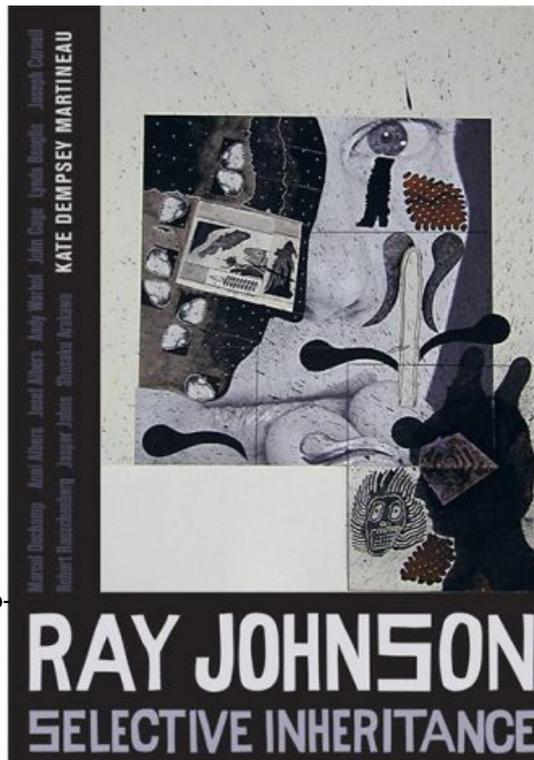




# Two of a Kind: Ray Johnson & Marcel Duchamp

BY MATTHEW ROSE | NOVEMBER 29, 2018



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Ray Johnson, "Untitled, (Duchamp with Moticos)," 1988, 20 x 15 in., Private collection, London. (Courtesy © The Ray Johnson Estate)

In 1990 while living in Port Washington, New York, [Ray Johnson](#) (/artists/ray-johnson-3337) paid me a visit, and offered me a mysterious gift — a glass rosebud vase plugged up with a champagne cork. It was a Ray Johnson-[Marcel Duchamp](#) (/artists/53660-marcel-duchamp) rectified readymade, a wordplay on my name and a nod to the Frenchman's feminine alter-ego, Rose Selavy ("Eros, c'est la vie"). The gift is in many ways the essence of the new book on [Ray Johnson](#) (/artists/ray-johnson-3337), Kate Dempsey Martineau's "Selective Inheritance," which sets out to dissect Johnson's aesthetic relationship to Duchamp — the artist whose ironic works largely defined Modern art.

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Born in Detroit in 1927, [Ray Johnson](#) (/artists/ray-johnson-3337) attended Black Mountain College from 1945 to 1948, where he studied with Joseph Albers in the commune-like art school in North Carolina. After moving to New York in 1948, he befriended a generation of artists like Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and John Cage, creators who would dominate the art world in the second half of the 20th-century.

Johnson's place in that world, however, was somewhat blurry; he consciously avoided gallery shows, preferring to work monk-like in the margins. He made and remade his smallish, odd collages he called "moticos," sending them off mostly to artist friends. He was quirky, funny and idiosyncratic — both introvert and extrovert. He told his friend the artist James Rosenquist: "This weekend, I walked to all the mailboxes in Brooklyn." Following Johnson's debut show at the Willard Gallery in New York in 1965, a decade after he moved to the city, Grace Glueck wrote in *The New York Times* that Johnson was "New York's most famous unknown artist."

"Selective Inheritance" achieves the scholarly goal of unpacking [Ray Johnson](/artists/ray-johnson-3337/) (/artists/ray-johnson-3337)'s unknown-artist status by peeling away the layers of his complex works with a savvy that combines art-world knowledge and darker, psychological theories. Martineau examines the minutiae of Johnson's collages, his use of the mail to subvert the art system by giving away his work for free and explore the work's relationship to the viewer through the aesthetic lens of Duchamp (1887-1968).

The French artist, writes Martineau, was a hero of American artists of the 1950s, particularly Johnson's colleagues and friends.

Duchamp argued in his works and texts for an art of the mind, setting in motion dozens of art movements scattered across the last 100 years. While many artists embodied Duchamp's spirit in their works, Johnson consciously riffed off of the French artist's bawdy innuendos, texts, images and wholesale notions of sexuality, eroticism, death and identity.

Since Johnson's suicide by drowning in 1995, a handful of books and at least one feature documentary ("How to Draw a Bunny," 2002) have emerged to explain his poetics and his mysterious suicide. This present volume goes a long way to elucidate Johnson's thinking, his ironic DNA and his consistent, obsessional focus on "correspondences" and synchronicity, the chance pile-up of meaningful coincidences.

Martineau discovered Johnson's work as an intern at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas while looking at his letters to the art critic Leo Steinberg, which had been donated to the museum. Johnson's multi-layered world of references, strange language and visual puns intrigued her, and she wandered deeper into his wide web of friends, correspondents, dealers and collectors.

[Ray Johnson](/artists/ray-johnson-3337/) (/artists/ray-johnson-3337)'s only known correspondence with Duchamp, "Solo Hair Net For [Marcel Duchamp](/artists/53660-marcel-duchamp/) (/artists/53660-marcel-duchamp)," opens Martineau's "inheritance" thesis as she unpacks the undated collage's references. Hair, she notes, rhymes with "heir," and this piece echos Duchamp's own rectified readymade, "Apollinaire Enameled" (1916-1917). The hair net was designed for "the Marcel wave," a popular 1920s hairstyle; the hair net was also made of "RAYON," clearly a play on Ray's own name; and the words "SOLO" and "Draw" and "String" appear, referencing Duchamp's works and that artist's solitary lifestyle — much like Johnson's own.

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Duchamp, Martineau maintains, is the key to unlocking Johnson's works and opens the door to both artists' preoccupations. Johnson's first exhibition at the Marion Willard gallery, we learn, was entitled "Duchamp Combs." Several Johnson works, like his Untitled ("Why Not Sneeze?") (1989) are direct commentaries on Duchamp's "Why Not Sneeze Marcel Duchamp?" (1921). Some works pay homage through confabulations like his "[Marcel Duchamp](#)

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(/artists/53660-marcel-duchamp) Fan Club Meetings,” while still others, Martineau points out, take center stage in Johnson’s erotic musings as he repeatedly repurposes Duchamp’s last work, “Etant Donne” (1966). The younger artist produces dozens of silhouettes of Duchamp’s profile and employs them as templates for his own collaged self-portraits.

Johnson’s “Green Box” — loose collages detailing the suicide death of one of Warhols’ superstars, Andrea Feldman — was a final coded reference to Duchamp’s own “Green Box” (1934). Discovered in his immaculately arranged Locust Valley, New York, home, Johnson’s story of one suicide pointed toward another — his own. Duchamp’s “Green Box,” Martineau explains, elucidates his “Large Glass,” the Frenchman’s most well known work; the “notes” were left unbound so their relationships would be determined by chance. Martineau’s analyses are often psychoerotic, occasionally over-the top, but the author brings an attention to detail that both artists— who swam in a world of language, codes, puns, double entendres — would most certainly appreciate. One can only guess the word play they would employ reconfiguring “martineau” and “dempsey.”

Nearly 30 years after my three-hour “meeting” with [Ray Johnson](/artists/ray-johnson-3337) in my small Long Island kitchen, I remember drinking black coffee with torrential rains falling outside as the artist offered a zigzag tour of his world, his friends, skipping through hundreds of years of art history, and riffing on everything from his “Nothings” (drawings made frontwards and backwards) to how he sends letters. He “enrolled” me into his New York Correspondence School: “I will mail you a letter, Matthew.”

Ray’s world was an addictive, visuellinguistic labyrinth, a time-released mental calisthenic that rewarded (and still does) with an inward satisfaction...like unpacking a riddle without solution, and hearing the sound of one hand clapping.

*This article appears in the October issue of Modern Painters.*

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