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Zippy the Pinhead by Bill Griffith

BACK TO BASICS

Drop a brick, it falls to the ground... put your foot in a puddle, it comes out dripping... a fire will be hot... ice will be cold... and the bedroom will always need vacuuming... these phenomena we all take for granted...

thanks to Erik Hardin
When future historians comb through the wreckage of our century to reconstruct a picture of the origins of "do-it-yourself" culture, they'll reach back before grunge, zines and punk, to the late Ray Johnson, whose artistic use of coin-operated Xerox machines in the early sixties are a milestone. When all of us but Elvis are dead and gone, some sleuth inquiring "who WAS the first Pop artist, anyway?" will undoubtedly unearth Johnson's celebrity collages of James Dean, Shirley Temple and the King himself.

It will also be discovered that the legendary Johnson did the first happenings (he called them "nothings") when he carefully arranged those collages on the street. Or sat under a sun lamp until somebody told he might get burned. Or nailed a folded Larry Poons painting to a board. Or dropped mustard-covered dimes into a pay phone. Need I go on?

Even cyberspace is considered by some to be a Ray Johnson "nothing." In the early sixties, long before there was an Internet, Johnson's greatest performance work - the New York Correspondence School, an international network of poets and artists who used the low-tech medium of the postal system- freely exchanged artwork, objects and anything else deemed worthy by it's participants, many of whom became the cultural movers and shakers of the next several decades. The epicenter of this decentralized whirlwind? Ray Johnson- "the most famous unknown artist in the world."

Because Ray Johnson was the original "bridge" between so many of the people and sensibilities that dot the landscape of the international art scene and it's fringes, it is ironic that he took his own life at age 67 on January 13th, 1995 by jumping from a bridge into the chilly waters of Sag Harbor. But deadpan irony was central to Johnson's work and his lightning-quick wit left no detail unexplored. Tomorrow's historians will also be faced with solving the riddle of his final work- a death every bit as fascinating as his life.
Raymond Edward Johnson was born in 1927 in Detroit, Michigan. His first experiences using the
mail as an art medium stretch back to 1943 with his friend Arthur Secunda. From 1946-48 he studied
alongside Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly at the experimental Black Mountain College in
North Carolina with faculty members Joseph Albers, Robert Motherwell, John Cage, Merce
Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, and Willem and Elaine DeKooning, among others.

He moved to Manhattan and showed annually with the American Abstract Artists which included Ad
Reinhart among its members. By 1955, the trailblazing Johnson was painting over and cutting up
images of Elvis Presley. A year later a portrait of Ike would appear in the Robert Rauschenberg
collage and Roy Lichtenstein would include fuzzy pictures of Mickey Mouse by. But it would be
seven long years later Johnson-crony Andy Warhol would immortalize Elvis for the first time. By
then Johnson had moved on.

The trailblazing Johnson was a fixture on the Manhattan scene, heralded as an innovator by the
heroes-to-be of Pop and Fluxus. A pre-Factory Warhol crony, he joined Billy Name and a handful of
others to provide the creative atmosphere that Andy bounced off of.

Meanwhile, Johnson called his own collages "moticos" and stored them in cardboard boxes to be
shown in Grand Central Station or on the street. When he compiled them for the occasion of a 1955
photograph by Elisabeth Novick, Suzi Gablick wrote in the book Pop Art Redefined, "The random
arrangement... on a dilapidated cellar door in Lower Manhattan may even have been the first informal
happening"

"Ray didn't talk about it, he just did it." says long-time friend Toby Spiselman, "That's why you don't
find art magazines lying around quoting the art philosophy of Ray Johnson".

Indeed, Ray's iconoclastic blend of Taoist humility and spontaneous improvisation ran contrary to the
demands of the marketplace. "There was no perusal of the meaning of these pieces," Ray told me in
1991,"They just wanted them as objects. 'Aren't these nice! Put them in a museum with nice lighting.'
Not the ideas... I wanted to paste things on railroad cars. Nothing to be seen by anyone except
coyotes." But when the Pop Art gravytrain appeared instead, "I consciously burned everything in Cy
Twombly's fireplace. Those were early nothings... Destroying them was the logical thing to do as a
statement."

Johnson chose instead to give his art away via his Correspondence School, using a rich pallette of
bunny head portraits and verbal-visual puns and rhymes carefully designed to confound and amuse
the recipient. His love of collaboration and a habit of recycling old works into multi-layered new ones
resulted in a flurry of "mail art" circling the globe with instructions to "add to and return to Ray
Johnson."

In the early seventies the Whitney Museum asked Ray to invite members of his Correspondance
School for what was possibly the first mail art show, and certainly the first one in a major institution.
Ray once told me "For accuracy's sake Marcia Tucker should be credited with the policy of the New
York Correspondence School. She took over as an institution. I was merely the person inviting 116
people to be in that show. It said 'Please send to the Whitney Museum (etc.)...' There was no
explanation that they'd be exhibited, that they'd be catalogued. They just sent it." Ray was referring to
a now standard mail art practice that all work received is exhibited and that all participants are sent
documentation of the show in return.
ROLLING COMBERS

[Handwritten text]

John M. Bennett
John M. Bennett's new book advances his exploration of the possibilities of language and expression into previously unexplored territories. Whereas in his previous book, "Mailer Leaves Ham" (Pantograph Press, 1999), the poems doubled back on themselves and were in a sense "inside-out", in this new work such doubling often becomes superimposed, with the doubled texts right on top of each other and simultaneous. This makes for a stereophonic reading experience: poems with two (or more) lines of thought (converging, diverging, interweaving) heard at once. Read with superficial attention, this of course could sound cacophonous, but if the reader opens his/her ears, the real poem will be clear and deep. For the multiple voices truly blend into one, rather like the overlapping lines of a fugue. This is perhaps one of the most important contributions of Bennett's work: he has uncompromisingly introduced polyphony into English-language poetry, which, throughout its long history of styles and theories, has generally adhered to a "single voice" approach. Polyphonic structures occur in several dimensions of Bennett's text: in its music and sound; in its multiple meanings and punnings, sometimes across multiple languages; and in its thematic content. His themes are basically the ones that have concerned poets for centuries, even though he addresses them in unique and idiosyncratic ways. Underlying all of Bennett's work is a narrative base; here these narrations multiply, with one or more occurring at once. "Rolling COMbers" is a work that shows that true innovation must occur in the context of a dynamic engagement with the fundamental issues of human life: love, death, history, and consciousness. Bennett is a true original, occupying a category all his own, who has expanded the universe of poetry immeasurably.
Some thirty years and 50 countries later, mail art continues to expand from Johnson's original impetus and in addition to shows and one-to-one correspondence, it has spawned everything from "correspondence dinners" and mail art "congresses" to the omnipresent "zine" network to the do-it-yourself audio cassette exchanges that helped spread punk rock. In fact, if mail art can be considered a movement, none other has lasted longer or reached further.

For decades, in the legendary privacy of his own home in Locust Valley, Ray worked from morning until night, often with the television on in the background, always making up new incarnations of his CorresponDANCE School, (the latest one I had heard of being the "Taoist Pop Art School"). People who were close to Ray Johnson in the last years of his life know that he used inexpensive throw-away snapshot cameras as a tool to make pictures of "set ups" in natural settings of his silhouettes, portraits and other 2 and 3 dimensional objects.

In addition to his mail activity, Johnson continued to do events and make collages until the very end. His death itself may have been his final "event". He told several people in the last days of his life that he was working on his "greatest work". This man who had playfully announced his own death many times, died for real January 13, 1995.

He presumably drowned after a jump from the bridge in Sag Harbor, New York about a two hour drive from his home in Locust Valley. He was last seen by two teenage girls, backstroking away into Sag Harbor Cove two hours after checking into the Barron's Cove Inn in Sag Harbor, near the end of Long Island, NY. The weather was unusually mild for that time of year. Ray was fond of the water. He often took walks along the shore at Oyster Bay near his home. Though he turned 67 years old on the 16th of October, he was going strong, remarkably fit for a man of that age. He told me on the phone late last year, "I'm going to do my exercises," that he was "working on a washboard stomach" by doing "rowing exercises on the beach with rocks." And that he would "walk with rocks" as weights and that he was "feeling very fit."

He was pulled from the water at 12:35pm Saturday afternoon, January 14. He was fully clothed- in a typical outfit for him- levi's, a wool sweater, work boots and a wind breaker.

He probably would be amused by the "Paul Is Dead" atmosphere that has littered the press since his curious "rayocide." So-called art mavens quibble about auction prices while correspondents compare notes, sifting through old letters for evidence to explain away the enigmatic endgame of a complex man who was always one step ahead of the pack. The clues will continue to appear because he loved mystery, but always left a trail. In the end, all roads will lead back to the deadpan stare of Ray Johnson.

Created by The Panman (markb@echony.com)
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This page is a prototype for http://www.echony.com/~panman/ and new information will appear shortly updating this one and adding new subject matter about Ray Johnson and all sorts of other stuff. Bye!
The "S" stand for "sucks"

Photo of Ray Johnson in the 1960's by his close friend Toby Spiselman from a book by William S. whitney

Ray added a ladder to the drawing (by somone else of a statue in Tompkins Square Park honoring Postmaster Samuel S. Cox that appeared in a 1960's era Correspondance School project) after he did his September 1984 "roof event" in which he carried a ladder back and forth on top of a parking garage. The pun (letter/ladder carrier) was only an inkling of the layers of meaning that Ray eeked out of any slice of life. Photo of Ray by Coco Gordon.

Return to Text

http://www.echonyc.com/~panman/samcox_w_ladder.html
Ray sent me this program from the Whitney Show a few years ago with the "copyright" notice taped on.

In this 1994 bunny head Ray makes reference to the cost of postage for a first class letter. Shortly before his death, Ray made a point of complaining to art dealer Sanda Gering about the new postal rates, which rose to 32 cents on January 1, 1995. Friends were later surprised when $400,000 was found in his various bank accounts.