

CELEBRATION OF THE SCHOLARSHIP AND LEGACY OF

William S. Wilson

1932-2016

The Ray Johnson Estate mourns the passing of William S. "Bill" Wilson, who died on February 1, 2016. Bill, called "Ray Johnson's Boswell" by New York Times writer Michael Kimmelman, was one of Johnson's closest friends and his unwavering champion. He generously welcomed students and scholars to his extraordinary Johnson archive and wrote brilliant essays that provided deep insight into Johnson, his era and his work. Always generous with sharing his profound knowledge, Bill returned questions posed to him from all over the world through ever inspired and voluminous emails, phone calls and letters. He was truly a correspondent extraordinaire. There is no doubt that his legacy and work will only continue to expand its reach in the future. Regarding his relationship to the artists he studied, Bill once strikingly said, "In my private aesthetic, I feel and think that something is beautiful when I desire to conceive something with it." The Ray Johnson Estate is profoundly grateful for the many thrilling conceptions and inceptions, on Ray Johnson and in all of his art scholarship, with which Bill has left us. The art world, this estate, and his many friends and family, have lost a cherished friend and mentor.

-Richard L. Feigen, Chairman and Frances F. L. Beatty, President, Richard L. Feigen & Co.

It is hard to think of a more spirited conversationalist and communication partner than Bill Wilson. His vast reading and detailed knowledge of a dizzying array of subject matters, personalities and historical incidents kept the associations coming hard and fast; a single line of thought would soon become a delta of interconnected narratives and lines of interrogation, kept in check only by a brilliant analytic wit. Perhaps it was his aesthetic and intellectual passion for the reverberating detail and its wider networks of associations and connections that made him such a good friend to the artist Ray Johnson, whose mail art and collage practice seems to have been founded on similar principles of operation. Bill was in many ways Johnson's ideal archivist: not just because he stored and took care of a significant body of his work but also (and even more significantly) because he kept creating new nodal points in Johnson's network.

He took its wealth of minute visual and verbal details seriously enough to constantly and passionately question their potential implications or directionality, without ever closing down on final answers. And in this way he kept the archive vibrant and mobile, in word and in writing.

-Ina Blom, Art Critic and Professor of Art History, University of Oslo

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If Ray Johnson was unknowable, as William S. "Bill" Wilson implied after Johnson's death when he noted: 'Ray, we never knew you', it was not for want of trying, for Bill devoted so much of his time, particularly after Ray's death in 1995, to knowing yet more.

Bill took it upon himself after his great friendship with Ray Johnson in the latter's lifetime, to promote the achievement and as far as was possible the nature of Ray's life's work.

Bill had other enthusiasms and preoccupations, but Ray was at the centre of his concerns. His house became a Ray Johnson Archive storing not only correspondence but also many works by Ray, from drawings to collages to reliefs. On entering his house visitors could immediately enjoy a gallery of diverse works by his hero.

Many of these artworks were sent directly to Bill in the early days of their friendship, and they help to define a great many features of Ray's early development. But Bill added to his collection over the years, acquiring more works but also collections of Ray's correspondence with others, not to mention copies of publications in which he featured. His Johnsonian archive had many strands.

If his Ray Johnson Archive was a generative core for his deliberations over the riddles that were Ray, Bill was also very receptive to others who toiled in the same vineyard. He would encourage us, exchange information and ideas, and was extremely generous with his time both in discussions but also in writing and dispatching cascades of emails.

One hopes that eventually more research will reveal how much of Bill's thinking and knowledge informed Ray's work. But for now, we can carry forward memories of Bill's generosity, his keenness to enlarge horizons and his twinkling and mischievous sense of humour.

-Clive Phillpot 4-2-16