

Ray Johnson: en rapport

Paul Cezanne, August 1906: "...le tout est de mettre le plus de rapport possible..."

Ray Johnson was a student of the imaginations of other people, especially verbal and visual artists. He responded to the work of other artists as friendly communications to him, reciprocating with collages which mention those artists with whom he experienced rapport. He often mailed envelopes with notes addressed to those artists, sometimes with apt images that related to a work of art, or to the artist, but always obliquely. He never pointed toward something deep and perhaps secret, but always directed attention toward something available on the surface. With his collages, his notes, and his lists of artists, Ray constructed more inter-relations with more artists than anyone else working from 1955 to 1995.

With a word or a glance, Ray could give a surface to a person, rendering the person into a visual image that he could then combine with other parts of an event, the way an image combines with other images. Ray would construct a whole of interweaving and interanimating images, a construction of the moment that evaporated when the images shifted into another constellation.

Ray also began to send apt images in the mail to people other than artists. By 1960, he began to ask a recipient to relay an image to someone else, thereby starting a network which in 1962 became the New York Correspondance [sic!] School of Art.

Ray encouraged thousands of people to participate in disinterested aesthetic actions, rather than remain outside art as observers. By 2006, when electronic mail has overlapped postal mail, Ray's network has become an international self-developing system of communication of aesthetic images and events.

By the summer of 1944, his seventeenth summer, Ray found himself safe in a field of visual artists studying together beside a barn. In the summer of 1948, he was a twenty-year-old student at Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina. As he wrote in 1974, he "...walked with Bill and Elaine one sad evening up 'the Road' when they had just heard about Gorky's death." Bill and Elaine were Willem and Elaine de Kooning, painters who befriended Ray. So he walked and talked with American painters who were struggling with the achievements of Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso in the European

background.

At Black Mountain College, Ray studied the relativity of colors with Josef Albers. He became friends with Robert Rauschenberg, Sue Weil, Cy Twombly and Stan Vanderbeek. He learned beside students like Ruth Asawa, Arthur Penn, and Kenneth Snelson, a group who were mediating among European Modernisms and American Pragmatisms. When opening himself toward Europe, he listened to music like Gregorian chants that he had never heard in Detroit, but also 20th century music from France and Germany. When opening himself toward Asia, he studied Asian religio-philosophies to learn how to get ideas to disappear into actions, and how to fill abstract concepts with concrete sensory experiences.

Through books and magazines from Europe, Ray became familiar with the paintings of Paul Klee, the poems of Antonio Machado, and the collages of Kurt Schwitters, John Heartfield and Hannah Höch. He met Walter Gropius and Buckminster Fuller. Thus he arose in the midst of Euro-American Modernisms in painting, music, dance, poetry, films, architecture, and other arts, including the weaving of Anni Albers. He followed the gaze of immigrant European artists toward Native American Indian art, design and architecture, and participated in the study and use of the languages of Mayan glyphs, images which spoke to Josef Albers, Ben Shahn and Max Ernst.

By 1952 Ray lived on Monroe Street, in Manhattan, with artists who used the hypotheses of art in ordinary events. He deepened his acquaintance with his neighbors, John Cage and Merce Cunningham, two artists who adapted the methods and values they used in the construction of their arts to their construction of daily life. John and Merce made indeterminacy a way of life, but always in tension with precise knowledge and information, so that no one would eat a poisonous mushroom, and no one would break a bone. Richard Lippold brought Ray to concerts, parties and openings of shows in galleries, where he met artists like Philip Guston, Kenzo Okada, Alfonso Ossorio, Hedda Sterne and Marcel Duchamp. Thus Ray learned Modernism through direct acquaintance with artists, their families and friends. Socially, at that time, Manhattan in the 1950s, the realms of visual art and of music had several hierarchies, but the number of people in any group was small.

Although most artists might stay within their group of

sympathetic artists, Ray was taken to uptown mansions and downtown lofts, where marginal artists reconstructed life and art in the margins of the city.

Settled in New York, Ray was able to exhibit with the American Abstract Artists, because at Black Mountain College he had studied with Ilya Bolotowsky. As late as 1953, the visual and verbal thoughts of painters such as Piet Mondrian inspired paintings of Euclidian geometric forms. In those early paintings in oil, Ray experimented with abstract objects like circles and triangles, shapes conveying ideas that can lead out of sensory experience toward transcendence. But after a few seasons in New York, his thoughts turned from participation in transcendental forms like perfect circles and pure triangles, toward immersion in total immanence. As he subsumed his formalist education in the construction of his own life-world, he began to work with images clipped from magazines and books.

So where once Ray's abstract paintings had been answerable to the paintings of Piet Mondrian, soon photographs of Mondrian became images in collages. The aesthetic theories of Mondrian seemed less inspiring than stories of Mondrian improvising dance-steps to Boogie Woogie.

Ray's friendships with Black Mountain College faculty and students opened him to new acquaintances in New York, so that he met and interacted with George Brecht, Robert Watts, Oyvind Fahlstrom, James Lee Byars, Christo and Jeanne-Claude. He developed friendships with artists in Chicago, especially Karl Wirsum, and he responded to artists in California who seemed to travel light though the history of art, both George Herms and Ed Ruscha. Both Ruscha and Ray, in their different ways, used the format of advertisements as an expressive art-supply.

While Ray was a man who felt empty in several ways, and who philosophized about Nothing and Nothingness, he appreciated artists and their art. The artists he responded to, often in collages sometimes designated as "portraits," were artists with whom he felt rapport. Ray would discover a rapport with an artist, and then reveal that rapport in a collage, even in a series of collages. His collages did the work of gratitude, giving back appreciations for having been given so much. He often gave away more art than he sold, because he preferred the rapport of the gift to the anxieties of a sale. On the plane of artistic rapport, Picasso was like a distant cousin who had been

generous with Ray, doing favors that prompted him to return the favors, even though they had never met. Yet in his own time and place, he could actually sit in cafés with Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, or drink beer with aesthetic kinfolk in the Cedar Tavern. In later years he sat at a table in Studio 54 with Salvador Dali and his bodyguard, whom Ray identified as Dali's lifeguard. He had been aware, when he touched the hands of Elaine and Willem de Kooning, that he touched the hands that had touched the hands of Arshile Gorky. He made many portraits of artists, but he was reluctant to sell them lest he appear to be profiting on a friendship. Ray worked, largely ignoring fame and the sales of art. The quality he appreciated in art and in artists, *fullness*, was the counterpart of his feelings of emptiness and nothingness. He developed an appetite for the fullness of a person who was fulfilled. The people Ray admired, and was attracted to intellectually, aesthetically and erotically, were people who were fulfilled by their work in one of the arts, so that as persons they were full to the brim, and even above the brim.

A work of art is constructed of interrelations among parts, and one of the parts of Ray's art was often the name, or the silhouette, of another artist. Ray had many reasons for flattening time, space, and even heads. For an experience of space, he glued flat images to cardboard, then glued cardboard to cardboard in order to make a surface with two or three physical levels, actual spatial depth, rather than an illusion of depth. In order to compress time into one immediate moment, he used fragments of earlier collages, some from around 1958, so that earlier times were represented by evidence, not vague depths of time. Accordingly, in his portraits, he usually flattened a head to a profile, a silhouette, so that it yielded a flat surface rather than suggestions of interior depths behind a face. Ray did not interpret the expression on a face, as though he was looking through the eyes as the windows of the soul, any more than he wanted anyone to interpret the depths of his own psyche.

The profile of a person is not usually part of self-knowledge, but Marcel Duchamp, in a gesture which seems inevitable, did have himself photographed from five angles, a trick with mirrors which was a popular novel amusement at the time. Without the camera, five simultaneous perspectives could only have been known, not seen. In contrast, Ray went to the original myth of

painting as the use of profiles or silhouettes to preserve memories of a face. He used a profile as a perspective on a person which a person can only with difficulty achieve for himself or herself. Because he recognized limits on self-knowledge and on knowledge of another person, he used profiles as signs of just how much of another person we are going to know and should try to know. Within his own private Buddhism, Ray drew profiles and printed names in order to awaken the mind to recognition of another person, but not to tell it what to think.

He imposed limits on insight into other people, because he both felt real limits on knowledge of another person, and he believed that limits should be respected, as though a loving father and a loving son did not need to know everything about each other. A profile of a face did not encourage, nor did it fix, an interpretation of a person such as a frontally confrontational face might suggest. Ray abided by a lesson he learned in his study of Buddhism, to awaken the mind, but not to fix it on anything.

The side of the head in a profile can look flat, and uninterpretable. One of Ray's goals was the least depth with the largest surface, because for him, the surface is as much of the Inner as can be known. Although he said that the portraits were about the interior of the head, "thoughts, images or ideas," the contents of the head as he depicted them seem uninterpretable, another set of surfaces, with images which remain opaque because they don't yield ideas.

I have written elsewhere that Ray had two familiar operations.

Confronted with a unitary object, he looked for a way to split it into two. Confronted with two objects, he looked for ways to mash them into one object. One flat profile can be seen as either left or right: both. One perspective can become two perspectives, and sometimes two perspectives, in rapport, can become one perspective.

Because of Ray's collages of Elvis Presley and James Dean from 1956-57, he was among the earliest Pop artists. Then, as Pop Art became popular, he became the artist who used the names and images of other artists in his own art. His collages about Pop artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein overlapped his mail-art, wherein he mailed apt images to other artists, including Jim Rosenquist and Chuck Close. While the implications of most Pop Artists were folded into their paintings for unity and coherence, the implications in Ray's images

stretched toward other artists with whom he felt alliances. Thus he was next-of-kin to Fluxus artists, while preserving a flexible interval between him and them. He played games of near-&-far, of now-you-see-me, now-you-don't, with Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, Robert Filliou, George Macunias, Daniel Spoerri and Geoff Hendricks. He was an artist who introduced many artists to each other, setting hierarchies in fluctuation, constructing his own network by bringing Arman to meet May Wilson. He was aware of the American Declaration of Independence, and in 1976 combined John Hancock, who signed the Declaration conspicuously, with Lynda Benglis. He juxtaposed a silhouette of George Washington with a profile of Marcel Duchamp, two of his liberators.

Ray was the artist of cross-references and inter-relations. He and his art were independent, but he was dependent on his inter-dependencies. So, given the satisfactions of complex interrelations, how could Ray judge that everything is nothing?

Part of an answer is in the status of relations and interrelations in Ray's experiences. He was so intent on constructing fields of relations that anything that entered his life must yield interrelations, or else not exist for him. Thus Ray was open to communication with anyone, anywhere, at any time. He held "meetings" for people, among them many artists, where nothing much happened but their meeting *en rapport*. Yet for Ray, interrelations were evanescent, always about to evaporate like dew. His relations with other artists existed only in his consciousness of them, a consciousness he had long planned to end by drowning. So, even in astonishingly full moments of immediacy and indeterminacy, he sensed that relations were ultimately *nothing*. Yet while he lived, the rapports Ray Johnson constructed with other artists, as with the fullest of people, were *everything*.

William S. Wilson, October 2006