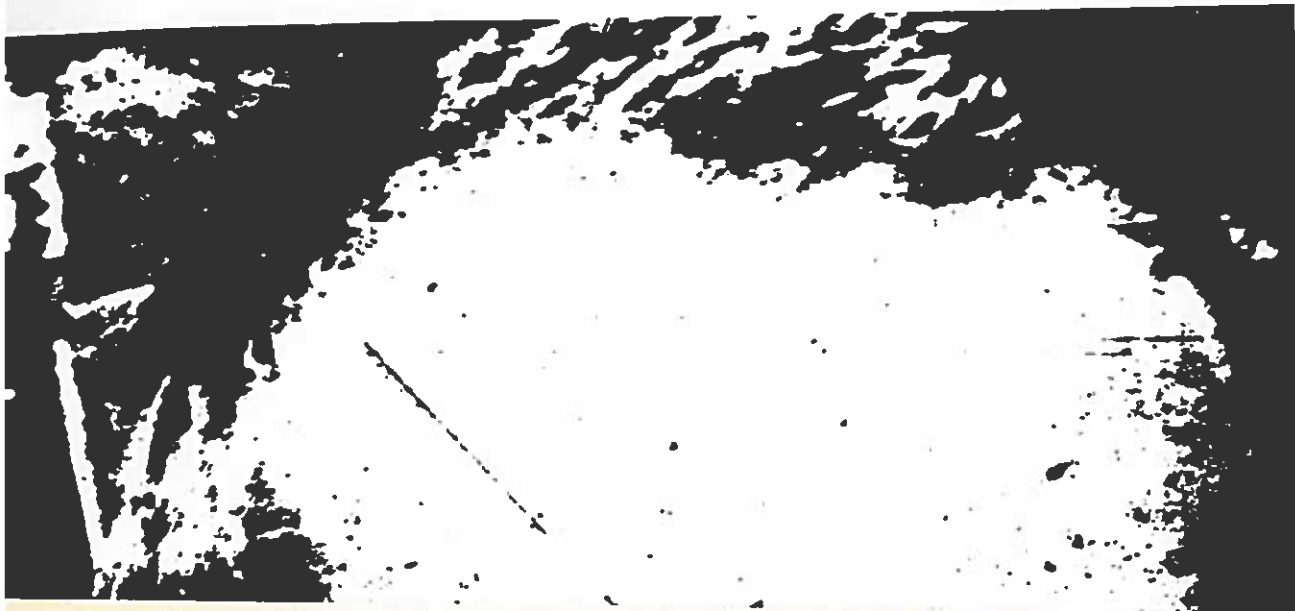




CORRESPONDENCE

an exhibition of the letters of Ray Johnson

North Carolina Museum of Art
31 October - 5 December 1976



RAY JOHNSON
THE COMEDIAN AS THE LETTER

BY WILLIAM S. WILSON

The letter C is comic because it represents either the hard k sound as in Carolina or the soft s sound as in dance. The visual letter mediates between k and s, and is able to participate in either sound. The letter C derives from the Phoenician sign called the gimel, meaning camel.

Cameleopard is another name for giraffe, an animal with a head like a camel and spots like a leopard. Camel and leopard have no particular relation until an intermediate, cameleopard, arises between them to make them contraries to each other.

Ray Johnson is a moderator, a mediator, a man in the middle. He decides on an image that refers concretely and idiosyncratically to someone he meets, and he sends references to the image to the person, and sometimes to a third person with the instructions "Please send to..." the other person. This action draws two people into a relation. If one is sender, and the other recipient, then they are opposites, but contraries, not contradictories. For Ray Johnson is in the middle, the mean participating in two extremes of sending and receiving. And by sending a reference to be sent on to someone else, he puts the recipient in the middle, able to discern something of Ray Johnson, and something of the person to whom the image is to be sent on.

Ray Johnson, as the one person participants in the New York Correspondance School have in common, is himself uncommon, with an uncommon caring about references. He is the mean between contrary extremes, and he is himself extreme and contrary. But he is peculiar as an artist in that his work mediates between the artist and ordinary people by enabling an ordinary person to participate in the work of art. He is the mediator, but he gives almost anyone who wants it a turn in the middle or as an extreme. Everyone gets a chance to be in the midst, to send to another person, to send another person, as an accurately remembered and precisely rendered reference can send a person into transports of delight.

The idea that extremes meet is bodied forth in actual meetings. Ray Johnson holds meetings for the pleasure of merely circulating people among each other. These meetings define people as bearers of references that meet, that refer to each other. The feeling that arises between people, when they are defined as reserves of references, or reservoirs of correspondences, is a feeling not within a person but of something between people. He is quoted in the New York Times, October 12, 1975: "Our first meeting was held in a Quaker Church, and all are based on that idea, the idea of people communing together, saying something if there is something to say." Instead of mediating between two equally full realities, being and becoming, his mediation is the fullness, his mediation with a network of references is the only available demonstrable fullness.

The movement of the people in the place of meeting, like the movement of letters through the mails, or of people going to get their mail, is a dance. Ray Johnson is a mild-mannered choreographer who sets people in motion. He starts the dance of others but does not seek power over them, as the meaning of much dance is the invisible power that moves people. The New York

Lenders of the letters of Ray Johnson reproduced in this catalogue

For purposes of identification, a number has been assigned to each lender and his letters. The number beside each lender's name in the list below appears in the upper right hand corner of every letter from that lender reproduced here. With few exceptions all letters are reproduced actual size. The catalogue represents only a small portion of the total letters offered in response to the museum's request for material, and it is published in connection with a more comprehensive exhibition of the letters at the North Carolina Museum of Art.

Vince Aletti-no. 1 Michael Andre-no. 2 Arakawa-no. 3 George
Ashley-no. 4 Dana Atchley/Ace Space Co.-no. 5 Anne Ayres & Gerald
Ayres-no. 6 Anna Banana-no. 7 Timothy Baum-no. 8 Mike Belt-no. 9
Lynda Benglis-no. 10 Bob & Laura Benson-no. 11 Jim Bohn-no. 12
David Bourdon-no.18 Carolyn Brown-no. 14 Earle Brown-no. 15 Dr. &
16 Brian Buczak-no. 17 Ted Carey-no. 19 Christo &

Correspondance School is "...like the spontaneous yet ordered, in the sense of patterned, movements of dancers in a country dance of figures, none of whom are bound by law to do what they do, nor yet pushed by others coming behind, but cooperate in a voluntary harmony of wills" (Joseph Needham, Science and Civilization in China, II, 287).

The correspondence of the word correspondance with the word correspondence is an example of movement between the visual and the verbal. The puns in the word, which are both seen and heard, recall the statement in Baudelaire's poem, "Correspondances" -- "...les couleurs et les son se répondent..." Baudelaire's claim that "colors and sounds correspond" is not an influence on Ray Johnson; it is a statement that corresponds with his method of thinking with correspondences, a method that closes the interval between the visual and the verbal.

In ordinary reading language is transparent as we focus past the printed letters on the meaning. But as we read we usually hear, especially if there are obstacles to the transparency, as when I say I was reading on the Reading Railroad. A work of art with letters or words in it is both visual and aural. Ray Johnson's collages and letters must be heard as well as seen. The aural effect affects the spatial effects. One might hear in the picture of a musical instrument its name, mandolin, and then recognize that the sound of mandolin echoes the woman's name, Madelaine, which itself revives the memory of Proust's teacake, the taste of which revived his memory of a childhood scene. A letter from Ray Johnson, and almost any item in the N.Y.C.S., mediates between sight and sound, visual and verbal, doodle and riddle.

The references in the N.Y.C.S. are the meaning, and the spectator in the North Carolina Museum of Art might not get the references and might feel left out. Who could know that a reference to Toby Spiselman's legs is equivalent to a reference to a camel? Has Ray Johnson constructed only another esthetic élite, a collective of curious correspondents? The answer is that those who get the references might not get the meaning, which is reference itself. The point, when references are clearly references, but the point of the reference is unclear, is that reference is a quality in our experience. We do not live as individuals among meaningless isolated facts; we rise in the midst of references, of correspondences, that carry us toward other people. The meaning of Ray Johnson's art is to call attention to reference as such, as the meaning of his correspondence is to call attention to correspondences as such, as part of the fabric of experience. The spectator here in Raleigh, North Carolina can judge for himself whether or not the work corresponds with his experience of correspondences.

And thus he tossed
Between a Carolina of old time,
A little juvenile, an ancient whim,
And the visible, circumspect presentment drawn
From what he saw across his vessel's prow.
Wallace Stevens, "The Comedian as the Letter C"

LIST OF LENDERS

Vince Alletti
 Carole Alter
 Michael Andre
 Irakawa
 Tom Armstrong
 George Ashley
 Dana Atchley / Ace Space Co.
 Anne Ayres
 Gerald Ayres
 Anna Banana
 Douglas Baxter
 Mike Belt
 Lynda Benglis
 Bob & Laura Benson
 Carol Bengé
 Jim Bohn
 David Bourdon
 Carolyn Brown
 Earle Brown
 Thett & Robert Delford Brown
 Dr. & Lady Brute
 Brian Buczak
 Robert Buecker
 Ted Carey

Christo & Jeanne-Claude
 Rosalind Constable
 Michael Cooper
 Paula Cooper
 Richard Craven
 Robert Cumming
 Dadaland
 Elaine de Kooning
 Irene Dogmatic
 Diana Epstein
 John Evans
 Charles & Noelle Fahlen
 Will Farrington
 Richard L. Feigen & Co.
 Neil Felts
 Mr. & Mrs. Michael Findlay
 A. M. Fine
 Edward L. Flood
 Charles Henri Ford
 Ken Friedman
 Maud F. Gatewood
 Henry Geldzahler
 General Idea
 John Gruen
 Robert Heide

son Woodrooge
 & Mrs. Karl Wiltschko
 Liam S. Wilson
 Wilson
 Nathan Williams
 n Willenbacher
 Liam T. Wiley
 es Waring Collection
 Vautier
 van der Marck
 Tlp Van Brunt
 the Urdahn
 K C. Truman
 Det Hampson
 y R. Spiselman
 man Solomon
 tur Secunda
 uto Schwarz
 ka Sarfo
 ard Ruscha
 es Rosenquist
 ry Held
 eph & Judy Kalfael
 nces X. Prohomo
 ard M. Blunkett

Picard
 hael Moritz
 ny New
 hard Merkin
 . Pollard Harbers
 obby Mancusi
 us
 n Loring
 hard Lipold
 Lipold
 ney & Frances Lewis
 Liam G. Landwehr
 ner B. Kremarsky
 en Korell
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