

Ray Johnson's Art World
By Elizabeth Zuba

“Ray Johnson is not neo-dada or abstract or extract:
he is an artist representing the reality of his life;
it happens that his life is a collage.”

William S. Wilson, 1965¹

There is a photograph from the 1948 Black Mountain College summer institute that follows my mind's eye whenever I think about Ray Johnson. It is a picture of Buckminster Fuller and a group of bemused students holding aluminum blinds above their heads in a sagging Maypole dance would-be geodesic dome. Among them stands a shirtless young man obscured by the blinds strung across the frame, body segmented, face masked. I don't know if that young man is Ray Johnson, but it could be; he was there that summer and his visible features match those of Johnson's to my eye. Then again, I don't know that I need to know. In Johnson's world, correspondence is reality; and for me, whomever he is, he is Ray — dissected and masked, suspending a supine world-dome of woven human exchange.

And yet when I first walked into the gallery rooms of *Ray Johnson's Art World*, it was surprisingly not this image but that of a different geo-dome that took hold in my mind. About a decade after those first geodesic forays at BMC, Fuller began working on developing another globe-like instrument, the “geoscope.” The geoscope, unlike the dome from the BMC photo, was an individual-sized globe, a small painted one comprised of layered transparent plastic sheeting and fixed with lights on the outer surface, into which a man or woman would insert his/her head and upper body in order to view the earth from the inside out. Globe with legs — the viewer sees the world within, but the world no longer sees the viewer at all.

We tend to think of Ray Johnson, the “dada” of mail art, as the progenitor of an art of contiguous interfaces, an art of mutuality and exchange. Rightly so, I think. And yet, if one spends enough time with Johnson's dense work, intimately palpable in this selection from the vast repository of the Ray Johnson Estate, one gets the sense that these correspondences (be they human or material) floated little lightly above Johnson's head in the joyful mirth of a mountain patch of green. Rather, the interfaces of echo and exchange that define Johnson's work and life plait themselves tightly into what feels like an urgent geoscope, both optic instrument and *terra nullius* — method of layered transparency to intimately see the world, and ample mask of surfaces to sheath the head and halve the body.

The work in *Ray Johnson's Art World* coalesces around his relationships in the art community and the intensity of his epistolary reach; in this sense, the “world” in the title of the show evokes the social world that shaped and informed his vision, some of the friends and artists with whom he communicated and felt rapport. Johnson once said, “I don't just slap things in envelopes. Everything I make is made for the person I'm writing to,” a sentiment richly manifest in all of the works, collage and correspondence alike, foregrounded in this exhibition.² Grouping the pieces by correspondent, the show reveals Johnson's vertiginous communication with, and via, a selection of his fellow artists and friends — John Baldessari, Lynda Benglis, Chuck Close, Jasper Johns, Yoko Ono, James Rosenquist, Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, Edward Ruscha, Andy Warhol and May Wilson. Each work explores its subject intimately and yet the intimacy is given on the very private terms of Johnson's own singular world. Rather than linear narratives, Johnson's correspondence emerges in wormholes of interlocking congruities that weave unpredictably through the pressed boards and pages of his collage and mail art. That isn't to say one can't find clear references or epistles to Lynda Benglis in the collages that respond to her, or Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns in theirs; one can, for all of the artists included. But they are references as seen through the dimensions of Ray Johnson's individual man-sized world, swept tightly into the orbit of his own shifting argot and eyepiece — dissected and masked layers of surface-scope (with legs).

Welcome to Planet Johnson. It would be impossible to create a lexicon for the primary interfaces of Johnson's work (be they of image, language or process); the static signified/signifier does not, could not, exist in Johnson's practice of near-viral permutation of symbol and semblance. Nevertheless, as one looks around the rooms of *Ray Johnson's Art World*, certain threads of continuity emerge and circle the walls, one gossamer and

slippery thread over another, not unlike layers of transparent sheeting forming a globe. The laws of physics in Johnson's works change too frequently and intensely to ever accord these threads certain and singular meanings, but we can, nevertheless, revel in the shimmer of their weave.

JOHN BALDESSARI: EVERYTHING PURGED BUT HEART

"I liked [Ray's] sense of irony and sense of humor, the possibility of anything being art and also that art didn't need to have any physical weight."

John Baldessari, 2014³

John Baldessari and Ray Johnson met in the late 1960's through their mutual representation at the fairly subversive and very hip downtown Richard L. Feigen Gallery of that era ("located on a street carpeted in garbage" as *New York* magazine put it);⁴ they quickly became correspondents. The affinities between the work of these two artists are unequivocal and capacious, at least in terms of concept—from the blurring of text as literature and visual object, to the approach to language as both sentient and arbitrary game-system, from the impetus to deface the human visage, to the palmistry accorded the flattened hand. Strikingly, both artists torched their earlier works in deliberate acts of ritual; Ray Johnson privately in Cy Twombly's fireplace in the late 1950s and Baldessari in a more formal work *The Cremation Project* in 1970.⁵ In as much as Johnson and Baldessari were dedicated pen-pals of mail art, they were also intimate correspondents of inquiry and (un)consciousness.

In 1973, Baldessari made a work entitled *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line*—I can't be certain that Johnson knew of this work when he made his 1973 collage *Baldessari Heart* included in *Ray Johnson's Art World*, but I like to imagine he had. The concept and intention would have fascinated Johnson, and indeed *Heart* feels, to me, like a response. The inquiry of the graduation of three, or parallelism in triangulation (a twoness in threeness, a oneness in twoness) is a primary articulation in all of Johnson's work. Johnson riffed ceaselessly on "squareness" and "straightness" as euphemisms for heteronormative culture and frequently used circular, organic and moticos shapes to alternatively reference homosexuality and non-"normative" lifestyles in general, bucking the proverbial straight line. Throwing three balls in the air to get a straight line, especially balls (as euphemism), must have been of incredible interest and bemusement to Johnson. In *Baldessari Heart*, Johnson has divided his potato masher emblem into three parts, two of the handles fit together into a whole, the third does not. (The masher, to begin with, is an instrument for synthesizing rather than dividing, albeit through wrenching means.) The handles are three of the same and yet the third does not "fit," it would be easy to consider this a male/female binary and a third that does not "fit." *Un coup de trois balles jamais n'abolira le hasard*. Three balls, three handles, three sections that form $\frac{3}{4}$ of a heart, completed by Baldessari's address—three balls in the air to get a straight line descend back down, per the laws of gravity, to one—Baldessari. Johnson's emblematic "fetuses" appear in one of the sections, as do his glyphs and a pink "rubbing" (pink triangle?). An endowed snake (the snake as phallus with breasts, a third version or hybrid male/female) swims around the heart with the caption "skinny dipper" (Baldessari joined the faculty at CalArts in 1970, a freewheeling, alternative school that had a pool reserved exclusively for skinny dipping). So, what's the skinny on dipping as a third in a heart-shaped line? I don't know and I'm sure I've only begun to see a hundredth of the correspondences to and via Baldessari in this powerful piece.

LYNDA BENGLIS: DOUBLE-(BE)HEADER

"Ray was a minimalist and a concrete poet of great wit (...) Being with Ray was art. We communicated emotionally; it was a process and it was fun (...) Ray was extremely quick-witted and I was attracted to his energy. He was very cute and flirtatious—intellectually flirtatious. I loved him. I love him. To me, he's still here."

Lynda Benglis, 2014⁶

Ray Johnson and Lynda Benglis's friendship is now all but immortalized in a series of 1973 polaroid photographs of nude Benglis, Johnson and Robert Morris posing in various compromising and utterly humorous positions with an oversized double-headed dildo. Indeed, Benglis's double-headed dildo was likely the inspiration for Johnson's oft-used double-headed snake. The rapport Johnson must have felt with Benglis is readily intuited; gender transposition, phalluses, organic form and interfacing with media are all shared elements and inquiries rich in the work of both artists. The themes of duplexity and inversion, in particular, must have drawn Johnson to Benglis's work in the mid-1970s — doubled and inverted dildos, doubled and inverted sexuality, gender roles. The works that evolve around Benglis in *Ray Johnson's Art World* reveal multiple such pairs — Johnson's paired Benglis silhouettes (one sur-faced, one sub-faced) flanked by a cleaved doubled-headed snake, the image of Benglis doubling as Grable twinned by a second pin-up, Benglis again doubled as Grable but this time doubled doubly by an outline of Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, and of course Cupid's double-headed "snake" framed by its own paired vaginal wings. No double is the same as its first — duplicating in Ray Johnson's world yields multiplicity not mimesis, difference instead of likeness, indeterminism⁷ instead of replication. A copy, silhouette or tracing, is for Johnson a figure that is both its same and other relieved of the burden of a singular identity, a disincarnated form to be reincarnated as its own echo.

The implications of gender, sexuality and identity in these disincarnated doubles are certainly many and myriad. In *Untitled (Benglis with Moticos)*, Johnson pairs Benglis's fairly feminist riff on the pin-up icon Betty Grable (stripped of the coy semblance that protects the pin-up from her onlookers, her modern jeans dropped unsensuously around her ankles) with a tracing of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (Duchamp's final work of a nude female figure lying spread-eagle in the grass whose genitals are strangely, almost violently, misshapen, and head and limbs truncated as viewed through a peephole) a piece that met with much criticism in 1969 as another work of aggression toward women in the annals of art. Johnson layers (*interfaces*) the figures, the disembodied and faceless silhouette of *Étant donnés* over Benglis's embodied Grable, both over a series of moticos glyphs (made from the silhouettes of Johnson's long-discarded or dissected collage panels of the 1950s called by the same name) that come to function as coded letters in Johnson's works. The moticos glyphs that surround the female figures in the piece are a particular set that appears frequently in Johnson's work, as speech bubble, message or mask. They are clearly a message Johnson wants us to receive — and yet they are also utterly impenetrable. The viewer is forced to reside uncertainly, even uncomfortably, on the surface of the work along with the disincarnated *Étant donnés* framing the nude Benglis. Though perhaps not completely without human comfort — Johnson has washed the moticos with the traces of his own breath (more detail below) using a straw to blow puddles of ink into comb-like figures veritably breathing around the female figures (the comb being a reference to Duchamp's readymade comb, an oft-used motif in Johnson's work in the 1960s and 70s, usually acquiring parallels with both male and female sexual organs). Interestingly, Benglis a la Grable is "combed" or breathed over with the ink, but the *Étant Donnés* is kept "clean" ... breathless ... dead?

CHUCK CLOSE: SPLIT SECOND DOUBLE PORTRAIT

"When the phone rings, every time, for a split second, I think it may be Ray. It's very sad."

Chuck Close, 1995⁸

Ray Johnson and Chuck Close met in New York through fellow artists around 1970; they quickly became enduring friends. Close describes his interest in doing outsized photorealist portraits because he wanted to make an overwhelmingly large and confrontational image that couldn't be easily scanned as a whole, art that would suck the viewer up close to it in order to truly see the work, but in order to see the work, the viewer could only see the parts and not the whole. Addressing why such an effort would knell in the Zen or quantum-based dimensions of Ray Johnson's life-world would be reductive to say the least. It isn't hard to see how Close and Johnson would have been attracted to the mutual entreat of the particulate in order to approximate a truth or *other* real in their respective practices. The sympathy and affinities in their work and practice are complex and riveting, and demand, in my opinion, an entire show of their own. Interestingly *Ray Johnson's Art World* displays Close and Johnson's works of collaboration. It is an inspired move. Where better can we truly examine and discover the rapport these artists possess, the specific interests in one another's work that each brings to the table, than in their visual correspondence.

In 1976, Johnson began a silhouette portrait project that he would continue to work on until his death. Johnson asked friends and acquaintances to “sit” for him as he traced the outline of their shadow on drawing paper hanging on a wall behind them; he would then transfer the tracings to black construction paper and use the final silhouettes in any number of capacities though usually in his collage work — in the collages included in *Ray Johnson’s Art World*, we can discern the silhouettes of Lynda Benglis, May Wilson, and Chuck Close. Moreover, there are likely others lurking now unrecognizable in the fragments of these collages; Johnson frequently de- or un-faced his silhouette drawings to the point of oblivion. In two of the works exchanged with Close in 1993 and 1994, Johnson had sent his own silhouette to Close with a request that he “add to and return;” Close added a grid to the face (evoking his portraiture work) and finger-stamped his own hair structure, beard and all, onto Johnson’s silhouette — labeling it Double Self-Portrait. The image must have really struck Johnson — one becoming two via a process of emptying, or two becoming one via a process of flattening; he made several copies of the collaboration and continued to elaborate on them. (He also sent the image off to others to keep the add-to ball rolling.) How many more visages might be fit in the hollow? *Untitled (Chuck Close Xerox)* and *Untitled (Red Chuck Close Xerox)* are two examples of additional interventions Johnson made to this exchange. Both evoke masks, circles, stars (anti-drips), many of the images we have come to associate with Johnson’s work. Most significantly, these two works both reveal a very particular, very poignant and powerful intervention of Johnson’s that he applied to much of his work over the course of a particular week in April of 1994 — the perforated X. From April 8-14, 1994, Johnson traced a perfect X, the axes of two fixed lines, over the face of his works, and at the point of their intersection (0,0), incised a clean hole through the entire body of the work, as can be seen in both of these collaborative pieces with Close. To date, no insight has alighted in Johnson’s papers or interviews with friends to lead us to any concrete conclusions about his decision to perforate so many works on that particular week in April. It is, of course, impossible not to see the act through the retrospective lens of his suicide nine months later. These perforated X’s *tend* to appear on works that are the clear amalgamation of two beings or things becoming one, or one becoming two, though not always; could it be that the perforation is part of the emptying of the space between two? I don’t know. But when I see that hole pierced into Johnson and Close’s double self-portrait, I can’t help but hear Close’s words in my head — “for a split second, I think it may be Ray.”

JASPER JOHNS IN JAPAN

“The thing is, if you believe in the unconscious - and I do - there's room for all kinds of possibilities that I don't know how you prove one way or another.”

Jasper Johns, 2004⁹

“I wait not for time to finish my work, but for time to indicate something one would not have expected to occur.”

Ray Johnson, 1965¹⁰

Jasper Johns and Ray Johnson met through mutual friends in 1954; they lived within a few blocks of one another on the Lower East Side and met frequently. Johns and Johnson, together with Rauschenberg and Twombly (later Rosenquist and Poons as well), made up a small cadre of younger painters working alongside more established artists Richard Lippold, John Cage, Willem de Kooning, and Ad Reinhardt, to name a few that were particularly close to Johnson. Zen Buddhism was in the air in 1950s New York; and all four young painters have been said to have rooted themselves during those years in a path of Zen awareness. As Johns says above, there is no single meaning or interpretation to be had in any single experience; meaning can never be static, singular or absolute. And this philosophy is at the bedrock of both Johns’ and Johnson’s work, though certainly in very distinct ways. Viral-like and infinite permutation of language was one such driving force of the unconscious in Johnson’s work. For Johnson, language and image are rarely metaphorical; all symbols are not what they were but newly open to serendipitous blunder, metonymy, parataxis, contextual transition and translation, correspondences. Process is paramount, and it may be helpful when we look at Johnson’s collages and mail art to imagine him at his worktable waiting for another correspondence to occur.

In *Untitled (Jasp with Orange Buttons and “Ni” Label)*, a scrap of ribbon embroidered IN becomes “OUT” in concept and NI in its visual rendering, when inverted. As a result, JASP is “outed” via the inverted IN and then erected (flag-like) by “Sade in Japan” — a concrete poem of sorts taken from a longer text written by Johnson

that invokes the sexual libertine Marquis de Sade and alludes to his Japanese friend Yukio Mishima's novel on Madame Sade. So, if we follow the serpentine mitosis of language in Johnson's hands, JASP (Jap?) is outed via IN and corresponded with the Madame de Sade. And before we can even catch our breath, under the entire text-based meridian are two testicle-like button faces, one of which reads PA (the rest of FLOP ART having been inked out) which may be PA as in addendum to JASP (JASPA, a New York accented twist on Jasper); or if we flip the NI back into IN and add the PA, we get PAIN, which may very well be "pain" as in "sadism" (sexual sadomasochism) a term deriving from the Marquis de Sade himself. These vertiginous twists of verbal and visual language are then flanked by the button-balls and phallus that frame the "flag" of text that drapes across the inked frame. Following these mitotic correspondences, one begins to have a sense of Johnson's relationship to text as textile. I'm quite certain that Johns perceives in this piece intimations and references much greater and more complex than I will ever know; then again, as he says, there's room for all kinds of possibilities. To my mind, it is this charged energy of potentiality and possibility that will keep Johnson's art from ever ossifying; the constant coming and the going, the open portals of possibility. In *Malone Dies*, Samuel Beckett writes, "Because in order not to die, you must come and go ..." To me, the apograph of that line is the arresting image of one of Johnson's planate Marilyn Monroe silhouettes suddenly taking flight over a flattened city blueprint, in *Untitled (Marilyn Monroe)* — the echo of the self, the art of the echoic in the void.

YOKO ONO: OO

"I remember...[we met on] a snowy day. He was walking toward me with a background of a snowy city (...) We only talked in sign language, so to speak. Both of us were not too vocal. But we met a lot. (...) Ray was not wordy. Ray was just an artist who engaged in his works and was loving it. I thought it was very Ray, that he didn't talk about them but didn't mind sending them to me. I love them because, again, they are not like any collages by anybody else. They are almost like pictures in his dream."

Yoko Ono, 2014¹¹

"Years later, I said to Yoko: 'Don't be concerned about all those old letters [lost] — I'll send you tons of new letters, just get a new cloth shoe bag.' So Yoko goes: 'We could do a multiple edition.'"

Ray Johnson, undated¹²

Circular cut-outs are ubiquitous in Johnson's collage and correspondence work, as is his gesture of "o art." Amputation and absence surely always draw inquiries of identity and existence, and yet the cut-outs in these pieces that map around Yoko Ono and her work seem particularly palpable. The double OO's in YOKO and again in ONO surely titillated Johnson both in their perfectly paired doubleness and perfectly paired hollowness; their resemblance to button holes and eyeballs and the simultaneous notion of hole as conduit toward something and hole as nothing/void. Two O's are the same as much as they are different; as much nothing as the shape of human breath. Johnson has drawn a snake as a pipe-like body connecting an O and a second O at each end, and his snakes' bodies are frequently articulated with crescents that may or not be the same crescent we see in his button-like eyes. Could the crescent whites of the eye in fact be the cross-section of an O (breath)/0 (nothing)? An O that stands in stark contrast to the angled "square" (the Jazz Age moniker for persons who adhere to the rigid and repressive rules of normative culture) as seen above hyper-masculine Richard Widmark, who incidentally frequently stars opposite Marilyn Monroe, rumored to be one of Johnson's many alter egos?¹³ An O NO reversed and inverted is still O NO.

As an artist who referred to his collage work as "chop art," Johnson must have felt a strong affinity for Ono's performance event *Cut Piece*, one in which she gives herself over to an almost violent excising of the layers of surface that clothed her. Ono and Johnson share an instructional and injurious excising of surface that renders moot any Platonic divulgence of the inner or under. The audience participants in *Cut Piece* snip and carry off scraps of Ono's clothing, reconstituting the surface of Ono's clothes into a larger surface area that encompasses first the room and then the larger world to where the pieces will travel at the end of the evening; the removal of Ono's clothing is minced, aggressive and methodic, and yet stops short of revealing Ono's nude body beneath them. What is *under* is not the point. It is not surprising why Johnson must have felt a great rapport with Ono — in Johnson's work, any surface (and what tangible object or symbol including ourselves is not surface?) is an(other) surface yet to be reconstituted — there is no under under, to riff on Gertrude Stein.

The suggestion perhaps is a Kantian one — there is only surface and if we want to discover anything about the human condition, that is indeed where we need look.

JAMES ROSENQUIST: LIFELINE

“Ray, Larry Poons, and I were good friends; we were always together the three of us. We were very close to each other. And we had a great time. I really miss Ray. I have a definition of him — all things are devoid of intrinsic existences.”

James Rosenquist, 2014¹⁴

“I told Jim Rosenquist that he was America’s and the World’s Greatest Living Painter.”

Ray Johnson, 1965¹⁵

James Rosenquist and Ray Johnson met in 1957 through Rosenquist’s then-girlfriend, arts reporter Peggy Smith. Drawing relationships was Johnson’s penchant and one of his many legacies of the 1950s-60s NY art scene; Johnson got a lot of joy out of introducing friends to one another and connected Rosenquist with Bob Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Lenore Tawney, Agnes Martin, Bob Indiana and Ellsworth Kelly, among others. Radically different artists in many ways, Johnson and Rosenquist share a similar eyepiece qua kaleidoscope; Rosenquist writes, “When you look at a collage by Schwitters, with disparate things stuck side by side and laid on top of each other (...) you involuntarily make connections. With collage, you are free to create your own narrative.”¹⁶ Multiple and ephemeral narratives abound in the works dedicated to Rosenquist in *Ray Johnson’s Art World*, and Rosenquist is right, we are given open energy enough to weave our own personal way through the works. Nevertheless, there are moments in these works, in all of Johnson’s work, when one is deeply aware of communications beyond our ken.

In his 1966 piece *Yellow Applause*, Rosenquist stilled and magnified the motion of clapping hands — the hands barely resemble their form, consumed by the impressions of their now-frozen vitality. I can’t help but hear that applause in Johnson’s *Jim Rose Snake with Yellow Figure*, not because of the similar monochrome color, but because of the shared evocation of the remains, the fossils, of human movement. The trace of human breath is less foregrounded in Johnson’s work — but once realized, its presence is staggering. Indeed I would have missed it completely, if not for curator John McGill. McGill explained to me that it is his theory that the wiry, single bleeds of diluted ink one sees above the yellow figure in this piece (and indeed in many of Johnson’s works) are neither brush-strokes nor rolling drips given over to the force of gravity, but the vestiges of Johnson’s very breath. Based on the evidence found at Johnson’s work table at the time of his death and thorough examinations of the movement of particular strands of ink or paint in Johnson’s work, it is McGill’s belief that Johnson would pool a small drop of paint or ink onto the canvas and then use a straw to blow the droplet gently, slowly across the surface. Each line is the trace of a single exhalation of Johnson’s breath. (Giving new nuance to Johnson’s quip “I am the only painter in New York whose drips mean anything.”) Something that has been discussed repeatedly about Johnson’s work, repeatedly because it bears repeating, is the obsessively intricate and time-consuming detail of Johnson’s process. Johnson worked on most of his collages over the span of 20 to 40 years, both because their subject necessitated that level of density and because their medium (his life) demanded it. One might think of Johnson’s work as another of his vital organs; I think he did. And in this breathing of paint across the board, we feel, arrestingly, Johnson’s breath in and through them.

ROBERT RAUSCHENBERG: ANTI-DRIPS

“It is completely irrelevant that I am making them. ‘Today’ is their creator.”

Robert Rauschenberg, 1950¹⁷

“Things grow, wilt, die, things will reassert themselves. Each person has a different reason to communicate.”

Ray Johnson, 1977¹⁸

Ray Johnson and Robert Rauschenberg likely met in 1949 in New York, upon Rauschenberg's arrival from Black Mountain College. Rauschenberg was one of Johnson's first close friends in New York. It isn't hard to see the strong rapport between Rauschenberg and Johnson; both men shared a penchant for playfulness, for incorporating found objects and images in their works, for conjoining media and genres, primarily for narrowing the infamous gap between life and art. They belonged to the same circle of friends and the same generation of artistic inquiry; surely they must have talked about the various ideologies of art that doggedly surrounded them in late 1940s New York. And yet the stories of occasional competitive feelings between them don't really surprise much.

If Rauschenberg can be said to have taken the primacy of concept and personal revelation of the Abstract Impressionists and bedded it (literally) in the postmodern surface, then perhaps we can say that Johnson took the highly conscious irony of the postmodern surface and re-infused it with a highly personal concept of revelation through opacity. Johnson experienced a near-mystical relationship with the surfaces of his world; images, words, things, events, were all experiences eligible for unlocking orphic correspondences. Rauschenberg's paints drip from the bed in provocative winks at the viewer, asking: why is art something more cerebral and occult than the reality of the viewer's experience? What is so authentic about the artist anyway? To my mind, in the pieces that center around Rauschenberg that have been included in *Ray Johnson's Art World*, Johnson is responding quite directly to these drips, and their latent questions. In both, Johnson has used his straw technique in a vehemence of force heretofore unseen in his work, veritably shooting the ink across the surface with what must have been incredibly powerful blows of breath. One feels them near whistle across the surface, as if resuscitating a body with CPR, a force sufficient to jump centimeters in certain spaces. Like everything with Johnson, one can never say with any certainty what his intentions were, as he worked very hard to ensure that that would be the case, but it seems likely to me that these skidding blows of Johnson's breath intend to draw life back into the surface's mouth, to draw Rauschenberg or the viewer back to the rich potential of intimacy and meaning in surface encounters, accident and opacity. I do not mean to suggest at all that Johnson purported a 180 return to the sincerity of high modernism — on the contrary, it would seem that Johnson purported an embrace of highly self-conscious wit and irony, but in that wit and irony, new footprints of an(o)ther, less subjective sincerity.

In this vein, and on the subject of drips, it is also interesting to note Johnson's use of negative-spaced O's in his works which he creates via inking out the space around them; this motif in Johnson's work is frequently referred to as "starry night." It is a process that is literally the inversion of that of splashes on a canvas. In juxtaposition to both Pollock's thrown paint-drops and Rauschenberg's gravity-given drips, these methodically inked-out spaces might be considered anti-drips. Anti-drips can be seen in a number of the works included in *Ray Johnson's Art World*, sensitively installed to give you a strong awareness of their prominence as motif such that, when one comes upon the *Untitled (Five Snakes, Jimmy Connors)* collage that centers around Rauschenberg, their starkly different aspect in this work (washed-out, tremor-like) rattles one quickly to attention. Here, the anti-drips are dripping! And from the looks of it, Jimmy Connors has been knocking them with all his might out of their negative spaces. Jimmy Connors + dripping anti-drips + CPR splash breaths = powerful resuscitation of the animation of surface: "Bob Rauschenberg once said that I am not an artist and perhaps he is right I am not an artist. I like things better than I like art. I liked that heart I made for the waitress. Perhaps I am in the tradition of classical dada."¹⁹

READING AD REINHARDT

"It's not nothing and not all and not all or nothing at all but something sometime not much and not all bad ..."
Ad Reinhardt, May 1955²⁰

"Like a painting should be nothing and free and not a thing at all otherwise it becomes something."
Ad Reinhardt, September 1955²¹

In 1953, 26-year-old (pay attention to this number) Ray Johnson began working as an assistant to Ad Reinhardt. Though a strict abstractionist in the annals of art history, Ad Reinhardt worked as a cartoonist from 1942 to 1947 and his private exchanges with friends reveal a man who continued to work with the rich erotics of wit through word play, cartoon figures and visually composed texts until his death in 1967. And yet, Reinhardt was unequivocal as to what he considered his art, capital A Art or Art-as-Art as he referred to it — highly geometric

paintings rooted in Abstract Expressionism. It is interesting to consider Johnson's private evolution from abstract geometric work much influenced by his BMC mentor Josef Albers, to collagist (and moticos-ist) by the mid-1950s, an evolution that took shape during the same years that Johnson began assisting Reinhardt. What kind of impact did Reinhardt's relationship to his very Thanatos-rooted Abstract Art and conversely Eros-rhizomatic private correspondence have on his young assistant Ray Johnson? Perhaps no one knows for sure, but I think we have to assume it wasn't insignificant. Johnson's writings and letters reveal that he was very fond of Reinhardt; he was grateful for the opportunity to have worked with him, and for their friendship. Nevertheless, as is perhaps always the nature of mentor-mentee relationship, of parent and child, that the younger defines himself against the elder, much of Johnson's work tacitly questions Reinhardt's ideas about art.

Ad Reinhardt wrote extensively and passionately about what he believes art should be and do, and yet his writings, taken as a whole, frequently contradict and controvert themselves. In the two examples above, Reinhardt writes two different letters, within a few months of each other, in which he describes painting as both not nothing (in the first) and nothing (in the latter). Nothing was a primary theme, concept and medium for Ray Johnson, and yet he turned around and made several pieces that read Not Nothing. It is arresting, in myriad ways, but perhaps mostly, in my mind, because it reveals what is so central to Johnson's work — visual and verbal language can never live up to our needs of expression, as every word is simultaneously itself and other. Month is Mouth, Live is Vile, Hat is Tah, "Art spelled backwards is art."²² Nothing and Not Nothing may be one and the same, and we may simply not yet, or not ever, possess the adequate language to express that experience. Classes and classifications were a subject of much attention in Johnson's work, from his NYCS aliases to his bunny lists, to the random and campy adding and dropping of names to his "schools." One wonders if those early systems of category in Reinhardt's cartoons, and later system of nomenclature in his writings, may have influenced Johnson. In Bill Wilson's words, "Johnson's technique was to question classes and sets, offering absurd lists or illegible lists in order to subvert serious lists of art, because classifications seriously distorted experiences of art."²³

Johnson's *Ad Reinhardt Artforum* seems to speak directly to this Nothing-Not Nothing inversion as we see it play out in Reinhardt's work and efforts to define art — transgressed and cancelled geometries brought into conversation with language qua glyph puppets as they are surrounded by *named* animate figures. Johnson started work on this collage five years after Reinhardt's death; by that time Reinhardt's legacy as painter of the Black Paintings and the writings around that series had been thoroughly instituted by the agents of history. Writing about the Black Paintings series, Reinhardt describes the aesthetic purity of his project as "A square (natural, shapeless) canvas ... (not large, not small, sizeless) ... trisected (no composition) ... one horizontal form negating one vertical form (formless, no top, no bottom, directionless) ... an object that is self-conscious (no unconsciousness), ideal, transcendent, aware of no thing but art (absolutely no anti-art)."²⁴ When I look at this collage by Johnson, a collage in which Johnson explicitly evokes Reinhardt's name six times (an "outside" reference itself that Reinhardt would have rejected as art), I can't help but read it as a response to Reinhardt — evoking explicitly the absurdity of all visual and lingual attempts at purity — square and not square, shapeless and shapeful, sized and sizeless, composed and not composed, geometry and figure, directed and non-directed, image and letter, glyph and non-readable character, conscious and unconscious, present and absent, nothing and not nothing, private and public, art AND anti-art — inevitably and necessarily the same. *Ad*, Johnson seems to say, *Your pure aesthetics are also your Nothing.*

EDWARD RUSCHA: TWENTYSIX LETTER REALISM

"If you isolate a word for just a moment and repeat it ten, fifteen times, you can easily drive the meaning from the word and from the sound of the word, and I do that a lot with the printed word."

Edward Ruscha, 1980²⁵

"European artists are receiving information about the death of Ray Johnson. But they are not fooled. They know what conceptualism is all about."

Ray Johnson, 1990²⁶

According to Ruscha's recollection, he and Ray Johnson met in the late 1960's at the Leo Castelli Gallery. Their mutual admiration is not hard to glean; both shared roots in commercial art design, both were fore-

figures in the Pop Art movement with a strong interest in the use of found text in their work, and unsurprisingly, this interest in language and “reading” meant for both artists a long and prolific metier in book arts. If their rapport as artists is keenly evident at first blush, their correspondences get downright eerie once you really dig in. Take *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, Ed Ruscha’s first book and, according to Clive Phillpot, *the* book to “establish the paradigm for a new concept of the cheap multiple booklet as art.”²⁷ Cheap page-based multiples that circumvent the commercial art market had to be something Johnson would have admired in 1962. And yet despite the principle of direct and cheap distribution in *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations*, it was likely the concept of the book that would have truly given Johnson delightful pause. 26 was a very important number to Johnson, it is the number of letters in the alphabet, frequently the numbers of “letters” in Johnson’s own post-based alphabet; an alphabet that when “halved”, falls into two letter sets of 13, perhaps the most significant number for Johnson. The 26 images of Ruscha’s book are pictures of generic and unpeopled gasoline stations; the letters are oblique images that lead the reader to new “approaches” to reading. In 1963, Johnson would begin the process of making and distributing his intentionally incomplete and indeterminate book of 13 pages, *A Book About Death* — a process that entailed sending only a few pages to a few persons at any one time, and never the complete set of pages to anyone. No person could read the complete book — the alphabet, halved, meant you could never read the complete story. 26 also pops up in Johnson’s later book, *A Book About Modern Art*. Johnson’s cover letter to Clive Phillpot indicates that the book will consist of 26 sections of 26 pages each. Unsurprisingly, Johnson subsequently abandoned the rubric without explanation. However, the number 26 continues to appear significantly throughout its unbound pages. Moreover, as has been perhaps over-documented, the number 13 seems to have figured into Johnson’s planning of his own death — half a complete set of letters, half of a language means the story is ipso facto incomplete, the speech is arrested, thwarted, left gaping an open mouth, or “o.”

Those collages in *Ray Johnson’s Art World* that speak to Ruscha, are rich in shared identities: both are portraits whose (sur)faces are layered in stacked moticos blocks re-surfaced in bas-relief-probing depths of perceptions; both portraits have been (de) faced with paint or crayon; a silhouette drawing of (photorealist) Chuck Close figures in both; in both paintings Johnson has rigorously X’ed out (or “cancelled” as in how the post office stamps over a postal stamp) a number of images. Clearly, these elements are all key articulations of Johnson’s work that surface and resurface. And yet, there is something intimately engaging about seeing the way in which these two portraits reach out from their respective posterboard panels and hold each other in a slippery embrace. Stacking aggressively sanded cardboard blocks one on top of the other to create rising and falling depths into and out of surfaces is a common agency in Johnson’s collage work, but it is one that is particularly articulated in his portrait collages. In her perceptive essay on Johnson, Dalí and Warhol, Frédérique Joseph-Lowry links this stacking to Derrida’s Concept of Supplement: “the incessant task of infinite addition (...) you add and add without end, mask after mask, one after another, because there is nothing behind the mask — no stable self and nothing that can stand for it.”²⁸ I’m not sure if I agree that there was nothing behind Johnson’s mask, but I do agree that he was definitively drawing our attention to a logic of supplement, depth of perception, human dimension; perhaps, though, it was more along Rousseau’s idea of the supplement — culture, writing, and representative image play an instrumental and auxiliary role to showing the value of the real. In other words, a logic of supplement can be read two ways — supplement as necessary to perceive the truth of the existent presence *and/or* supplement as necessary to mask the lack of an existent presence. Either way, it is striking to consider all of the carefully sanded (destroyed?) layers of surface built up over the faces of Ruscha and Johnson in each work. In both portraits, wherever they are not built up with moticos pieces, the human visages have been de-faced, mildly erased by either a whitewash paint or crayon. We still can’t quite get to the photo (the realistic image) of the subject; we are kept aware of the surface, we are kept at bay, and yet it is in the attention to this distance, to this unknowability, that a person, any person, feels truly real — “A Hopeless (...) High Priority (...) Photorealism” (texts taken from Ruscha’s word painting *High Priority*).

ANDY WARHOL’S SHOT SOUP CAN

“During the 1960s, I think, people forgot what emotions were supposed to be. And I don’t think they’ve ever remembered.”

Andy Warhol, undated²⁹

“Please understand the nature of my work, it’s a split-ness between what is true attempt at statement and the echo failure.”

Ray Johnson, 1971³⁰

Ray Johnson did not forget. I haven’t come across any writings or artwork by Johnson that respond directly to Andy Warhol’s death in 1987, but judging by how Valerie Solanas’s shooting of Warhol in 1968 affected him and judging most palpably by his work, we know that Johnson did not forget. It is a somewhat burlesque twist of fate that Ray Johnson was a pioneer of American Pop art, a movement that has come to symbolize a parody of personal expression in art and an association with industrial means of production. Johnson’s art was anything but, on both counts. Nevertheless, he was undeniably central to its genesis in the United States. Pop art had two galactic beginnings of sorts, one in London and one in New York. In London, Pop art exploded onto the scene in 1956 with Richard Hamilton at its big bang helm, but in New York, its beginnings were much more of a whimper, literally floating lightly up from the sandpaper of a young Ray Johnson the same year. In art critic Henry Geldzahler’s words, “Johnson’s collages ‘Elvis Presley No.1’ and ‘James Dean’ stand as the Plymouth Rock of the Pop movement.”³¹ But it wasn’t until the early 1960s that Pop art in America truly exploded, and by that time, it was not Johnson but Johnson’s friend Andy Warhol who would turn out to be its posterchild. Was Warhol influenced by Johnson? Probably. Friends tend to influence one another and Johnson and Warhol were undeniably very good friends. They met in the mid-1950s and cottoned to each other for many reasons; both worked in graphic design and it was Warhol who introduced Johnson to the art directors at Bonwit Teller department store as well as the publishing house New Directions, *New York* magazine, and other early cover and print design opportunities that were Johnson’s bread and butter. But that isn’t to say that the title of posterchild of American Pop art ought to have gone to Johnson, at all — Johnson’s incorporation of popular and iconic imagery in his work was of a very, very different vein from Warhol’s.

In his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Martin Heidegger writes “At bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary, it is extraordinary, uncanny.”³² (Johnson would likely take that last word and mold it into any number of new permutations of Campbells’ Soup labels.) The sentiment applies well to Warhol’s work, but Ray Johnson was a different story. For Johnson, the ordinary becomes extraordinary only when paired with its other symbiotic and corresponding faces of ordinary, or rather the real (the “bottom”) happens between ordinaries, in their coming and going, in whatever unexpected energy is unlocked by their pairing. It seems to me that for Johnson, in Charles Olson’s words, “what IS is no longer things but what happens BETWEEN things, these are the terms of the reality contemporary to us — and the terms of what we are.”³³ What we are, for Johnson, is not the image or surface of a thing, as Warhol frequently quipped, but what happens between surface fragments — not under, but between. On June 3, 1968, Valerie Solanas (a friend and frequent face at The Factory) walked into Andy Warhol’s studio and shot him point-blank three times; David Bourdon spent that evening in the hospital with Warhol and called Johnson with the news when he returned home late that night. The news spurred Johnson to go out for a newspaper in hopes of even more detail. In Bourdon’s words, “As he hurried toward an all-night newsstand in his dismal Lower East Side neighborhood, he was set upon by a small band of delinquents, one of whom attempted to knife him in the back.”³⁴ The combined trauma of these two events, both Warhol’s attack and his own, according to letters by Johnson, prompted his near immediate move from Manhattan out to Long Island. *Untitled (Campbell’s Soup with Cut-out Circles)* is not dated, but its collage mates (other collages whose pieces fit into and out of this work) date to the early 1970s, just a few years after that fated day of violence. I don’t need to conjure too tightly the evocation of bullet holes cum peep holes, the notion of lurking violence, the dripping blood that spreads out horizontally across the work, as if a person were lying down on the frame, between the fragments of the can; the power of the piece is larger than my meager words. Perhaps all I could add here would be an epitaph of sorts — that the red that I see seeping across the can must be the same red that bleeds from Elvis’s eyes in Johnson’s now legendary proto-Pop piece of ten years earlier, before fame, before The Factory, before people forgot that emotions are what happen between.³⁵

MAY WILSON: FIGURE 1 FIGURE 2

“Another day in 1958 I found a large carton from Ray Johnson in my mail box. This one contained a wire mesh object, of three graduated spherical shapes [a Ruth Asawa sculpture]. I did not know what it was, except

bulky. At the time I had a triangular 2x4 wood shape, open in the center, so I sat on the wire thing to flatten it, nailed it to the triangle, and painted it black.”

May Wilson, 1965³⁶

“I received a letter [from May Wilson] saying she had sat on it, flattened it down to a board, nailed it down and painted it black. I was amused by this and thought it witty to associate Asawa with the act of sitting.”

Ray Johnson, 1965³⁷

In 1956, William S. Wilson gave his mother’s address to his friend Ray Johnson; his mother was an artist and Johnson was always on the hunt for new and rich correspondence in the mail. He could have had no idea, at the time, of the deep impact that that introduction would have not only on the life of his mother, artist May Wilson, but also on that of Ray Johnson. It’s probably hard for any of us to imagine sharing our best friend with our mother, but the Wilsons are not a typical family, and certainly not of typical minds or talent. Ray Johnson knew this of course — Johnson isn’t known for making friends with the normal and average-minded. But the intensity of the artistic collaboration that formed between May Wilson and Johnson is unique in the Ray Johnson story. By 1966, Wilson had separated from her husband and moved from Maryland to downtown New York. When I first read that fact, I assumed she likely came north to be near her son; William corrects that view in one of his essays on his mother’s work — she came for art. At the age of 61, Wilson moved into the legendary Chelsea Hotel and began to put her art roots down. Within a short time, she was holding celebrated salon-like soirees and had earned the moniker “Grandma Moses of the Underground.” Ardent feminist and lifetime nonconformist, Wilson was finally at home in New York. She had started her career later than most, but she wasted no time in making her mark.

History will likely most remember Wilson for her *Ridiculous Portraits* and *Snowflake* series (though one wishes the art world gave more credence to mail art; Wilson’s exchanges with Johnson are some of the richest and wryest exchanges of image and language I’ve seen). In Wilson’s *Snowflake* pieces, she places several layers of “paper snowflake”-style incised images one over the other, in such a way that the sub-figures or shadows of the primary figure distort into and out of unexpected and potent hollows and bulges. Echoes of a human figure’s multiple existences and identities, the figure’s shadows and movements seem to contort beneath their weight. It is an element of Wilson’s work that must have resonated intimately with Johnson.³⁸ Throughout Johnson’s collage and correspondence work lurks a motif I think of as the black-sheep shadow — a shadow that seems mis-matched to its object-image, sometimes the wrong size, the wrong shape or placement, but that nevertheless seems to seek to belong, adapt, to blend, to be forgotten. We see this motif twice in *Untitled (Snail with Yarn and May Wilson)* — in the snake-snail’s shadow that implausibly lies heavily over its own head, and then again in the umbra of the pendulum object on the right side of the canvas, heavily distorted at its cross-section. Distorted at the cross-section of what we are and the shadows we cast, of a singular identity and the many oblique, simultaneous and indeterminate identities that we possess, is a rich territory of shared inquiry in both Wilson’s and Johnson’s work. Wilson’s son, William, is not simply a dear friend of Johnson’s, he is also a heralded art historian. In an essay on Andy Warhol and Ray Johnson, William S. Wilson has written, “In the 1940s, both must have registered for the draft, but both were certainly mis-registered as ordinary men. Both worked with mis-registrations of images, as with Andy’s off-registrations in silk-screen prints, and Ray’s mis-registrations of people on his lists. Both men became artists who mis-registered a world that off-registered them, while each modified the public world in order to get it to match their private world.”³⁹ I can’t help but think of May Wilson when I read these riveting lines — fragmented and mis-aligned tonal breaks between object and shadow, between identity and difference. A woman of her generation, May Wilson spent the first 61 years of her life in a mis-registered identity — 1950s-normative bourgeois housewife. Like Ray Johnson, it would seem Wilson rearranged the surface of her artwork to match that mis-alignment of identity, that fundamental quality of fracture and multiplicity. The shadow may reflect more than we can see.

GEOSCOPE ALL AROUND

Henry Martin, art historian and friend of Ray Johnson’s, tells a story about a time when Johnson was asked to record an audio guide to accompany an exhibition of his works. Johnson declined, saying “Well, these collages are really like playing cards, and everybody gets a different selection; so every time they’re shown, they’re reshuffled and become a different story, a different (audio) tape ... the next time these works are shuffled and

shown, they'll bring up other people and images and ideas. It's constantly and kaleidoscopically different."⁴⁰ In the beginning of this essay, I wrote *Welcome to Planet Johnson*. After a careful walk through this exhibition, I think, in fact, we need no welcome. It seems to me that we are already here. Or perhaps it would have been better to have written *Welcome to Planet You*. Johnson's geoscope reveals ourselves to ourselves, and makes room for each of us in its seemingly one-man livery. We see the surfaces of our existence anew through Johnson's dizzying quantum-like lens — multiplicitous, indeterministic and contiguous terms of reality that speak to each of us intimately, instinctually. Perhaps this is Johnson's particular genius — the fact that his “world,” his art-life collage-scope, necessarily includes our own, our face in the mask, our own chopped fragments of human consciousness in the turn of the flattened and layered silhouette. Johnson saw himself in and via everything and everything in and via himself; by the very nature of that eyepiece, we are implicated — quantumly, definitively and joyfully implicated.

¹ William S. Wilson, jacket text for *The Paper Snake* by Ray Johnson (New York: Something Else Press, 1965).

² Ray Johnson, Randy Delbecke, and Diane Spodarek, “Ray Johnson Interview,” *Detroit Artists Monthly* 3, no. 2

² Ray Johnson, Randy Delbecke, and Diane Spodarek, “Ray Johnson Interview,” *Detroit Artists Monthly* 3, no. 2 (February 1968): 8.

³ John Baldessari in conversation with the author, September 2014.

⁴ Rosalind Constable, “Art Moves Downtown,” *New York*, January 12 1970, 41.

⁵ Ray Johnson has written repeatedly that he burned most of his early *Moticos* in Cy Twombly's fireplace in the late 1950s. However, there is some disagreement among scholars as to the specific details of this event.

⁶ Lynda Benglis in conversation with the author, September 2014.

⁷ William S. Wilson used the term “indeterminism” in a description of Johnson's work in conversation with the author; like so much of our understanding of Johnson's work, we owe him a great debt for this incising interpretation.

⁸ Chuck Close in Charlie Finch and Knight Landesman, “A Tribute to Ray Johnson” interview with Chuck Close, Mark Bloch, Richard Feigen and Jill Johnston, *Artbreaking*, WBAI-FM, 1995.

⁹ Jasper Johns quoted in Emma Brockes, “Interview: Jasper Johns, Master of Few Words,” *The Guardian*, July 26, 2004.

¹⁰ Ray Johnson in a 1965 letter to Nam June Paik. Quoted in Willam S. Wilson, “Ray Johnson: The One and the Other,” in *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, eds. Donna De Salvo and Catherine Gudis (New York: Flammarion, 1999), 167.

¹¹ Yoko Ono in conversation with the author, September 2014.

¹² Ray Johnson, letter to Yoko Ono (undated), collection of the Ray Johnson Estate.

¹³ The theory of Marilyn Monroe figuring as alter-ego in Johnson's work is still tenuous at best, but a very provocative notion worth pursuing. Frédérique Joseph-Lowery, *Ray Johnson...Dali/Warhol, and others, “Main Ray, Ducham, Openbein, Pikabia...”* (New York: Richard L. Feigen & Co., 2009), 29.

¹⁴ James Rosenquist in conversation with the author, September 2014.

¹⁵ Ray Johnson, “Untitled (Interview with Santa),” (1965), collection of the Ray Johnson Estate.

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- ¹⁶ James Rosenquist, *Paint Below Zero* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 10.
- ¹⁷ Robert Rauschenberg quoted in Moira Roth and Jonathan D. Katz, *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1998), 67.
- ¹⁸ Ray Johnson and John Held Jr., *Video Interview with Ray Johnson*, 14:57, December 2, 1977, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qWUxY-NoRIM>
- ¹⁹ Ray Johnson, untitled writing (undated), collection of the Ray Johnson Estate.
- ²⁰ Ad Reinhardt, “Nothing/”sch” word play” (May 16, 1955), Woodward Gallery collection.
- ²¹ Ad Reinhardt, “Free and Fluid/Matisse reclining figure” (1955), Woodward Gallery collection.
- ²² Ray Johnson, “JUNE 15 POEM FOR TIMOTHY BAUM,” in *Correspondence: An Exhibition of the Letters of Ray Johnson*, ed. Richard Craven (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1976), 8.
- ²³ William S. Wilson, *A Book About A Book About Death* (Amsterdam: Kuntsverein, 2009), 25.
- ²⁴ Ad Reinhardt, *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1953), 81.
- ²⁵ Edward Ruscha, interview by Paul Karlstrom, 1980-81. Oral Histories, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- ²⁶ Ray Johnson quoted in Clive Phillpot, *Ray Johnson on Flop Art* (London: Fernley Press, 2008), 29.
- ²⁷ Clive Phillpot, “Twenty-six Gasoline Stations that Shook the World: The Rise and Fall of Cheap Booklets as Art,” *Art Libraries Journal* 19, no.1 (1993): 4-13.
- ²⁸ Frédérique Joseph-Lowery, *Ray Johnson...Dali/Warhol, and others, “Main Ray, Ducham, Openbein, Pikabia...”* (New York: Richard L. Feigen & Co., 2009), 40.
- ²⁹ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1975), 27.
- ³⁰ Ray Johnson, *Not Nothing: Selected Writings of Ray Johnson, 1954 - 1994*, ed. Elizabeth Zuba (Los Angeles: Siglio, 2014), plate 104.
- ³¹ Henry Geldzahler, *Pop Art: 1955-1970* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1985).
- ³² Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of The Work of Art,” in *Off The Beaten Track*, eds. Julian Young and Kenneth Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 31.
- ³³ Charles Olson, *Collected Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 138.
- ³⁴ David Bourdon in “Returned to Sender: Remembering Ray Johnson,” *Artforum* 33, no. 8 (April 1995) 106, 111.
- ³⁵ *Elvis Presley #1*, ca. 1956-57, 10 1/4 x 7 1/2, collection of William S. Wilson.
- ³⁶ May Wilson quoted in “Invoice #4” unpublished interview with William S. Wilson, 1965.
- ³⁷ Ray Johnson quoted in “Invoice #4” unpublished interview with William S. Wilson, 1965.

³⁸ Ray Johnson provided May Wilson with the gay male pornography she used in her *Snowflake* pieces between 1965-66; when Wilson moved from the Chelsea Hotel to the apartment building next door in 1966, it was Johnson who carried the snowflakes over. “The word SNOW was important to Ray, as in writing ‘is now,’ and using snow as an image of that which would melt into evanescence and evaporation.” William S. Wilson, in conversation with the author, October 2014.

³⁹ William S. Wilson, *A Book About A Book About Death* (Amsterdam: Kuntsverein, 2009), 36.

⁴⁰ Henry Martin, “Should an Eyelash Last Forever? An Interview with Ray Johnson” (conducted in 1982) *Lotta Poetica* 18 (February, 1984): 4.