

Permanent Recollection

CARY LOREN, DANA SCHUTZ, AND PHILIP LEVINE
ON THE DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

The dire events unfolding this past year at the Detroit Institute of Arts—where the sale of part of the institution's permanent collection is under consideration due to Detroit's bankruptcy—have far-reaching repercussions that speak to the crises of the American city and of cultural value itself. But here, *Artforum* takes a more personal tack, bringing attention to the museum's collection and its lasting impact by asking three generations of artists, writers, and musicians closely connected to the city to discuss an artwork at the DIA that holds particular meaning for them.

CARY LOREN

Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theater. . . . He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging.
—Walter Benjamin, Berlin Childhood Around 1900

THE DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS has been a local theater of imagination, pride, and wonder since its founding in 1885—and a lifelong source of self-education. At the museum, I met my antiheroes Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs during intimate live readings and heard Afrofuturist performances by Sun Ra and Griot Galaxy; and there I first encountered the films *La Dolce Vita*,

1900, *Dreams That Money Can Buy*, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, and *The Source Family*.

I met Ray Johnson briefly in the mid-1970s, through the mail-art circuit, and we became friends in the mid-'80s, when he'd drive to Detroit to visit his mother. Ray had an ability to dig into memories, following every detail, peeling back layers with his constructions and letters, a method I adopted for my own practice. He remained a determined outsider and an enigma, his own best artwork.

Ray's life was spent connecting with artists, sometimes in person but usually through the mail or phone, always in a collaborative, communal spirit. He introduced Andy Warhol to Billy Name in 1963 and put the Silver Factory in motion. Following Warhol's death, Ray introduced me to Name, who had just received a silver trunk filled with his photographs, negatives, and objects that Warhol had saved for him in storage. After we showed his Factory photos at Book Beat, Name sent me an extra copy of Jack Smith's *The Beautiful Book* (1962) that he found in the trunk, something I'd been searching for since 1972.

Ray's *January/February* (a 1966 work in the DIA collection) is built up from layers of pasted magazine pages and bristol board, carefully cut and sanded smooth, a collage closely related to his 1955 "Moticos"—a

series of cutout collages, drawings, glyphs, and stand-up street installations that Ray called boxcars on a moving train—blurred movements and slices of time. The compressed boxes in *January/February* might also refer to his time volunteering as Joseph Cornell's assistant, or to books, a library, apartments, or an overhead diagram of the museum itself. The surface is made up of paper fragments, dashes of rubbed-out words and color. The only word left intact, though barely visible, is UNDIVIDED—a tiny clue within this Zen koan.

January/February was not on view at the DIA for a decade and finally resurfaced in 2007, after the museum's renovation. When I first saw it hanging, I cried for Ray

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and the beauty of it. Sturdy and mysterious, it looked like a maze of windows filled with nothing, a flattened pancake of a sculpture, and yet a key work that sums up many of Ray's best ideas—a kind of theater where memory is projected.

The DIA is not only a collection of art, but a zone of anarchy and freedom, where one can wander and gaze through time and watch the material and antimaterial collide—where deviant observations are allowed, outside the confines of work and society. When we think about objects in the museum, an alternative history of ruins takes shape, a history we can watch in safety and stillness, with our own thoughts about culture and all that surrounds us, still waiting to be uncovered.

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Diego Rivera, *Detroit Industry* (detail), 1932–33, fresco. Installation view, Detroit Institute of Arts, 2011.



The original Detroit Institute of Arts building, ca. 1890.



Ray Johnson, *January/February*, 1966, painted wood and paper on board, 30 x 30".

