

Ray Johnson Aboveboard

Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.
If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses --
As, for example, the ellipse of the half-moon --
Rationalists would wear sombreros.

Wallace Stevens

Ray Johnson liked to rescue events from sinking into somber depths of analysis. In 1966, he rescued Marianne Moore's tricorn hat from my interpretations. Inspired by Wallace Stevens, who had been a literary friend of Moore's, I was trying to write an essay about Marianne Moore's hat and Ray Johnson's pictures of it. I titled the draft, "A Picture Hat." The theme, open to revisions, was that the shape of the hat which protects the head from the sun and rain resembles the shape of the imagination that protects the mind from raw reality. If a hat is worn indoors, where it doesn't protect the brain, it can only be protecting the mind or the soul. After reading my draft, Ray then set an example of how to write by writing his own essay, "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore?", dated November 2, 1966. It is reproduced in Ray Johnson: correspondences, Wexner Center/Flammarion.

I was adapting an idea derived from Claude Lévi-Strauss, while Ray was in no way analyzing her hat, but entering it as an image in his montage of life. Yet he was listening to me on the meanings of adornments, for in 1968 he responded to an interviewer's question about a death's-head ring, "...in fact I wanted to wear all eight rings today, but I misplaced these three. But I'm very interested to read, I think he's a French anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss." Sevin Fesci asks, "Oh, yes, yes. Did you read *Sad Tropics*?" Ray responds: "I have not read his books, no" (Archives of American Art 40: #3)." He had not read Lévi-Strauss, but had listened attentively when I had explained to him that for Lévi-Strauss an adornment like jewelry (a death's-head ring) or a decorative hat (Moore's tricorn hat) was protection for the soul, the way functional clothes protect the body, yet more the way flesh clothes the bones of the skeleton. Since his drowning I

have published unrepentant analyses of Ray's immediacies, I have meditated slowly on his spontaneities, and I continue to revise thoughts about his improvisations.

Sometime late in October Ray and I sat in Keller's Bar, a rather rough waterfront bar with drunk seamen, prostitutes, a few men slumming or trolling for sailors, and a lively jukebox. Ray would select a record so that when its music filled the air, he could point toward it, as he pointed toward a taste of 7-UP, toward the letters U P, UP, toward the touch of a fabric, and toward details like a necktie or a tattoo. His attention constructed a sensory collage that hung suspended within an event until it dispersed, becoming as though nothing, after having been something for a moment.

These moments of haiku were the background to the foreground, the booth in Keller's where we spread papers on the surface of the table. Ray kept an eye on both doors, openings through which a novelty might accidentally emerge. Accepting a random addition to any scene, he would construct an episode into new immediacies and new indeterminacies, a newly emerging composition of varied parts into a whole event. With a word or a glance, Ray could give a surface to a person, rendering the person into a visual image that then combined with an event the way an image combines with other images, meshing together the ideas they suggested. Such attention could make people and objects into images, each a plane of implications that could combine with the implications of other persons or objects, constructing a whole of interweaving and interanimating images, a construction of the moment that evaporated when the images reorganized into their next constellation.

The draft of the essay I read with Ray was about a thing, it wasn't much of a thing in itself. While I was thinking my way beneath surfaces, Ray was trying to hold himself above surfaces. In his collages, he called attention to a surface as surface by scratching it with sandpaper, or by gluing stuff that held to the surface without implying illusory spatial or intellectual depths. For him, the surface of indeterminate immediacies had its purpose, to set in motion responses that carried over toward other surfaces. In contrast, my statements of depths beneath surfaces tended to be thought with abstract objects, mediated by abstract concepts, and as determinate in statement as possible.

My essay quoted the Encyclopedia Britannica, 9th edition, on the tricorne hat as it derives from men's hats of the 17th century: "Still greater breadth of brim and a profusion

of feathers were fashionable characteristics of hats in the time of Charles II, and the gradual expansion of brim led to the device of looping or tying up that portion... .and ultimately, by the looping up equally of three sides of the low-crowned hat, the cocked hat which prevailed throughout the 18th century was elaborated.” That is, the brim had a tendency to exaggerate itself with excesses which were then tied up, so that an expansive style was restrained by formal disciplines.

However much the tricorne hat approached the pure triangle, it would never fulfill the criterion of perfect triangularity. Thus one theme of the triangular hat is that it can move toward abstraction, answerable to an abstract object like a perfect triangle, but as an object the hat moves into concreteness, surviving its adventures and misadventures in our specific history, especially within the military history climaxing with Napoleon. Because the hat adapted to changes from within and from without, once evolving feathers and brim so broad that it ceased to be functional, it gradually combined feelings of elation with questions of usefulness. Hence Moore’s apt words:

Ecstasy affords
the occasion and expediency determines the form.

The hats many women wore socially in New York during Moore’s early life were in no way functional, and in fact might be ruined by rain and wind. Those hats were images of the imagination, and were nothing but imaginary, suggesting that the mind of the woman was impractical, not to be tied down by a logic of a hat, which implies protection of the head. Such hats were not answerable to reason, but were capricious signs of capricious minds. Ray’s friend May Wilson had worn hats by Lily Daché and Mr John, displaying conspicuous consumption of useless and non-nourishing commodities. However after she began to construct assembled objects out of trash, she glued her hats into assemblages. She occasionally crocheted a hat as a gift to Ray Johnson, although less a practical hat than a prop for those two to use in their vaudeville flotant.

Those hats for women in society, perhaps worn for lunch at Schrafft’s, were a visual answer to the question, What do women want? The hats provided an answer for husbands: women want too much, and want more than is good for them, hence they must be governed by men for their own protection. The men judged themselves as reasonable

and functional, indulgently governing the women whom the men assigned themselves to protect. The plot of many movies from the 1930s is telegraphed ahead in the hats the male and female characters are wearing. Katherine Hepburn did not wear wildly fanciful hats. Watch for the moment a wife removes her dizzy hat, takes off her white gloves, and turns toward the husband, he who knows the good for her better than she does.

Moore's tricorn Napoleonic hat was androgynous, with a military air, suggesting an image that had survived historical forces, and picturing an imagination capable of military strategy and reason. Her hat was, and is, an image of her imagination as she kept it persistently answerable to experience. She praised New York (Manhattan) for its "accessibility to experience." And she aspired to an art of poetry as an imaginary garden with real toads in it. Marvelously, she mentioned that she wore her tricorn hat because her head was shaped like a hop toad. A toad is an image of experience without false illusions, like the toad before it is enchanted into a prince, who must become like a poet, a self-governing governor of images and themes. Moore used the hat to meditate on her modesty, to challenge herself, for while she wore it as armor for her soul, the hat revealed her imagination and her aspirations, so that she could not lie to herself about her modesty, and always had to review her renunciations.

Now while Ray used clippings from encyclopedias or dictionaries, and other reference books, both he and Moore used reference books more like Bower Birds adorning their bowers than like scholars confirming their hypotheses. Ray didn't use information to get into the substructure of an object or event that he was reacting to. He positioned surfaces at angles he could follow into a visual/verbal riff. He thought from one surface toward another surface, and while I could follow him and sometimes keep up with him, I did not surrender meaning, which for me required either looking through a surface toward an interior, or from a surface toward an idea about the surface.

When Ray peeled one postcard into two units, he was pointing toward the fact that there was nothing inside the postcard, that the surface concealed only another surface. Therefore we discussed both the novelistic meditation on surfaces and interiors, Snow White, by Donald Barthelme, brother to a friend of Ray's, Rick Barthelme; and The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon. In her way just as materialist with her medium, words, Moore's attention to each syllable galvanizes the material surfaces of

words, rendering them more translucent than transparent. Her readers read from words toward ideas, but also feel words as words, with their sensory qualities active in the experience. Either Moore or Johnson might have enjoyed a moment of rapport with John Ashbery: "But your eyes proclaim/ That everything is surface. The surface is what's there/ And nothing can exist except what's there."

Ray was flexible, and often requested my help or advice on his own researches. Then he would work on visual information he thought had become inert, hoping to revive its movement by adhering it to his wave of unfurling images. In that mood he pivoted the words of a song, "New York is such a lonely town,/ When you're the only surfer-boy around." Ray was like a frog perched for a moment on a lily pad before risking another leap through the surface into the pond: -- **frog**, pond, *splash*. One of his images, sometimes glued on envelopes to be dropped into the oceanic postal system, was the octopus, a sea-creature he associated with hugging the breath of life out of a person under the surface of the waters. He asked me to explain how or why Marianne Moore had misspelled the word "octopus" as "octapus" in her draft of a poem, as though she had been seized by the word "octopus" and pulled beneath her meticulous surfaces.

After my disheartening conversation with Ray, I revised "A Picture Hat," but did not complete it. In the meantime Ray wrote his essay, "Is Marianne Moore Marianne Moore?," his model to teach me how to compose a surface of indeterminate immediacies and immediate indeterminacies (I borrow abstract objects from Hegel, whose notions of identity and non-identity we had discussed in 1963). In our conversations both verbal and visual, the tension between us was usually constructive. I pushed for intellectual analysis of meanings with explicit continuities, while Ray pulled for successive moments on discontinuous surfaces, trusting to the continuum he could both observe and participate in. He worked and played to get friends and strangers to become observer/participants.

I think now of the "watch" in the sailor's watch-cap he sometimes wore, an image of his imagination as an attentive sailor, that is, a person who is floating on the surfaces, looking attentively across the surface of depths he must not let his ship to sink into. The elements in his visual and verbal collages can be thought of as themselves sailors, that is, as nomadic entities that can be moved from place to place, adhering to surfaces above

perhaps unfathomable depths. Ray enjoyed Norman Solomon's joke about the Hippies on the Staten Island Ferry, the first of whom says, "Look at all that water," and the second of whom replies, "Yeah, and that's only the top."

Thirty six years after conversing with Ray about hats, I still read hats as informative adornments. I have wondered if he wore a watch-cap to his drowning, and if it got mashed in the tides. Any hat worn indoors, like a purposeless tattoo and a piece of jewelry, displaying no practical functions, indicates that a person claims to have a "soul" to protect. That soul at its simplest is a focal point that a person's miscellaneous disorganized thoughts and feelings can be brought to bear upon, thereby achieving order within turbulence. A decorative hat continues to suggest the shape of the images that protect the soul, and/or the imagining mind, from undercooked reality.

So turning to words I wrote in 1966, some of them blurred by assumptions about men and women in that era, "A hat on a poet (a tricornered hat on Marianne Moore) is something that comes between the poet and sun and rain, the heat and cold, of the world... ..But of course a hat on a woman is not as useful as it is a protection against hot or cold social climates. It can be worn indoors, as the sign of a formality that protects from direct rays of feeling. ..." The repeated thought is that the hat is to the head as the shape of the hat is to the shape-making and shape-shifting imagination: "The tricornered hat is the symbol of the poet's imagination, shaping her own feelings and the feelings of others."

Of course sometimes a hat is less important as a shape than as a conventional hat, agreed upon in a society. Yet a conventional hat still conveys meanings, that is, it implies that the person wearing the hat can be trusted to conform to conventions in that society. Surely Ray read such hats at a glance. His visual thinking about men can be traced in their hats as drawn or collaged into his high-school scrapbook and notebook. While I have interpreted any object placed above the head toward an idea, only now do I understand the beach umbrella he bought for me in Connecticut, with the name WILSON in large blue letters. Perhaps he was advising me to shelter my mind from harsh realities beneath his imaginative gifts. I discarded the umbrella a few years before his drowning, certain that someone would retrieve it as a gift from the corner of the street.

When Marianne Moore describes a skunk, she differentiates it from weasel, chipmunk, ermine, cuttlefish and otters, not thinking her way toward the essence of a skunk, but placing a variety of images next to the skunk to contrast and compare. Johnson's mature work began with the representation of abstract objects like squares, circles and triangles, but gradually those ideal forms became the shapes formed by experience. Ray's pure triangles evolved on a human plane among inherited absurd shapes like the tricorne hat. I wrote of his pictured hat: "he has made it his own by painting it to look like a manta ray, that is, a Ray, himself. Beneath the hat or ray (hat spelled backwards is tah, which in Ray Johnson's concatenations yields mantah ray), human figures are constructed from choice fragments of old collages, glued down under Manhattan phone books." He had sent me a note where he printed in block-letters, under the words "very important," MAN TAH RAY.

With those fragments of collages, Ray pulled the human figure toward circles and squares, yet the tesserae pushed their own meanings into the compositions. "This use of old fragments in a new arrangement suggests that endurance, survival and renewal, that delicacy of perception consistent with strength of will, which is both method and theme of Miss Moore's poems. Her habit of quotation (sometimes of herself) is like his use of fragments from his own collages; her emphasis on the syllable is like his emphasis on small visual units. And these collage/paintings of a figure beneath a hat are, like the tricornered hat, and like Miss Moore's poems, proof of a determination to reconcile contours of thoughts and lineaments of feeling with the measured forms and coincidences of geometry. How else was the Brooklyn Bridge ("implacable enemy of the mind's deformity"---and which Ray Johnson lived beside, at 2 Dover Street) built?"

Ray Johnson and I each had a Cousin Robert. My cousin, Robert A. Wilson, paid a social call on Marianne Moore, who wrote a note to him afterwards about the toilet: "And I did not intend to let you go away without saying that the house was at your service – the bathroom at hand if you cared to use it" (February 9, 1963). Thus she was as realistic as she was imaginative, so belatedly offering the toilet that her words are hypothetical, making nothing happen. Her real toilet exists within her imaginary event. Years earlier Moore had paid a social call on Ray Johnson at 2 Dover Street, soldiering up many flights of stairs. Ray's bathtub was in his kitchen, and the toilet was a small

communal closet down the hall, with water in an elevated wooden reservoir, and no sink. Moore's twenty-minute formal visit, which in her etiquette was as long as a guest should stay, obviated use of the "bathroom."

Ray Johnson was a student of the imaginations of other people, especially verbal and visual artists, and often of Marianne Moore. Typically he responded to an image with another image, not an abstract idea, because he remained within immanences, eluding transcendentals. Moore, who was actively Christian, wore her tricorn hat in the spirit of American of sacramental transcendentalism. In that allegorical imagination, a hat can be read as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual imagination. Ray didn't think with images the way Moore did, but he did welcome real toads and toilets into his imaginary garden. As he wrote October 23rd, 1993, he rescued a real hat from an imaginary garden, a cemetery: "Bill—there/s this dumpster DUMPSTER I go to in a poor Italian cemetery. . . . Last week I found a perfectly new unused Marianne Moore TRICORN Hat."

William Smith Wilson