

At Black Mountain College, Ray Johnson's exercises with Josef Albers were rectangular, if only because of rectangular paper. Ray's art immediately after B.M.C. is so far unknown, with several years unaccounted for. He may have returned to B.M.C. for a visit, the year Ben Shahn visited and drew a picture for Charles Olson, "Glyph for Charles." One of the images in Shahn's drawing was a house as an image of the mind, where the house has a dark interior the way a head has a dark interior mind. Wherever Ray first saw the image, perhaps in a common source known to Shahn or to Charles Olson, the image was drawn by Ray until the early 1990s. He drew glyph-like figures throughout his art, throughout his life. Some early drawings survive on paper, some in photographs from 1953, when he is usually drawing and painting rectangles. But by 1953 his rectangles are set in motion by becoming vertical diamonds, that is, rectangles are seen on their sides, seen from an adjusted angle. By 1955, his rectangles are home-made and handdrawn, so that the euclidian-platonic idealist rectangle is no longer a threat to spontaneous construction.

Little evidence survives from Ray's years from 1948 to 1955, with transitions among styles, methods and materials, and with overlaps of several styles at the same time, as in rectilinear geometric figures overlapping curvilinear, biomorphic and cartoony figures. Gradually he works with such irregular rectangles that a perfect rectangle would impinge on their right to their irregularities. Somewhere between 1950 and 1955, because earlier Christian Science seems not to have worked a cure for homosexuality, Ray experimented with a psychiatrist or psychoanalyst, but thereafter he disdained attempts to interpret the mysterious interior of a person from surfaces. He began to glue down images cut from magazines, and to mark surfaces with fragments of codes, signs and marks, but such illegible marks could not be read from surfaces toward depths. With legible images and forms, art was a puzzle, but with illegibilities and spatial obscurities, art was a mystery, adequate to the mysteries of existence and non-existence. Surfaces were often so opaque, with so little an illusion of space, that a viewer's attention was held to the surface, unable to pass through the surface toward meanings which have no surfaces.

Somewhere in the early to middle 1950s, Ray worked as studio assistant to Ad Reinhardt, and became a member of the American Abstract Artists. As though jumping on see-saws, he struggled with the rights of rectangles over the content and the style of his seeing. Defending his rights to his irregularities, he began working with images cut from popular magazines, pictures of people in popular entertainment. He had in high-school already sold a drawing of Carmen Miranda to be printed as a greeting-card. In 1963, he included Miranda in his Book about Death, and he was still drawing her image in the 1990s. Ray's uses of images from entertainment overlapped popular entertainment with art. An entertainment in the 1950s is an applied art where commitment to truth is not an issue. Yet entertainment can be reconstructed into art, where the commitment is not to the content of the entertainment, but to the art.

Ray begins to construct collages he calls Moticos, an anagram of "osmotic," used as both singular and plural, like sheep and fish. As "moticos" was first used, a neologism marking a visual language which was still under construction, images could be rearranged as whimsically as the os, mot, and ic and osmotic were rearranged into

moticos. An implication of an anagram is that a whole can be broken up into readymade parts, whereupon the parts can be reordered, a new use for the old. Such new interrelations construct new meanings. At first, a moticos was almost always a decidedly unrectangular shape, not recognizable or nameable like euclidian rectangles. Rectangles had visual reversals in their symmetries, but such reversals of symmetry yielded no discoveries of anything unplanned and never seen before. Reversals, with or without symmetries, became the principles that governed Ray's designs with images. Reversals of abstract symmetrical figures, without discoveries, were buoyant, unburdened by the weight of thoughts about irreversible events in life. His reversals like palindromes were among his trauancies from irreversible actions and from deepening commitments. In his art, he went to and fro between reversals and non-reversals, planning his escapes from the dark interior of the house of the mind.

From the available evidence, but without precise dates, during 1954-55 Ray made irregular moticos, but also some rectangular collages with a few found images glued on raw cardboard, usually shirt-boards from the laundry that washed and ironed Richard Lippold shirts. Thus the material, cardboard shirt-boards, had implications for the whole economy of labor and money, for the systems of labor in relation to any systems of visual art, and for reuse of materials rather than waste of materials. Occasionally, Ray glued a non-rectangular moticos and a rectangular collage by the name "moticos," with its recollection of "osmotic."

Some of Ray's meanings and values were not conveyed within the moticos, but by what he did with them.

"Moticos" could not, as objects, convey Ray's themes of space and of time as he was experiencing spatio-temporality within the theories and practices of Zen Buddhism and of Dao. In 1955, helping Ray to stage an event, Ray's friend Suzi Gablik brought a photographer, Elizabeth Novick, to Dover Street, where Ray lived and worked in two tiny one-room apartments, with a bathtub in the one room which was also a kitchen. The bathroom was usually covered to become a table, so that two functions were together in one object, like a shirt-board as background for a collage, and like one bodily part with two functions, reproductive and excremental. That day Ray carried boxes of moticos down seven flights to be photographed in sunlight.

By 1955, with Ray's philosophies in his hands and materials, he has worked out a philosophy with experiments on rectangles. Euclidian rectangles have essences that precede their existence. In contrast, Ray's rectangles have existence that precedes their essence, if they even have an essence. After World War II, "Essence precedes existence" has reversed into "existence precedes essence." However, Ray worked with and acted on a more extreme plane, where for him, existence precedes only existence, and existence precedes only non-existence.

By 1956, Ray has made hundreds of collages of varying shapes, most of them more non-rectangular than rectangular. These collages were cut up, with their fragments used in later collages, even into the 1990s. So one element in a collage might appear and

reappear across decades, in an experience of time, not with pressures from the past pushing the present into the future, but with images from the past surfacing in the present as modifications of the present. Old images became whatever they became by subordinating their old implications to fresh immediacies, and by appearing next to new, clear, and distinct images which were rendered hard to see. Surfaces of images of varying ages were scratched, abraded, scarred with cuts, or washed over with paint, in order to call attention to surface qua surface, to shift from interpretation in general terms towards uninterpreted minutely specifiable anomalous events.

The pressures on time, for things past to surface in the present among immediacies, were matched with pressures on space. Abstract unspecifiable horizonless space yielded to construction of a horizon in the foreground. Thus temporal immediacies combined with spatial indeterminacies. Any conclusions were rendered so inconclusive that further conclusions became impossible. Completeness was rendered incomplete when perfections were rendered imperfect. Ray learned how to succeed in failing, teaching himself how to be inspired by failure to use fragments of “failed” collages in new constructions. While legible shapes remained answerable to ideal forms, illegible shapes and obscure marks claimed the rights to free-hand spontaneities.

When Ray glued a fragment onto another surface, the effect was that the one surface became two different levels of surface, two spatial levels, while the vertical edges of fragments added areas of surface that had not been seen before. The collage then had two or more different spatial levels, brought together from two or more different times, adjoined into one whole moment of contemplation. On the surface of the collage, two spaces became one space, while two and more times became one time. That is, one surface consisted of two or more spatial surfaces, and one time subsumed two or more times. The spaces were more than the space of a flat cardboard, with the least possible spatial illusion. The times were more than the time of a clock, they were pools of temporal incidents, without the illusion of possible travel away from the present into a past. The future would have to shift for itself.

Spatially, a gain in the number of levels of surface combines with a gain in surface-area. The gain of surface is a gain in the meaning of surfaces. With collages in which surface qua surface is a value, the surface implies that surface is the best that one can know, because surface is as much as one is ever going to know. Cutting into surfaces of cardboard made edges and sides of fragments which increased areas of surface, while scratching the surface in order to frustrate illusions. The layering of fragments made edges in time, so that unit of time became a horizontal plane of edgy visual moments. Ray once made a work in which he begins a letter, “Dear Edge.” Since the letter is not continued beyond “Dear Edge,” it continues to be no more than an edge, yet thereby it cuts into space and cuts into time. Some collages become a surface of edges. Parts of Ray Johnson’s structuring of life and art could now be described in terms of edges, from his tendency to move toward the edges of groups and of systems, to his introducing edges in otherwise continuous surfaces. Many edges are literal material in his collages, but edges become themes when an edge marks a horizon in space or in time. Many collages by Ray Johnson are fields of edges in order to puncture aesthetic illusions, to keep such illusions

engaged with materials, rather than combining with ideas which float up to combine with other ideas.

Collages from 1953 might contain a clipped image from popular magazines, newspapers and books, surfaces which are not superficial, because they manifest Populist politics and Populist aesthetics. The moticos broke the rules of rectangularity in order to achieve what breaking rules achieves, which is immediacies and spontaneities as responses after deregulations, mischiefs and trauancies. Such breakdowns in rules reveal the very edges of the rules which breakdowns have constructed. An emerging visual event might be continuous, but a new edge is a new discontinuity, cutting into the wholeness of the work. When wholeness is no longer a continuous whole surface, then the wholeness must raise above material wholeness, becoming as complex as times and spaces with numerous interior edges. A whole like a hard-edge rectangle get displaced by a whole which is an unlimited field subsuming edges. “Dear,” in the salutation “Dear Edge,” is an address introducing a message, but “dear” is also an adjective claiming a high value, so that “Dear Edge” is an expression of fondness for an edge. Gradually, with his participations in Zen, as with haiku, and his participations in Dao, as within oceanic swaying forces, Ray’s becoming became for him like becoming part of the wave which builds as it surfaces from unknown depths, unfurling into nothing much on the beach, where the edge of the sand meets the edge of the sea. Perfect rectangles do not apply to Zen, Dao, I Ching, or to oceanic waves.

Once, according to sketchy details, Ray had gone further into the Christianity of his family by penetrating as far as The Church of Christ Scientist, hoping to be healed by faith. But then he zigzagged out of transcendental monotheistic religions toward the immanences of Zen Buddhisms and Dao. In the 1950s, he often worked at Orientalia Bookstore in the shipping room, unwrapping books from Asian nations, so that the trash-bin became a reservoir of art-supplies. A Japanese magazine published the first documents about him in April, 1957. He responded to a letter from the editor by writing his letter within the outline of a bottle, thus as a letter- in-a-bottle to be cast into the sea. Ray’s words were translated from English to Japanese, from code to code. Translation of an element from one language or code into another language or code became a method of thinking with changes from one set of rules to another set of rules, with no rules for what happens between two sets of rules. Ray was unwilling to obey the rules of a transcendental monotheistic religion, so he tried to teach himself to obey the rules of immanences. The promptings within him pushed him toward actions which seemed as though they had never happened before, and which had to make up their rules as they went along.

Ray’s study and practice of Zen did not quite follow even the rules of Zen as promulgated in the United States. His Zen was often an anomalous practice, constructing an atmosphere, an attunement with a tone, rather than an imposition of clear and distinct ideas which distorted the flow of mood. Even when Ray collaged sharp-focus images, by 1955 he collaged those elements into atmospheric fields, more a fluctuating atmosphere than a grid of rationalized lines. At B.M.C., he had glued an irregular piece of paper onto cardboard, then pin-pricked the paper to make holes which represent a field of stars. The

holes are not the first or last time he reifies nothingness, that is, he uses something to represent nothing, and uses absence to conjure up presence. Because he found less truth in explicit statements than in a mood conveyed by a collage, these collages are small paintings of atmosphere in which sharp definition would be too explicit for visual meditation; where nothing is contemplated as something; and where surface is called attention to as surface. Surface qua surface sets surface in motion. The aesthetic illusion, the wholeness, hovers above the material surface, but so near to the surface that non-material illusion is scratched by the material surface. Scratching the surface of aesthetic illusion with materials is a religio-philosophic event, not aspiring toward the infinite, as a worshipper of the transcendental might do; and not seeking to see beneath surfaces, as interpretative psychoanalysis might try to peer through events toward underlying forces. Ray's collages conceal any depths in order to reveal his satisfactions with surfaces. Surfaces suffice, in his experiences and in his art, both of which are finite, but unbounded.