

## "Ray's a Laugh" Opens at Half Gallery in the Lower East Side

*Matthew Hassell*

Serving as a tantalizing example of artistic independence and wit, Ray Johnson is an artist of almost mythic proportions. Purposefully setting himself off tangentially from the focus of the art scene radar throughout his life, Johnson was an artist who was constantly testing the boundaries of his relationship to the exhibition environment. This seemingly self-deprecating professional nature makes paying honorable tribute to his genius within the gallery system a difficult situation at best. In no small feat, Half Gallery at 208 Forsyth St. in the Lower East Side has done just this in their current show, *Ray's a Laugh*.

Curated by Leo Fitzpatrick, the show selectively brings together a collection of hot younger artists working either in homage or along similar aesthetic lines and materials. Contributing artists include Dan Colen, Dash Snow, Nate Lowman, and Hanna Liden, among others. The show displays their work alongside a handful of pieces created by Johnson himself, making their visual and conceptual interplay quite apparent given the intimate setting of the gallery space. The size of Half Gallery not only heightens the sense of Johnson's influence between the works selected, but also serves as just the vital, grassroots kind of art space that can keep Johnson's legacy alive without tarnishing the gritty, subversive nature of his oeuvre.

Even the curation process involved in the conception of this show points back to Johnson. Having asked some artists to contribute works specifically aimed as tributes while others were selected for their likeness to his work regardless of their inspiration, the exhibition aptly displays the sneaky, free-associative nature of Johnson's influence.

Although Johnson will always be visible to art world academics, it's just this kind of veiled influence that needs the occasional nudge to ensure that it is not lost among the shuffle of today's new talent. As stated by Bill Powers, Head Curator and Owner of Half Gallery, "We hope that in showing Ray's work alongside some emerging artists he has influenced—whether directly or involuntarily—we can highlight the significance of his collages and mail art to a younger audience who may not be as aware of Johnson's legacy."

To my mind, this show accomplishes just that. If you decide to visit, go alone so as to fully absorb the interrelation of the works. Better yet, bring a young friend.