

What's In a Name: Ray Johnson's Free Associations

Ray Johnson is a strangely hard artist to place. He's hard to place from the point of view of the art world, which likes its products neatly branded once and for all. But Johnson kept switching brands, moving back and forth between, and madly cross-pollinating among, collage, performance, and "mail art," the art form which he is known as the founding father of. Mail art involved the complex circulation of variously altered postcards and letters through a wide network of correspondents. Johnson is hard to place, too, from the art historian's point of view, even if, on the surface, he seemed to follow a well-marked path, moving from Black Mountain in the late forties to Manhattan in the early fifties, landing smack in the midst of a generational cohort of gay male artists like Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and Andy Warhol, whose cool ironies have the feel of a reaction formation against the agonized sincerities of their Abstract Expressionist predecessors. Yet Johnson had a strong conceptual bent that set him apart from these more painterly peers, while at the same time remaining too aesthetically-minded to be classed as a conceptualist per se. Johnson's manifest out-of- placeness, though, is no accident: it is the chief subject and the guiding structural principle of his art. Where do I belong? is his perpetual question (as indeed it is all of ours). His preferred way of addressing this question in his art is at once impressively rigorous and oddly literal. As many critics have noted, Johnson is a constructor—and deconstructor and reconstructor—of networks, an obsessive tracer of social relationships as they ramify across ever-expanding fields of space and time. But this makes him sound like a sociologist. What might it mean, then, to say that Johnson is an artist of networks? Can networks be said to function within art, as art, which is to say, as a source of aesthetic pleasure? This is my question here.

At the conceptual extreme of Johnson's production, the network appears as barely mediated, a sheer contiguity of bodies or names. For example, when Johnson would call actual meetings of the New York Correspondance School, the partly real, partly virtual institution that served as the nexus of his varied artistic activities, he brought together carefully selected configurations of people, mostly although not

exclusively art world figures, for a highly choreographed version of what usually is called networking, that is, the simultaneous assertion of one's presence on the scene and jockeying for position within it. The quasi-sociological character of such meetings is reflected in the formal properties of the ephemera Johnson generated around them. In these invitations and seating charts, the network is often represented at its very barest, as a simple grid of names. Take, for example, a flyer for the event titled "New York Correspondance School David Letterman Fan Club Meeting." The real date, time, and place on the flyer suggest that the meeting actually took place, and many of the names under the neat rows of bunny-head icons (one of the many more or less decipherable glyphs out of which Johnson constructed a private visual alphabet) are those of Johnson's actual art world friends and acquaintances, such as Allan Kaprow, Grace Glueck, Christo, Lynda Benglis, Jim Rosenquist and John Perrault. However, fantasy freely intermixes with reality here, via the names of celebrities both dead and alive, real and fictional: Emily Post, Henny Youngman, Joan Rivers, Bette Davis, Betty Boop. Yet the latter names are not merely fanciful: one begins to see the method in Johnson's madness as one connects "Post" and "Letterman" to the Johnson-the-mail-artist via their names' literal (letteral?) connotations; while in their roles as comedians, Rivers, Youngman and Letterman (the host-figure who is clearly the stand-in for Johnson here) remind us of Johnson's own role as joker in the art-world pack.

The dense weave of conceptual associations in the Letterman flyer is typical of Johnson's work in all modes. Also typical is the way the gridded field maps the intersection of the two chief real-world networks which Johnson's work takes up, the star systems of Hollywood and the art world. These two groups are alike insofar as they are both elites. Johnson, however, undermines the assurance with which the members of these elites might affirm their status as social insiders, first, simply by repeatedly forcing the two groups together into the same (pictorial) space and letting us imagine their inevitable mutual non-recognition. Among the fields of names of those who might count, from one perspective or another, as somebodies, Johnson also frequently seeds the names of friends and acquaintances who are stars only in his personal universe. In an undated "Meeting Seating" chart, for instance, the artist

includes his best friend Toby Spiselman and her mother Flo. One might also note that, with one exception, the names on this particular chart are all women's names. Some of these women, like the dealers Betty Parsons and Virginia Dwan, and the artists Alice Neel and Diane Arbus, were well-known in the art world in their own right; but others, like Sandra Feigen, Suzanne de Maria, and Mrs. Julien Levy, were best known as adjuncts to their dealer or artist husbands. Johnson's frequent invocations of the names of the wives and daughters of famous men reminds one of Alice B. Toklas's ambivalent aria about "the wives of geniuses I have sat with," that speech in which Toklas's "autobiographer" Gertrude Stein ventriloquizes her sense of her own ambiguous relation, as a woman of genius, to artistic authority. (And indeed, Stein, no mean drawer-up of guest-lists herself, appears often, both in image and in name, in Johnson's work.) To be famous but unrecognized, well-loved but unknown, brilliant but female: these are all versions of the same social predicament, one with which Johnson, who was once dubbed "the most famous unknown artist of his generation," was intimately familiar.

On one hand, Johnson's tendency to define his social position via a series of negatives—he's unfamous, unserious, unmasculine—is a sign of his sociological rigor. It's almost as if he had in mind the great French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's dictum that style in art is "nothing other than the space of the positions and self-positionings . . . within which the artistic intention of the artist in question has defined itself, generally by opposition"—which is to say, by negatives. On the other hand, Johnson's negativity also may be seen to derive from the strong tendency toward nihilism that suffuses his art with its dark atmosphere and stands in contrast to his Duchampian jokiness. Darkness dominates in *Untitled (No Ray Johns)*, where the paper surface is stained with runnels of blackened water, and in the center of the image black marks gather: a looming plantlike figure in whose oversized head the name "ANDY" is scratched, a pair of cross-hatchings which resemble both Duchamp's bottle-rack and prison bars, the word "NO," and over it all, a giant "X." A small white sprout labeled "Elaine de Kooning" floats in the middle of these ominous signs, while the black-lettered name "RAY JOHNS" defines the bottom edge. In short, Johnson here once again defines himself positively in relation to a

marginalized female artist, and negatively in relation to such successful peers as Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns. At the same time, this negativity is also the main source of the collage's graphic and emotional power.

It should be said that Johnson's odd position in the art world was largely one of his own making. He was notorious among gallerists and museum curators for the ingeniousness with which he obstructed their attempts to mount shows of his work, and equally notorious among collectors for the strange dances he would lead them when they tried to buy his pieces. (When one offered him 20% less than the price he had quoted for one collage, Johnson sent him the piece—with 20% of it cut off.) It was the dance itself, it seemed, that was as much the point as the object that was its ostensible occasion. Johnson was a fine draughtsman, and had an exquisite sense of color and design, honed early on in his classes with Josef Albers at Black Mountain. There is a clear visual connection between his conventionally beautiful early works featuring abstract grids and the later, less ingratiating chart-like pieces. Still, as he came into his own as an artist, Johnson came to see the self-enclosed, self-sufficient image as a trap, much as the closed circle of a social elite may be seen as trap. What began to matter to him most were not things or people, but the constantly shifting relations between them—what I refer to in my title as “free associations.”

As I have suggested in my discussion of his approach to real-world social networks, Johnson makes a gesture toward freedom in the political sense insofar as his associations imply a critique of existing social hierarchies. And insofar as he kept his art out of circulation or, as in the case of the mail art, put it into the wrong sort of circulation from the point of view of the art market, his art was also free in the economic sense (a fact that he constantly satirizes, as in the print, “RJ Collages One Million Dollars Each”). But it is Johnson's penchant for free associations in the proper, Freudian sense that is the chief source of the peculiar pleasures to be found in his work in all modes, from the most densely worked collage to the most disposable Xerox. Of course, art-making in general has much in common with dream-work, and collage in particular fits Freud's description of the process whereby “the whole mass of dream-thoughts is brought together under the pressure of the dream-work, and its elements are turned about, broken into fragments and

jammed together—almost like pack ice.” But few artists are as rigorous and relentless as Johnson when it comes to identifying the process of art-making with the workings of the unconscious, and the places in his work where these two processes are most tightly knotted together are marked by proper names.

In the introduction to the section on dream-work in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud describes the dream as a “rebus.” In dreams, as in rebuses, words and pictures keep changing places: “words,” says Freud, “are treated in dreams as though they were concrete things,” and images acquire a discursive function. One may say the same of Johnson’s art, with the exception that one type of word is privileged above the others: the name. As art critic Lawrence Alloway puts it, “In Ray Johnson’s collages words and images are inextricable; the denotations of proper names and the chains of visual associations tangle and unravel. Johnson merely explained his work by saying he was name-dropping.” For an example of this seemingly simple act at its most complex, take *Henry Fonda Foot Dollar Bill*. All of the motifs that are layered over and crammed up against one another here may be found in many other works by Johnson. Some, like the rectangular wooden blocks that have been painted, then sanded to reveal layers of color, began to appear in his work early on; others, like the dollar bills, and the silhouettes of feet and hands, were introduced later. As they are repeated over and over in new combinations, these motifs come to constitute a private language, with its own grammar and etymology.

The tangled and ambiguous relation between word and image is emblemized here by the comic strip, which like the picture as a whole, parcels out its anarchic impulses across a grid, panel by panel. The four panels of the strip, in which Ernie Bushmiller’s deadpan heroine Nancy drops a pail of water on an unsuspecting pup, are pulled apart and arranged counter-clockwise; all except the one moment in which Nancy actually speaks (“Oh dear, I gave my dog her medicine, but forgot to shake the bottle first”), which is presented out of order, in an ambiguous space, halfway between paint and collage. One might also point to the dollar bill, which features prominently in Johnson’s work of the early 70’s, as an emblem of a different sort of relation between word and image, one in which each is supposed to guarantee the stability of the meaning and value of the other. But that notion is

literally trampled on by the giant foot at the center of the picture. It has been said of Jackson Pollock's drips that they reverse what Freud might call the displacement upward of the picture plane, and reveal the picture-making impulse as literally low and figuratively regressive. Johnson's footprint makes this point more literally still, and with a deadpan comic flourish that would be utterly alien to Pollock and his cohorts. The foot's irregular outline is in tension with the prevailing grid, just as its personal, bodily associations are in tension with the different sorts of abstraction represented by the painted blocks and dollar bill. But whereas in a Pollock drip painting, the dream of freedom inheres in the wild gesture memorialized in skeins of pure color, Johnson feels freest when engaging in the play of associations, in the combining and recombining of fixed elements in a relatively rigid structure.

And at the center of these associations is the net of names, which as usual in Johnson's work juxtaposes Hollywood and the art world, the famous and the not-so: Metropolitan Museum curator Henry Geldzahler is paired with another Henry, Fonda, and Helen Gurley Brown with Warhol Factory house photographer Billy Name, whose moniker was, of course, irresistible to the name-loving Johnson. All of the names here have in fact been subjected to a double process of recombination, first pulled from their respective worlds of association and charted according to Johnson's private logic; then the chart has been copied multiple times, cut into pieces, pasted on wooden blocks which were then sanded and finally, fitted into the overall design of the collage. This strategy is repeated in work after work. As Johnson labors to fit each piece into the pattern, image-making and self-positioning are revealed to be one and the same activity. Thus, in *Untitled (T IN with 30 Joseph Cornell Bunnies)*, the worked-over grid repeats just one name, that of Cornell, another artist whose work mixes geometric rigor with Freudian fantasy, and who is, of all of Johnson's oddball heroes, the one with whom he most closely identifies. Johnson takes a somewhat more distanced view of his dilemma in *Untitled (Postcard to Jim Rosenquist)*. Here, the painter's name on the postcard is framed by an especially delicate set of blocks, while a cruder missive scrawled below reads, "Dear Whitney, I hate you, Love, Ray." This collage, along with the many others that incorporate cards and letters (some recycled, some freshly created), reinforces the

association between Johnson's sociological—or pseudo-sociological—chart-making and his social—or pseudo-social—correspondence activities.

One of Johnson's more ambivalent correspondents, the art critic Lucy Lippard, cites the claim of Johnson's close friend and devoted expositor, English professor William Wilson, that "Ray Johnson plays the U. S. Mail like a harp. His art is not of social comment, but of sociability." But Lippard adds that it seems to her a "curiously inverted and even at times misanthropic kind of sociability," citing Johnson's own related observation that while he was "interested in an incredible galaxy of people . . . My reason for being interested in people is their anagrammatic names. Since I cut everything up, they're all people in a kaleidoscope, but one person is many-faceted, like a crossword puzzle." Art historian Ina Blom takes a more positive view of this phenomenon, noting that the "social space" of Johnson's actual correspondence "is doubled by an ecstatic space" where names are subjected "to pseudonymy, cryptonymy, paleonymy, metonymy . . . In fact to all the accidents that can happen to a name."

In 1966, Johnson produced a kind of casebook study of "all the accidents that can happen to a name" for William Wilson in the form of an essay titled "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore?" because, Wilson says, "he so disapproved of my academic writing" and wanted "to show how it should be done." On the essay's first page, a chain of names are transformed via a series of associations that ultimately sets off an explosion of wordplay and wish fulfillment. Marianne Moore is connected via her initials to Marilyn Monroe (Johnson is obsessed with initials), who leads to thoughts of "Joe D." (DiMaggio) who becomes Joe Death (Johnson is even more obsessed with death). The second paragraph takes up the transformations enabled by typographical errors—"scarpbook" for "scrapbook" turns the dead "crap" of collage materials into live "carp." And this celebration of verbal accidents, or what Freud refers to as the "syllabic chemistry" by which dreams bend and break words in the service of unspeakable desires, unlocks the door to an "ecstatic space" of "Children's play" where one can slip the trap of identity and "I'll be you and you be me. Be my valentine. Ray Johnson wearing Marianne Moore's hat. Lend me your ears . . ."

It matters, I think, that the name that lights the fuse here is that of a female poet. In an aesthetic regime dominated by the image, poetry is a relatively weak, “feminine” art. Yet Moore herself, in her perpetual George Washington tricorne hat (another icon that Johnson took up into his own peculiar sign-system) also cut an oddly masculine figure. In fact, Johnson’s refusal to disentangle word from image here as elsewhere in his work is of a piece with his compulsive confounding of all those categories that might help us to place him once and for all. Still, however impure his art, which is certainly hard to describe, categorize, even to see, it contains, as I have been trying to show, a kernel of pure aesthetic experience. And paradoxically, the locus of this poetic pleasure, the name, also marks the opening of the artwork into the world of what William Wilson defensively refers to as “social comment.” It is not that Johnson’s curious inversions close out the social world in an affirmation of art for art’s sake; rather, by making art out of our associations, he unlocks their transformative potential. In the world, names, like dollars, mean something when they are backed by power; in art, names become more powerful as they lose their meanings and turn into pure spells.

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