling them in fan clubs he created—the Cher Fan Club, the Shelley Duvall Fan Club, the Edie Beal Fan Club, the Deadpan



Duchamp with Star Haircut, 1968

15½ x 11¾

Jedermann, N.A.

DUCHAMP WITH STAR HAIRCUT, NEW YORK, 1917.

Fan Club—that were phantoms, created entirely through rubber stamps and existing only on paper. He used his fan clubs and galleries, as well as the NYCS, as a way of joining people in coincidental ways. As in his earlier images of Elvis and James Dean, and his portrayals of art world heroes, he used

these strategies to parody and explore the illusory nature of celebrity, fame, and human identity.

In 1976, Johnson embarked on a major series of portrait collages based on the silhouettes of people he had asked to pose for him.²³ The list reads like a who's who of the New York art and literary worlds. He discussed these images in relationship to the silhouetted motifs he developed during the 1950s, which he once placed on the body of a friend. The silhouetted image created by the outline of the sitter exists as a background, a framing device, as well as an index. It contains some factual evidence, the person's outline, along with an array of abstract shapes and images that may or may not have a connection with the sitter. *Untitled (Wolf with Zodiac)* (1976–87, p. 157) fuses Warhol's outline with painted shapes and collage elements in an abstract composition that reads like camouflage. Johnson often produced as many as thirty or forty portraits of a single individual, believing his or her personality to be multifaceted. He also extended this approach to his own self-portraits, combining his images with the profiles of Duchamp (p. 163) and Cornell. The interlocking parts of these collages create a unified pictorial surface, but without fixed meaning.

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Johnson's kaleidoscopic view of the world fractured everything into a correspondence, its direction ultimately determined by individual desire and inclination. As David Bourdon wrote, his collages "are the equivalent of Rorschach inkblot tests that can be interpreted in almost as many ways as there are individuals to examine them." This statement is as true of the artist as it is of his work. Johnson placed himself at the center of a system of individuals—each with his or her own interpretations, inclinations, and opinions—and created works that allowed for those differences of opinion. The age of digital technology in which we now find ourselves offers a comparable allure of connection. Johnson's communication network, filled with announcement cards and histories of the world, makes the comparison to the Internet inevitable. In both worlds, fact and fiction mix quite easily, putting the user on guard. As Nicholas Negroponte has written in his book *Being Digital*, "in the post-information age, we often have the audience the size of one. Everything is made to order, and information is extremely personalized."²⁴

In the last few years of his life, between 1991 and 1994, Johnson produced a series of small works, more paintings than collages, that depict stages which seem to exist for an audience of one. Made on discarded cardboard, they are unlike the far more complicated collages for which he is best known. Each work features a single image placed on center stage;



*A Opera
The curtain opens:
On stage is a can
of sand.
The audience: Ha, ha, ha.*

Untitled (Can of Sand), 1992

Tempera on cardboard, 7½ x 7½

the images range from autobiographical references from the artist's early years, such as Josef Albers and the Coca-Cola logo, to ones with far more mysterious connotations, such as a can of sand (above). Beneath this image is a legend that reads, "The curtain opens. The can of sand appears. The audience says, 'Ha, ha.'" These enigmatic works suggest another way of framing the world, as Johnson's earlier motico panels had once reflected a view of postwar America created through its scraps. In certain ways, they also seem to crystallize the problematic nature of his quest. They are both distant and intimate, perhaps evoking Johnson's beliefs about the personal experience of art and the desirability of being able to have an audience of one—something that can never be accomplished through a public exhibition, in which the face of the viewer is often anonymous. They also seem to leave us with the uncanny feeling that Johnson is looking at us while we are looking at him.

Ultimately, the thousands of missives Johnson sent into circulation were a kind of fuel that enabled his network to move and expand. Collectively, they suggest both archive and time capsule, with its contents spread around the world. Unlike the work of other artists, notably Gerhard Richter, whose ever-expanding *Atlas* meticulously catalogues the artist's interests and influences, Johnson's project emphasizes the messiness of such things. It also comments on the fugitive nature of fame, glamour, celebrity, career, and finally, existence itself. As Wilson points out, "the 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."²⁵

In the end, one is struck by the enormous collection of work Johnson left us with, some of them purposefully created for a public audience, and thus capable of existing on their own within the context of art history. Others, more private works, came about as the result of specific relationships and are still best understood by those who received them. Indeed, the richest perspectives on the artist are still to be offered by those who sustained long-term correspondences and friendships with him, including Wilson, Henry Martin, and many others. These individuals bring to Johnson's project a visceral experience of the work that will never be possible for those in the "public" sphere, for whom the artist has become an historical figure. Johnson created a situation in which each recipient of his mail art feels, in effect, that he or she might possess the key to this vast storehouse of words and images, and that, by extension, we might all become drawn into their conspiracies of text and image. Nonetheless, by engaging in a formal analysis of Johnson's project, with an acceptance of its unresolvability, it becomes possible for those outside the network to begin to see how Johnson advanced his ideas about the possibilities and limitations of language—both verbal and visual—and the conflation of audience and network that was one of the end results of his experimentation with collage.

Although I never met Ray Johnson, I knew him from a few brief phone calls and through correspondence. I first made contact with him during the course of my research for the exhibition *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–62*, organized by Paul Schimmel and myself for The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. I asked Johnson for information about the works he had produced during this period; in response to this initial call, he began sending me photo-copied mailings with reproductions of some of his earlier collages with headlines such as "Pre-Pop Shop" or "Taoist-art School." While we were never able to arrange a personal meeting, Johnson did enroll me in the New York Correspondence School and sent me periodic mailings. We reconnected, as it were, when I was organizing the exhibition *Face Value: American Portraits for The Parrish Art Museum*. I felt Johnson's approach to portraiture had much in common with that of very contemporary figures, such as Cindy Sherman, and wished to include his work in the exhibition and catalogue, which I subsequently did. I received approximately twenty letters, either sent by Johnson or at his direction, as well as several small packages containing items such as a lamp shade. Johnson died during the show's organization and did not live to see its presentation in the summer of 1995.

1. Johnson used the word *ceremony* to describe his collage process, in the context of a discussion about his use of rubber stamps: "I use them as verbal information. I was explaining how my oldest rubber stamp reading 'Collage by Ray Johnson' as to how and where and why I use and stamp it, which in the collage process, or ceremony, after I apply tape or glue to a surface, which technically makes it a collage"; transcribed interview conducted by John Held, Jr., at the Mid-York Library System, Utica, N.Y., December 2, 1977.
2. William S. Wilson, in "Vibration and reverberation," *Collage* (Palermo, Italy) 6, no. 13 (September 1966); 58–59.
3. Secunda was Johnson's high school friend in Detroit; after high school, they began corresponding by postcard and letter and continued to correspond until Johnson's death.
4. For an extensive discussion of Albers's curriculum at Black Mountain College, see Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), especially 78–84.
5. William S. Wilson, *Ray Johnson, Black Mountain College Dissertations*, no. 4 (1997), 66.
6. Lippold recalled that Johnson used a palette knife to make his paintings; a photograph

taken sometime in the early 1950s shows the artist using this instrument. Lippold also remembered that Johnson had made paintings of a single color, notably orange; interview with Muffet Jones.

7. Although Johnson rarely acknowledged direct influences in his work, he did describe the following exchange with Cage in a 1968 interview: "I was doing very severely geometric paintings based on square units, rectangular and square units that I methodically filled in with color mosaics. And these paintings took me many, many months to complete. And one day having this pencil drawing groundwork for a painting I suddenly thought of putting straight pins through the back of the cardboard into my painting, into the picture. And John Cage was a neighbor of mine. When I was doing it I rushed over to show him what I was doing, 'I have this terrific idea to put pins through the middle of every square from the back and pins will all stick through.' He was quite shocked because I had changed the idea of what it was I was doing. I had made this foundation that I was going to fill in all these colors and this was to be a painting. And I changed horses in midstream and I was suddenly going to do something else. And he disapproved. I don't know why"; Ray Johnson, interview with Sevim Fesci, April 17, 1968, Archives of American Art, New York, p. 13.
8. Among the first were a series of collages sent in 1953 to Isabelle Fisher, a dancer with whom he was particularly taken. One featured a magazine fragment depicting a woman leaping through the air, a reference to its recipient, combined with another, the

word *Zen*, fragmented from *Jantzen*, a maker of women's swimwear and most likely an advertisement that had appeared in a fashion magazine. Over the course of one month, he sent postcards, each one with a different image from the comic strip *The Little King*, thus disrupting the narrative.

9. The entire quote reads: "Any number of details in Rauschenberg's works suggest his enormous respect for Abstract Expressionist painting. His art of parts, however, is fundamentally at odds with the quest for the whole fundamental to Abstract Expressionism"; Charles Stuckey, "Rauschenberg's Everything, Everywhere, Every-where Era," in Robert Rauschenberg: *A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1997), 35.
10. Johnson participated in numerous events organized by the Living Theatre, including the design of playbills and announcements, and also engaged in a correspondence with its founders. By 1957, he had also corresponded with Jiro Yoshihara, founder of the Gutai group.
11. The photographs were included in the article "700 Collages by Ray Johnson," with text by Suzi Gablik, in *Location* (New York) 1, no. 2 (Summer 1964): 55–58.
12. Interview with Held.
13. For more information on Kaprow and Happenings, see Allan Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments, and Happenings* (New York: Abrams, 1966); Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Michael Kirby, *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1965); Richard Kostelanetz, *The Theatre of Mixed Means: An Introduction to Happenings, Kinetic Environments, and Other Mixed-Means Performances* (New York: Dial Press, 1968); Mariellen R. Sanford, ed., *Happenings and Other Acts* (London: Routledge, 1995).

14. Ray Johnson, in Henry Martin, "Should an Eyelash Last Forever? An Interview with Ray Johnson," in this volume, 190.
15. Quoted in Katherine Hoffman, ed., *Collage: Critical Views* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989).
16. According to Norman Solomon, email to author, September 26, 1998, when Johnson was searching for a name for his new collages, he asked Solomon for suggestions. Solomon, who had just finished reading Hans Ruesch's *Top of the World* (1950), suggested "Eskimos." Johnson asked for another suggestion, and Solomon said, "Mexicos." Johnson then asked Solomon what word he was studying in the dictionary at that moment. It was "osmotics." Johnson then replied, "I think I'll call them moticos."

17. In a letter of November 22, 1982, to Lynda Roscoe Hartigan at the National Museum of American Art, Washington D.C., Johnson mentions he had recently learned that Joseph Cornell used the same engraving in one of his collages in 1933.
18. Johnson worked as a freelance commercial designer in the late 1940s and 1950s, producing book covers for *New Directions* and illustrations for women's fashion magazines. He also created several store window displays, such as those for Andrew Geller Shoes, in New York.
19. In 1957, Johnson composed "Funeral Music for Elvis Presley," a taped collage using music by Earl Brown.
20. "Four Artists in a 'Mansion,'" *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1952. In 1951, an article on Rauschenberg had also appeared in *Life*.
21. In a report from the New York Correspondence School, Johnson is described wearing a "Duchamp

star show cap all Nile-green with the Betty Davis bangs ss [sic] sewn-on to Arturo Schwarz lecture which was brilliant at the Modern Museum about Duchamp and Alchemy." There are countless references to Duchamp in Johnson's collages and correspondence. In the Schwarz collage, Johnson uses the letter "R"—the first letter of "R. Mutt," the signature on Duchamp's work *Fountain*, included in the American Society of Independent Artists exhibition at the Armory in New York in 1917.

22. Lawrence Alloway, "Ray Johnson's History of the Betty Parsons Gallery, in *The Nation*, February 5, 1973, 190.
23. Johnson either telephoned or wrote to the individuals he wished to portray. In a letter to Marion Javits in which he asked her to pose, Johnson describes the process: "It is a simple situation of my arriving with my small light and I draw your cast shadow on the wall on my paper. Jacob Javits could be drawn seated. But it has to be done in a completely darkened room. It takes just a few minutes each. And is very quick. This is how I have done the initial pencil sketch of the 290 people listed on the enclosed *Those Who Posed* page. The pencil sketch is just the first step of the portrait process. I do in my studio a secondary ink line tracing paper drawing, and then a series of variation portraits as described by Nina French-frazier about my last exhibition of Portraits at the Brooks/Iolas Gallery." See also, Nina French-frazier, "Ray Johnson," *Arts Magazine* 1, no. 10 (June 1978): 8.
24. Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 13.
25. William S. Wilson, "Reference and Relation," *Ray Johnson Ray Johnson* (New York: Between Books, 1977), back cover.

