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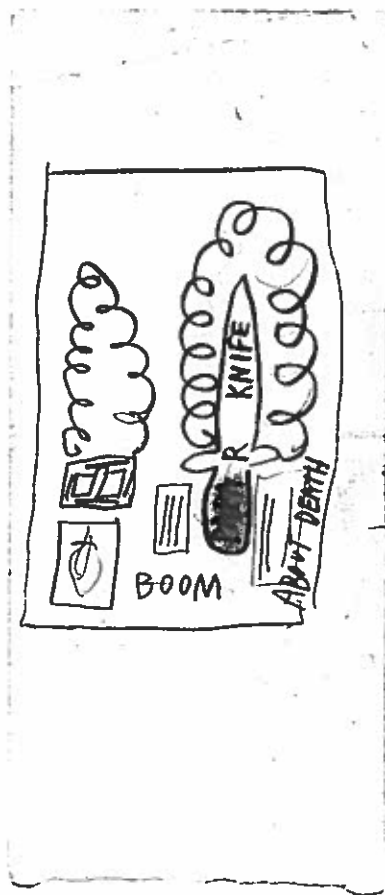
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A Book About A Book About Death

Fig.3 - Correspondence, Ray Johnson to Bill Wilson

**Ray Johnson's A Book About Death
Text by Bill Wilson**

I wait, not for time to finish my work, but for time to indicate something one would not have expected to occur. — Ray Johnson

Between 1963 and 1965, Ray Johnson had thirteen pages of his Book about Death printed by the Pernet Printing Company, 120 Lexington Avenue at 28th Street. His title, A Book about Death, yet also A Boop about Death and Boom about Death, designated thirteen unbound pages as a book.

Ray told Clive Phillipot: "They were all folded twice and put in the mail" (July 14, 1992). Yet some unfolded pages were hand-delivered, including proofs using both sides of the paper. A few pages were folded and sealed to become their own envelopes, then stamped and mailed. Ray, who tried not to allow any system to close down over him, devised his own systems, but did not let his own systems close down over himself. He knew that closed systems run down because they exhaust their energy. Thus when he entered any system, he made certain that he could get out of it. Where he did not find an opening, he would construct one. Thus he left this book open and incomplete.

One strategy was to enter a system, but once within it, to switch to a different system, or to leave a system inconsistent and incomplete. Although Ray specified for Clive, "Twelve pages in the Death Book" (July 2, 1990), Clive counts thirteen pages, not the fifteen of the original plan. I am able to quote Ray's remarks because in the early 1990s Clive took notes during telephone conversations. Ray told Clive, July 13, 1991: "Three, four or five loose pages of the book were sent at a time. Very few people got the whole thing."

Wholeness is a meaning, it's an aesthetic value with a tinge of ethical value. Wholeness actually interfered with Ray's own values, which included incompleteness and fragmentariness. Clive has recently researched the invoices from the printer, so the chronological order of printing can be specified, giving the order of the pages. A few dates on the invoices are recognizable as anniversaries, and other dates may be identified by other people. Any date might be naturalistic, as the actual date, yet the date could also be symbolic.

Ray often participated in one of the historic theme of an American sensibility, which was to have coherence, like a date in a coherent system

of meanings, match correspondence, which was to have the date also be a verifiable naturalistic matter-of-fact. For example, The Paper Snake, a hard-bound book, was in production during the same months The Book about Death was going to be printed for Valentine's Day.

I think still another work began as a proposed page, but became a print in a portfolio, SMS, from the Letter Edged in Black Press, 1968. That collage and the print of it include a photograph of Dick Higgins as a boy. During the publication and sale of *The Paper Snake*, Ray became angry with Dick Higgins, so that a page which might have become a page in *The Book about Death* became a print in a portfolio entitled *Shit Must Stop*. The text on the print pertains to the theme of the unjust perishing of an entity which is good. That is, a fact about a mythic or ritual event, the eating of a symbol, suggests the absence or failure of a theodicy: "A 2-year-old girl choked today on an Easter egg." A report of a child choking on an Easter egg makes explicit the problem of the existence of evil as the loss of good. The good for God is not the perishable good for humans, who may perceive the good for God as evil, and therefore deny the good of God. These themes of accidental perishing, and of both meaningless suffering and meaningful redemptive suffering, call into question both the goodness of Christian creation, and the compassion of the Buddhist self-activating world. Ray's book about death is a book about the mystery of perishing, about tragic discontinuities, and about the presence or absence of consolations. *The Book About Death* is discontinuous and incomplete, and thereby avoids the false consolations of any art which yearns to participate in infinity and eternity. Ray, in his maturity, did not yearn for the Beyond.

Ray Johnson, after childhood's Finnish Lutheran transcendentals, and then after teen-age participation in The Church of Christ, Scientist, renounced transcendental monotheisms, and Christian nihilisms, which for him were the wrong kind of nothingness. He turned from monotheisms toward his own private Buddhism. As with Nietzsche's Post-Man, at least as understood by Martin Heidegger, Ray Johnson did not punish the temporal for not being eternal, and he did not take revenge on the finite for not being infinite.

These terms may seem too conscious of religions, both transcendental and immanent. However, I met Ray Johnson amid a group of people for whom visual art was visual religion and/or visual philosophy. Meister Eckhardt,

"The Book of Unknowing," and especially Simone Weil, were part of daily conversations. The book that governed the tone and atmosphere of events was R. H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*.