

BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

DOSSIERS

1997

№

4



(Ray Johnson)

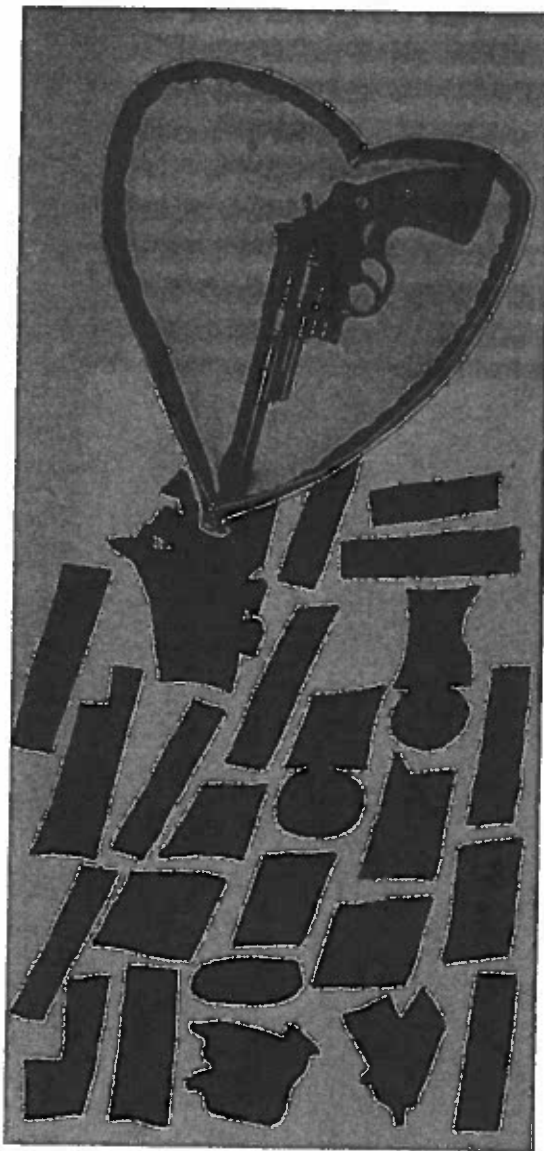
With Ray: the Art of Friendship

I. A Work In Progress¹

Talking with Ray, I became aware of how he was listening, different enough from other people to be noticeable, and less invasively than I was used to. We last talked on that final Friday in January 1995, in his brief collect-call announcing a mailart event that he was going to perform. We had first talked when I visited his studio in the autumn of 1956. He hadn't seemed interested in where I had come from, or in anything about me or my background, but only in the immediacies of my speech—the words I had to improvise in his apartment because I was seeing collages and a style of life I had not seen before. With Ray, one either was spontaneous or one was not going to hold his interest for very long.

Ray's remarks threw me off balance, and if I improvised a remark to restore my balance—taking off from something concrete and actual in the room with us—he paid attention. His verbal antics seemed to show that he enjoyed what I was saying about his visual antics. I was hearing words used as I had never heard them used before—not in a practical or social or ordinarily friendly style—but with the clearest focus on odd and minute details which, the more they were seen in close-up, the more indeterminable or large in meaning they became. If this was poetic, it was poetry as point-blank, here-and-now immediacy. As I learned later, being immediate was his way of being intimate. In that first meeting and in subsequent events with Ray, the feeling was of trapdoor after trapdoor opening, and of me falling through into reality.

I remember my delight and astonishment, and while I couldn't have thought about it then, the effect of the astonishment was to save me from my sense that the world was no more than I was projecting as my world. I knew that I didn't have it in me to conceive anything like those collages, and I couldn't have merely

**Muff Pistol**

1958

6 7/8" x 3 1/4" (17.5 x 8 1/4cm)

collage

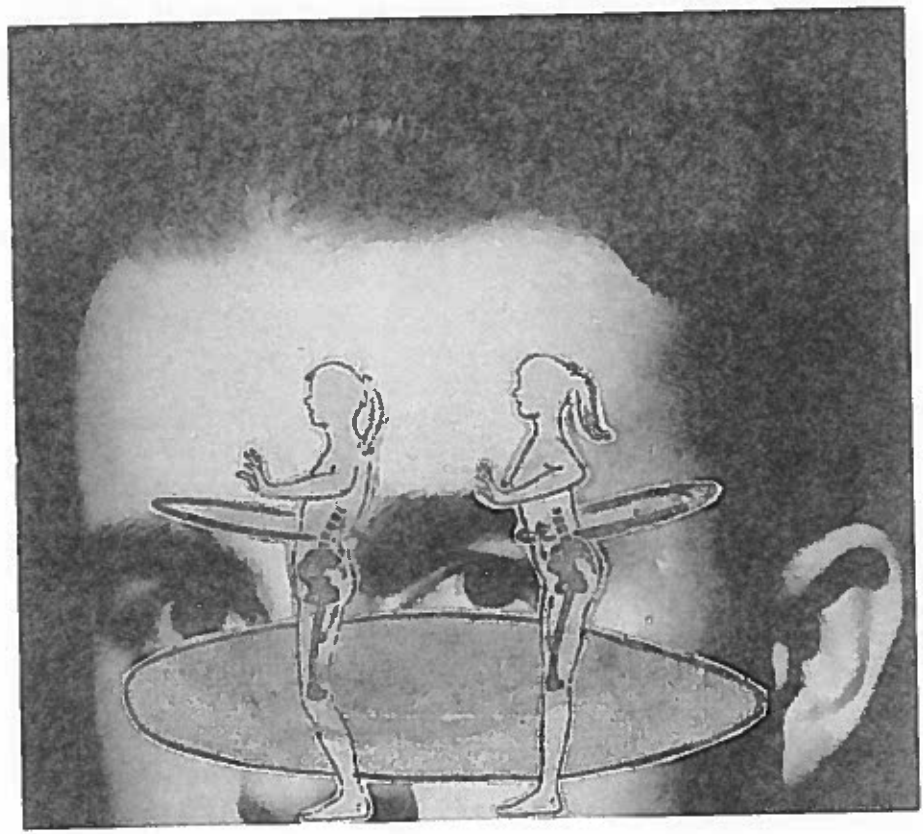
collection of William S. Wilson

imagined the people I was with—Norman Solomon and Ray Johnson. So while I had sometimes felt myself in charge of appearances, as though my experience was of images I was throwing forward onto a screen, I certainly wasn't inventive enough to project Ray Johnson. He became for me one of the touchstones of the actual. Ray's subjectivities were so well demonstrated in his work that they functioned for me as an intransigent objectivity. He was another lesson being taught to me by Norman — whose "show-and-tell" was often to point at that which spoke for itself, self-validatingly—so that I would say to myself the lesson he wanted me to learn. Norman's life was like a living theater for me, with real people doing the laughing and crying, and firing an occasional gunshot. He sometimes referred to

his art as "Collisionism", understanding the illusion of movement in an art as the effect of conflict, as in both montage and collage.

Norman Solomon and Ray had both been at Black Mountain College, although at different times. Dorothea Rockburne, an artist who had also studied at Black Mountain, where she became acquainted with Ray and later with Norman, had introduced Norman to Ray in a ten-cent store in Manhattan about 1950. I had met Norman in Baltimore in 1955, when I was 23 or 24 years old. Now Norman was taking me to meet Ray Johnson.

Norman led me onto and off a bus, and then we walked down Dover Street and up the flights of stairs in the tenement building. Ray showed us collages while Norman showed Ray and me to each other. In my private aesthetic, I feel and think that something is beautiful when I desire to conceive something with it. These collages, shown one by one in that rather antiseptic little apartment, gave my thinking yet another new life. The collages were separate, but images recurred, so that a fluid continuity was constructed, not quite like a film in which still frames yield to an illusion of movement, but quite like the movements of consciousness from image to image.⁷ Looking at the collages in 1956 was like thinking a new thought in a new way. I took away with me some new ideas.



Twin Hoops
1963
4 1/2' x 4" (114 x 102 cm)
collage
collection of William S. Wilson



Gargoyle

1958-60

6 1/4" x 5 1/4" (15.9 x 13.5cm)

collage

collection of William S. Wilson

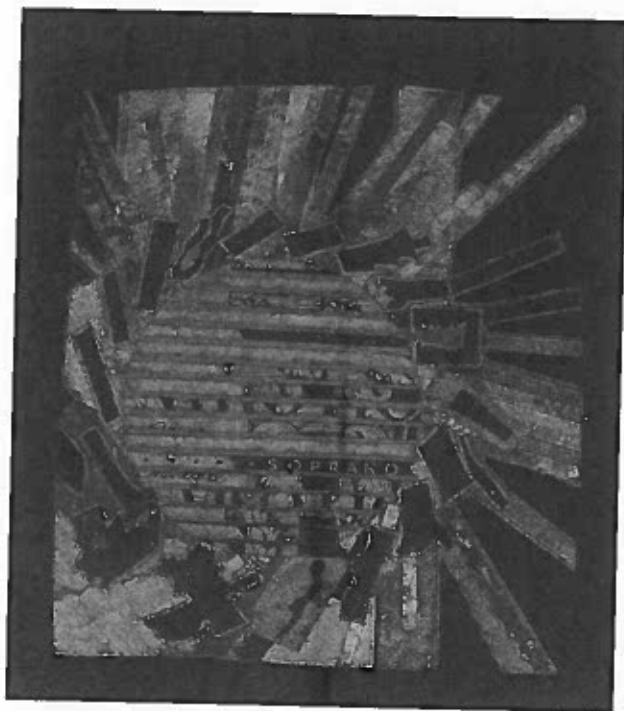
II. The Art

Sometimes I say that my experience of a beautiful work of art is marked by an increase in the available energy—energy for thinking and feeling. Looking at the collages which Ray showed by moving them from a high stack at the left, placing each one-by-one flat on a table, then moving it to the stack growing on the right, I felt clarifications in my thinking. I would recognize Marcel Marceau in one collage, and then recognize not merely Marceau, but the identical photographic image on a different scale in another collage. The recognitions of the sameness along with the differences entailed a reversal for me of ideas related to Abstract Expressionism, where nothing was repeated as a bilateral symmetry or any other form of duplication. To recreate a mark made with paint was contrary to using the energy of an emotion to reach through the painterly hand in a unique expressive gesture. Ray was doing something different, sometimes thinking with abstract reversals of intensely particular images. He frequently used identical images and other duplications that had different meanings for him than they had for the Abstract Expressionists.



Annie Was a Lady
1957-58
7 7/8" x 4 3/4" (20 x 12 cm)
collage

One could see at a glance Ray's truanancies from that New York School of painters—his trespasses wherever he saw an implied "No Trespassing" sign. I saw immediately the value of Ray's work, but I believed at the time that Abstract Expressionism was the fullest



"Soprano"
10 1/2" x 7 1/2"
collage
collection of William S. Wilson

and truest painting. The split in my judgments and consciousness would remain for half a decade and more as I saw Ray doing something wonderful, but something I almost didn't want done.³ He was aware of my passionate commitments, and mailed me teasing satiric references to Barnett Newman, Franz Kline, and others.

Norman Solomon, the third person standing by at this first meeting, was a photographer and a painter, and I had learned not to make

comments about his paintings. Once when I entered the loft on Greene Street and made admiring remarks about his painting of Jackson Pollock, *Jack the Dripper and Lulu*, he said that he hadn't painted it in two minutes, so I couldn't have seen it in two minutes. He sat me down to stare at a brick wall in prolonged silence—for such a very long time that it became a "session of sweet silent thought."⁴ The lesson took, and I still see paintings at a different tempo from that of some friends. And for me most criticism under-reads paintings as an experience of visual thinking about possible realities.

There at Ray's apartment, Norman was rather quiet. Because I could feel that my remarks were welcome, I tentatively and then volubly talked about the design and composition and space. These qualities were like nothing I had ever seen before, yet they seemed to solve some problems I would define only after seeing these solu-

tions. I was used to doing "crits" of paintings with friends in Baltimore, so I found much to say and I said it, mostly about the novelty of design—the visual thinking. Ray seemed glad that I felt the impact of his designs. He said that "design" was just what people didn't like about his work. Nothing was said about letters or phone-calls or a follow-up visit. I don't think that I was invited to return, and didn't expect to see him again.

On the busride back, Norman told me that if I mailed something to Ray, he would mail something to me, so I did that, and Ray did. His first envelope to me is preserved.⁵ Ray had cut out a hole in the envelope so that part of the contents was legible on the surface. It is incorrectly addressed to Bill "Miller".⁶ Forty years later, and ready to resist certain modes of psychoanalysis of Ray, I nevertheless can see the outline of an unconscious thought in the word "miller", for not only does "mill" rhyme with "bill", but a mill brings pressure to bear on materials to transform them by mashing them.⁷



In those early days, Ray seemed to rely on glue to keep papers adhering in collages, but he began to collect telephonebooks, and by the time he lived on Suffolk Street he used a pile of them to bring weight to bear on the images. He asked to be photographed sitting on a stack of phonebooks, but as with much of Ray's imagery, the information is upsidedown and might also be seen in a reversal: he could certainly have been photographed with a stack of phonebooks sitting on him.

At issue in his uses of phonebooks for pressure on his glued papers is an image of mash and of mashing. After all, one needs to write "Do not bend" on envelopes precisely because anything dropped into a mailbox of the United States postal system is likely to be mashed. Ray himself mashed things as a clue to others that he wanted in some way to be mashed, and as a model for how he desired to be under a weight. He wrote to Richard Lippold that he was looking forward to "hugs".⁸ He had a feeling of an interior

Mencken
1956 (1970)
15" x 9 7/8" (38.1 x 25.1 cm)
collage
collection of William S. Wilson

emptiness, and if a weight bore down on him, flattening him, then the dimensions of the emptiness might be reduced. He was interested in flat fish because they were not hollow, and in octopi as squeezing their prey into flatness.⁹

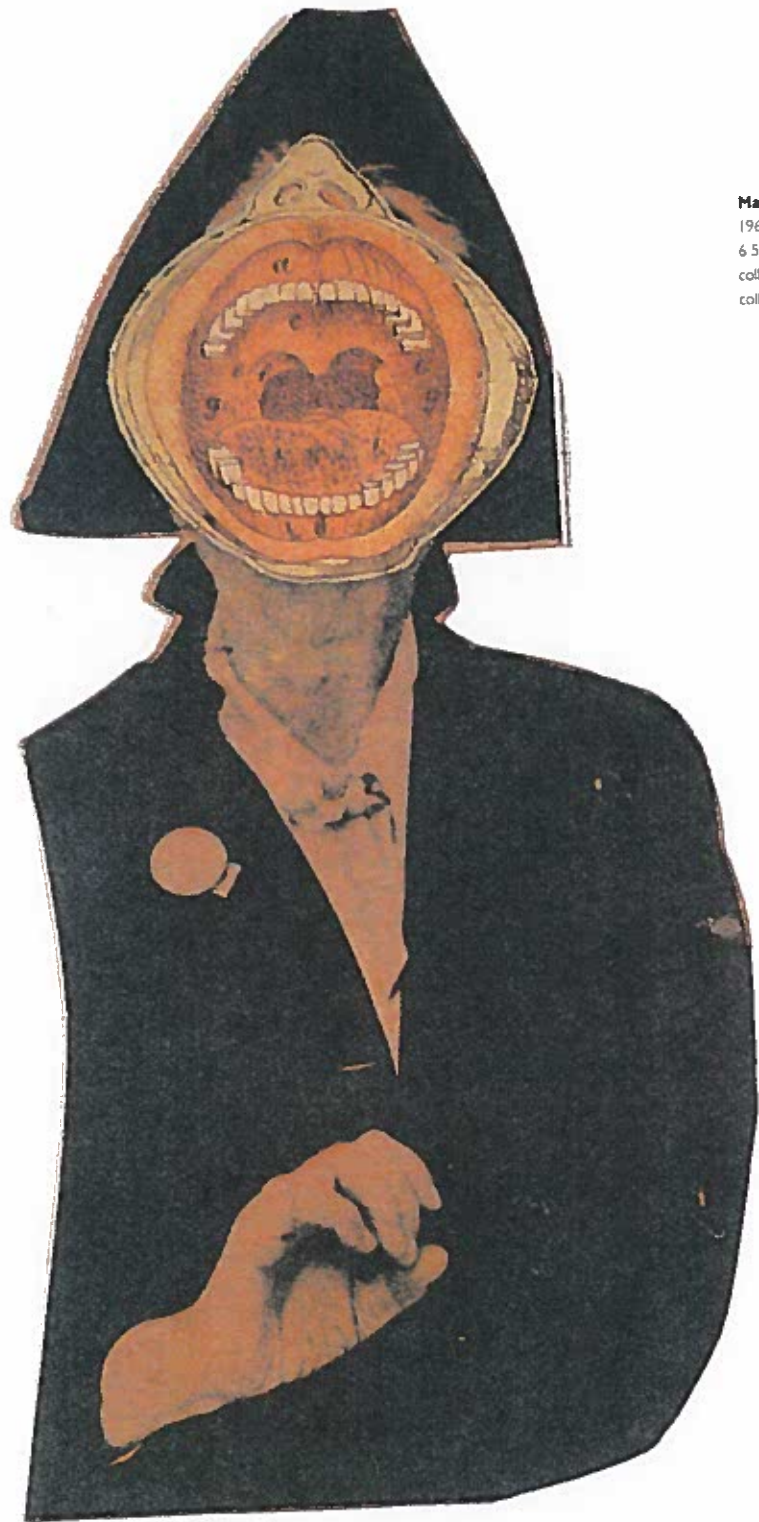


St. Jacobs Oil
1962-63
6 1/2" x 3 1/2" (16.5 x 9cm)
collage
collection of William S. Wilson

For himself as an image bodying forth an idea, Ray achieved the effect of reducing the inner emptiness, not by filling it, but by staying thin. The emptiness was experienced as a kind of Nothing, or Void,¹⁰ and Ray found many angles from which to point to various nothings and various voids.¹¹ A dream had the correct evanescence for him, as for a moment it was everything in consciousness, yet later was almost nothing. He recorded a dream in a note of April 11, 1963: "I dreamed last night that I lived in an apartment looking out on the ocean and a friend and I sat on

the balcony in the early morning watching a manta ray splashing around in the choppy water." Thus Ray saw a ray in the ocean, and joked with manta-rays in his collages by spelling manta as "mantah", thereby producing the words "man" and, in reverse, "hat". Thus a man with a hat in Manhattan could be a "ray" in a chain of permutations and metamorphoses.¹²

I want to pay attention to a small detail in that dream: "a friend and I sat on the balcony." In the dream, Ray had a view of a manta ray from the perspective of a balcony. The friend is part of the perspective—that Ray is looking at water, not splashing in it like that oceanic ray. The balcony with the friend is an image of his life in art looking out on the ocean, looking from an apartment toward a truer home.

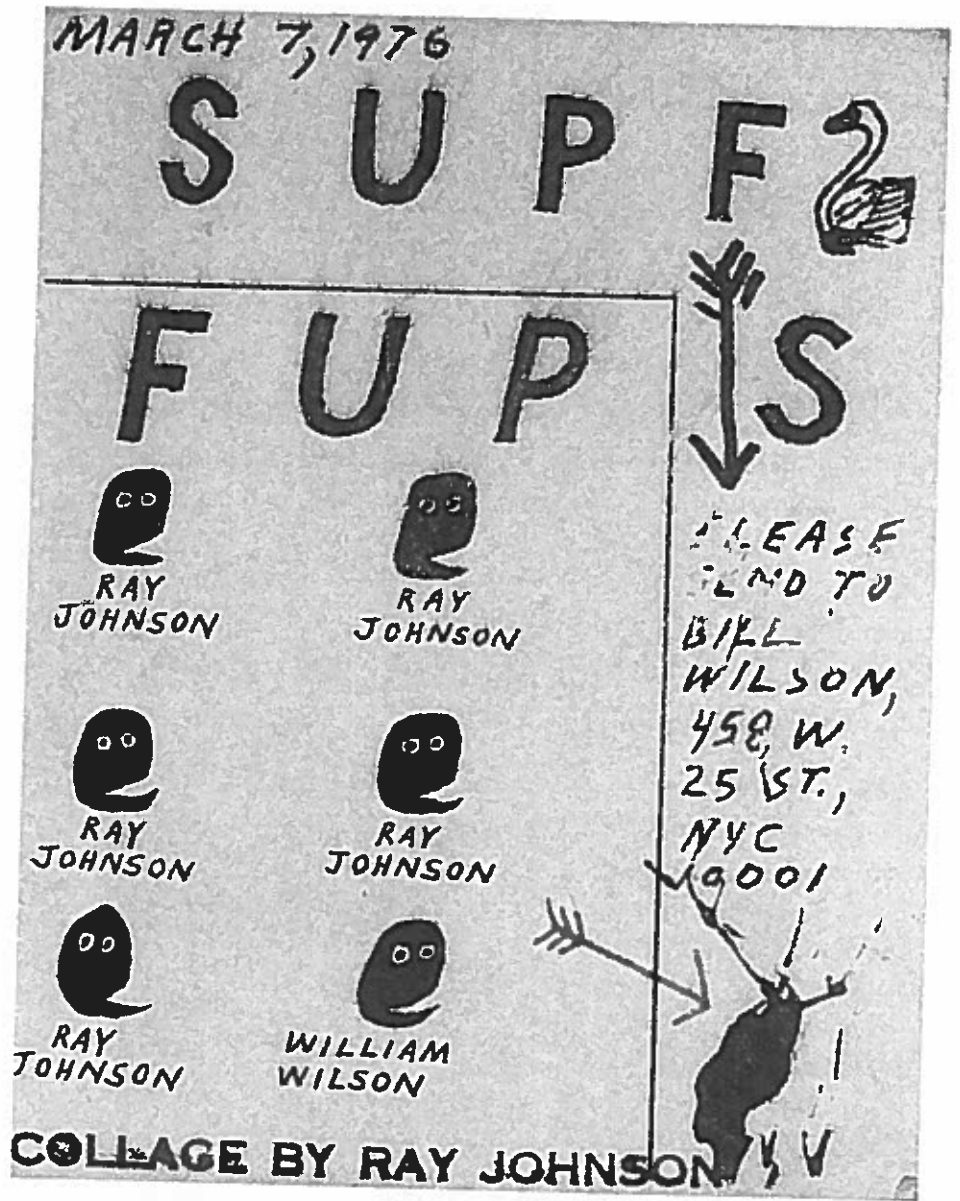
**Marianne Moore**

1963

6 5/8" x 3 1/4" (16.7 x 8.2cm)

collage

collection of William S. Wilson



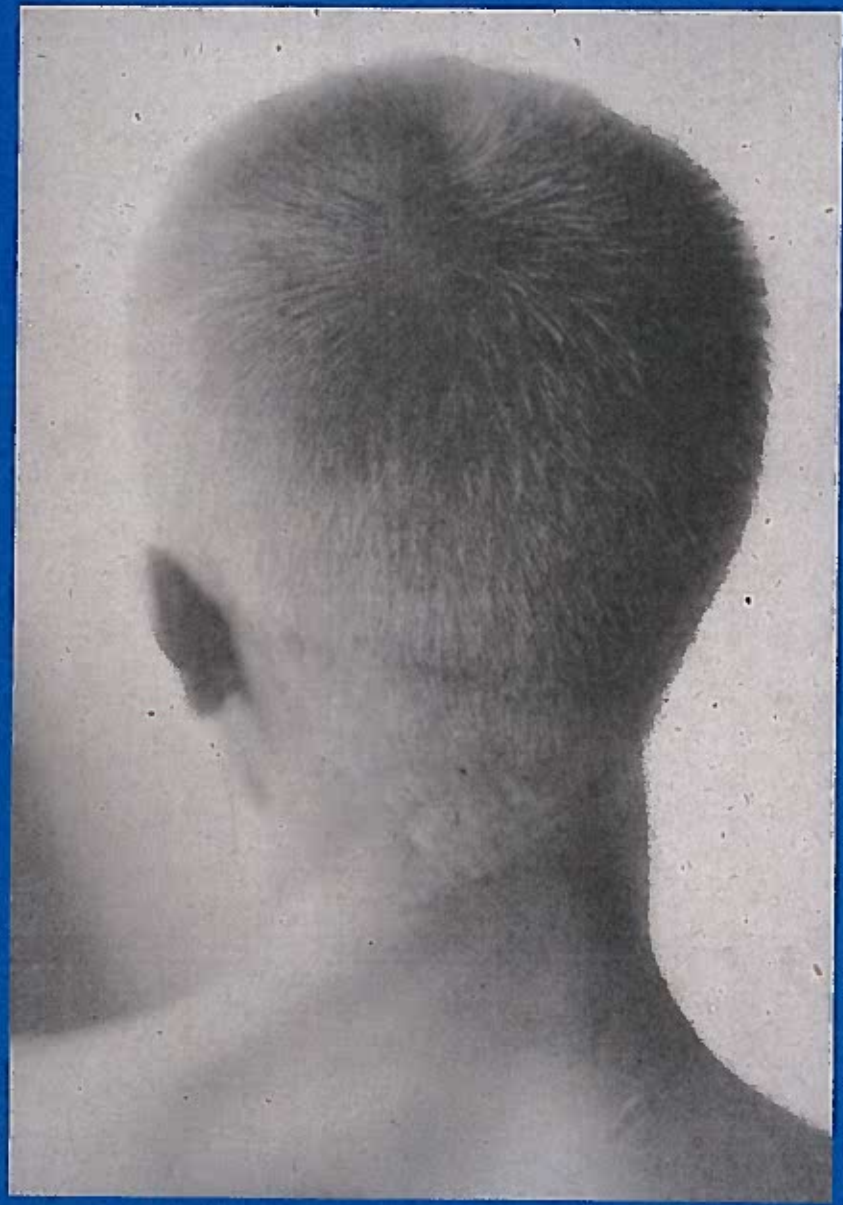
SUPP FUPS

1976

4 1/4" x 3 3/8" (108 x 8.6 cm)

mixed media on board

collection of William S. Wilson



ISBN 0-9649020-4-4