

THE MAILED ART OF RAY JOHNSON

by Clive Phillpot

(From the catalog)

Ray Johnson is a natural collagist, one of whose principal activities is bringing disparate entities into conjunction. His collages, especially those made after his period as an American Abstract Artist, have been intermittently exhibited and reproduced in books, catalogs, and magazines. The mid-fifties collages, which incorporate printed images of Elvis Presley and James Dean, are slowly entering the history books, usually as components of the early history of pop art. But Ray Johnson is not to be confined so easily within a single ism. Other of his collages are closer to the raw art of Jean Dubuffet, while displaying a funky inevitability all their own. Others, still, are very lyrical.

Although most of these inventive works exhibit a sensuous physicality, they also incorporate many of Ray Johnson's graphic inventions. His remarkable graphic abilities (at one time exercised, idiosyncratically, in the circumscribed fields of design and illustration as well as art), combined with his lettering skills, place much of his work closer to a tradition of illumination and pictorial texts. Certainly, there is a vital verbal component at the core of his creative process that manifests itself even in the least referential collages and reliefs.

In spite of a certain general level of awareness of the density and delights of these works, through their intermittent exposure and documentation, Ray Johnson is probably most widely known for his "humanoid" graphic creations and, above all, his bunny heads. These bodyless bunnies have evolved over the years, but at present they suggest across between Walt Disney's Goofy and Claes Oldenburg's Geometric Mouse. It is these creatures that most quickly evoke the phenomenon "Ray Johnson" around the world.

While many different names and words have been used as captions for representations of the bunny head, or, more recently, been embedded in them, suggesting that they may be portraits of the people named, Ray Johnson says that the bunny heads are actually a form of self-portrait, and that they change their character depending on the way he is feeling at any moment. This is certainly evident when he signs his letters with a bunny head or, recently, a buxus head. The frequent appropriations of his bunny heads by other artists (usually in homage to him, or for friendly reasons) therefore turn out to be images that index their makers' biography. Certainly, the bunny heads by other people, which regularly appear in the mail from so many countries, are subtly different in look and feel from Ray Johnson's.

In addition to the ubiquitous bunny heads, Ray Johnson frequently employs a woman's head that may well have an ancestor in Betty Boop. Both varieties of head occur in assemblies, each representing different people or entities, as do other shapes and figures from time to time, from ants to buttons to biomorphic abstractions. Ray Johnson often brings together the names of individuals in the art world and, indeed, other worlds, such as the movies, into a seating-plan format, or Meeting Seating, with or without serial images of heads or other devices. In addition, this activity is a wacky kind of classification of people or objects.

Ray Johnson is associated with several other media. He has conceived events and given performances; he has made books, such as *P/EEK/A/BOO/K/OFTHE/WEE/K*; he has designed buttons, such as *Venice Lockjaw*; and, in more traditional media, he has even made a sole water-

color of a watercooler! He has also done nothings. But the medium that he has made his own is mail art.

Mail art, simply defined, is art that utilizes the postal service, or, in a secondary manifestation, is art that, takes a form relating to postal products or apparatus—for example, artists' postage stamps and artists' rubber stamps. On many occasions, Ray Johnson has been named the father of mail art, and also the grandfather, and even the "sugar dada." As with most phenomena, a history of mail art can be cobbled together to give it ancestors, connections with the art of the past, or to validate it. People's desire for time-blessed roots is strange and strong. The futurists and dada artists are often dragged in as progenitors for mail art, but until Ray Johnson developed it as a distinct verbal-visual activity, from his early beginnings in the mid-forties, mail art was incidental and does not warrant separate treatment as a distinct form of art.

Ray Johnson's example and his legend have triggered a veritable explosion of mail-art practitioners, and, as is the case with many other pioneers in the arts and other disciplines, he has left a school in his wake—and a very unusual one. This school, open to all, is international. It has no name and no fixed membership; anyone can play. But schools do need rules. Thus, the principal public manifestation of the school, the mail-art exhibition, is conducted according to standard operating procedures. Anyone may announce and organize such an exhibition, and decide upon a theme, but every work submitted must be exhibited, and each participant must receive a record of the complete exhibition, whether a simple checklist, address list, catalog, or booklet.

Although this democratic process operates under the rubric of art, it has much more to do with communication and networking—the latter concept owing its application in the art world principally to Robert Filliou. Looking for finished works of art in a mail-art show, or, more particularly, highlighting or selecting the most creative works, is not only contrary to the rules of the network, it is also inappropriate. Nonetheless, there is a low level of wit and insight in many mail-art exhibitions. Since there are so many calls for participation, it would seem that those artists who feel they must support every manifestation tend to issue formulaic or signature pieces, or what amount to press releases on their latest activities and accomplishments, often with little relevance to the theme of the exhibition. Even so, the mail-art networks that come into public view through such exhibitions or their documentation are extraordinary phenomena with immense potential. They may presage anew art paradigm by utilizing not only the postal system but also, and increasingly, linked computers.

But public mail art of this kind is almost contradictory. The essence of mail art is one-to-one communication, and this is the core, with variations, of Ray Johnson's art and that of other committed mail artists. But this simple, essential form of communication, employed so imaginatively and idiosyncratically by Ray Johnson, effectively questions many of the norms of contemporary art.

When one writes a letter to a friend or relative, one is presenting, or making a present of, one's thoughts and reports as well as the letter itself. When one receives mail art from Ray Johnson, one is receiving a gift of art. An ongoing practice based on gifts, or gift exchange, is rather extraordinary in developed countries in the late twentieth century. The current convention that the value of art depends upon public exposure and a price tag is dented by this practice. (But the business of art will surely win out subsequently.)

Another concept that Ray Johnson's procedures call into question is the idea of the original work of visual art. His mailings include originals, copies of originals, and copies of copies, thanks to the photocopier and sometimes the offset press; however, a particular mailing conveys its message, directly or obliquely, regardless of the fact that it contains original drawings or statements, or copies of work, old or new. What is in the envelope (and occasionally on the envelope) is the work. If one thinks of Ray Johnson's mail art as a writing activity, as he has suggested, then analogies to a writer's correspondence, which includes quotations from past writings—poetry, for

instance—throws his work into perspective. In the writer's correspondence, quotations convey their substance, whether they are handwritten, typewritten, or photocopied. So it is with Ray Johnson's mailings; either a copy or the original will tell the same story. For instance, "Dear Whitney Museum, i hate you. Love, Ray Johnson," bears repetition and will be as fresh as the day it was minted to someone seeing it for the first time.

Ray Johnson's mailings of new work and/or recycled copies of earlier work—and even recycled, reformatted work originally sent to him by other artists—differ in another way from most current art activities: Not only are they one-to-one communications, they are frequently made with the particular recipient in mind. Even when all or most of the elements in the mail piece are recyclings or reprintings, that particular collection of items may well be assembled in a unique combination, and include, perhaps, images or words provoked by that person, even though current Johnsonian preoccupations will probably figure in the mailing as well.

Needless to say, Ray Johnson plays variations on this basic practice. There is a form of his mail art that transcends one-to-one mailings by involving three people, when it includes the instruction: "send to." Ray Johnson sends a mail-art package for a specific person to an intermediary who is requested to "send to" the ultimate recipient. Frequently, the intermediary, who is allied in some way to the recipient, is involved in this particular process simply as a witness. This process may also be regarded as a variation on the convention "c.c." (carbon copy): The intermediary see/sees the original communication, thereby sharing in something of mutual interest. But it is Ray Johnson himself who is really in the middle rather than the intermediary, since he is bringing two people together, albeit conceptually, if they will play the game. "Send to" links people as nodes in the Johnsonian network; it joins the dots and makes lines in space. But here the intermediary is passive, and merely has the power to decline the invitation to "send to" the ultimate recipient. There is another variation on this process, however, that involves Ray Johnson's collaboration with the intermediary. The latter may receive a sheet or a piece in the mail with the instruction "add to" as well as "send to" the ultimate recipient, or, sometimes, "add to" and "return to Ray Johnson." This invitation to collaborate with Ray Johnson, and actively participate in his art, is a remarkably open attitude for an artist to adopt. In spite of the fact that Ray Johnson is directing the traffic, the intermediary who is invited to "add to" is endowed with a creative role in the communication with the third party, or in their response to Ray Johnson's request.

Ray Johnson's practice, as expressed in his mail-art—the idea of the one-to-one communication; the irrelevance of what is physically original; the collaboration; the gift; the casting of art into the mailstream—adds up to a view of art that is not only a true alternative to most current art practices but implicitly questions the normal machinery of the Western art world. In fact, such an attitude to art may have more in common with the practices of other, nonliterate, cultures—except for his dependence upon friendly postal workers as art handlers, and on copying technology. And yet, Ray Johnson is tuned in to the current preoccupations of the art world—his rubber stamp "Collage by Sherrie Levine" alone is testimony to this. His assemblies of artworld figures also reveal his close attention to the scene. But while he revels in the various personalities, his alternative practice does connect with larger currents in recent art history. In spite of the unusual, utterly personal character of his art and his methods and his seminal role in mail art, Ray Johnson can be seen to have ties to pop art, to early conceptual and performance art, as well as to fluxus and other manifestations. When the history of the recent past is rewritten, when the revolutionary changes in art in the fifties and sixties are better defined, and when there is a more perceptive articulation of the elements that are common in the work of, say: George Brecht, Marcel Broodthaers, Robert Filliou, Allan Kaprow, Yves Klein, Sol LeWitt, George Maciunas, Piero Manzoni, Seth Siegelaub, Ben Vautier, and Lawrence Weiner; Ray Johnson will be an essential additional figure in this reassessment.

Although he follows and closely observes the art world from his fastness in Locust Valley—whether by proxy, via the press, publications, personal reports, or the telephone, Ray Johnson also keeps it, and its practices, at arm's length. Much of his art skirts the established art world. Even when he is invited to participate in a group show, he is as likely not to exhibit, or to

declare that his contribution will be a Ray Johnson nothing (or nothang), or, recently, to slip in with just a Ray Johnson button, as to make a splash in a given space. He has had relatively few one-person museum exhibitions, because he has not encouraged, and has even discouraged, curators. This reticence or abnegation contrasts markedly with his frequent incorporation and promotion of his own image and history in his mail art. Although such contrary behavior contributes to his legend, it also demonstrates Ray Johnson's refusal to be co-opted, except on carefully considered terms.

And there is no doubt that Ray Johnson is a living legend (or a living dead legend if his reports of his death in 1989 are to be believed). His serious playfulness with the art world and his rare visibility, plus the sometimes notorious events that he has initiated or been involved with, such as his robbing event, his pink wiggling, his nothings, as well as the proliferating versions of his own physiognomy sent out in the mail, his ubiquitous bunny-head portraits, and, finally and most particularly, the quality and elusiveness of his imagination and visual inventions, have all contributed to this legend.

So, too, have Ray Johnson's various institutional inventions, particularly the New York Correspondence School (a.k.a. New York Correspondance School, New York Correspondence School, etc.), whose demise was announced in a letter to *The New York Times*, in 1973, addressed to "Deaths." That the letter was not published perhaps explains how the announcement turned out to be premature. (In any case, it was reborn as Buddha University.) He has also initiated many fan clubs, usually under the auspices of the New York Correspondence School, such as the Marcel Duchamp Fan Club, the Jean Dubuffet Fan Club, the Shelley Duvall Fan Club, and the Paloma Picasso Fan Club, as well as the Blue Eyes Club (and its Japanese division the Brue Eyes Crub), the Spam Radio Club, and such events as the Locust Valley Biennale. Ray Johnson has actually called meetings of some of these organizations, often to the puzzlement of those invited.

People are enrolled in the New York Correspondence School through a communication from Ray Johnson. Upon receiving this information and, perhaps, other communications, they are, of course, drawn inextricably into the Johnsonian network. Other people, as well as members, receive mailings from him: longtime correspondents, friends, acquaintances, and fellow networkers, either out of the blue or in response to their missives. But he also writes to people he has only read about or heard about in the media. Usually there is some overt—or obscure—Johnsonian reason for such communication with the famous or the ordinary. But, for Ray Johnson, it is enough that a person has been recorded in the public realm, perhaps in a newspaper or just in a phone book, for them to become a correspondent. A side effect of these mailings and enrollments is that a great many people in the art world have at one time glimpsed Ray Johnson through the mailbox, and therefore have a direct, frequently fragmentary, and possibly puzzling view of him. This, too, contributes to the legend.

To add to this, other artists, especially mail artists, have contributed to his near-mythic status by making rubber stamps or copies of his face and his bunny heads, or by concocting epigrams about him—for example, "Ray Johnson has been dropped" (just as he has dropped others from his own New York Correspondence School!)—and have disseminated impressions or copies of these to many corners of the world through the mail. It is a rare mail-art exhibition catalog that does not have some reference to Ray Johnson.

But the ultimate key to the significance of Ray Johnson is what and how he communicates. Although the collage principle informs most of his work, the pieces that are more relief-like, that are framed and exhibited for sale, fit the mold of traditional artworks, in the sense of being at home in the object-oriented economy of the art world and, more particularly, in that they do not surrender their meanings quickly or definitively. They present the viewer with a congealed image that is a resolution of a process of composition, building, editing, or refining—even though they refer beyond themselves. These works are more like hedgehogs, rounded up compactly into balls, whereas Ray Johnson's mail-art works are more like foxes, darting all over the place.

The Johnsonian brand of mail art has its own characteristics. A theme will sometimes preoccupy him for a time, but its elucidation may not be confined to one correspondent. Thus, anyone recipient may get only a partial view of the working out of the idea. Pages of his *Book About Modern Art* and *A Book About Death* have come to reside in different places. But even while exploring a theme, Ray Johnson's mind and hand dart in other directions, for one of the characteristics of his mailworks—and his collages, since they are frequently cannibalized—is that they are always subject to change. Open to both outside influences and interventions, and to the choreography of his thoughts, he generates strung-out and scattered riches. Almost invariably, he breaks out of patterns or formulae, as the zigzags of the *Book About Modern Art* uniquely demonstrate. His fondness for sets of things or people goes only so far; there is nearly always one item or person in a set that does not quite fit.

Personalities who have solicited or attracted media attention, movie stars, art stars, friends, and acquaintances jostle with his many selves and creations for seats in the rooms of Ray Johnson's mind, along with everyday objects that have also acquired a special status, such as the almost-animate potato mashers. Although initially he may have become aware of these people through movies or magazines, he has often pulled them into his network by writing or telephoning them—people who would not know him from the boxer Jack Johnson. (It should perhaps be noted that Ray Johnson was mistakenly included in a 1973 biographical dictionary, entitled *Afro-American Artists*.) To the mass of readers learning about such personalities, they may be virtual fantasies or media constructs, but Ray Johnson makes them corporeal for himself and anchors them to reality through correspondence or conversation. (His use of the telephone inevitably is less well documented than his use of the mailways; it is also more instrumental, of course. Conversations with friends, acquaintances, and perfect strangers are an important part of his communications activity; therefore, his postal network is also overlaid with a telephonic network.)

Examining the elements of Ray Johnson's work, or disentangling the threads of his activity, would not be so worthwhile if he were not a superb graphic artist who pursues the embodiment of his thoughts with consummate economy and skill—and wit. The movements of his hand are responsive to the fluidity of his verbal and visual ideas. HE ! animates the most unpromising shapes; he makes life flicker in the simplest forms. He is highly sensitive to words, both the way they look and the way they sound. He detects words within words, puns, and other oddities as easily as a heat-seeking missile rips through skeins of camouflage. He shapes letters and words deliberately and effortlessly, giving them, too, an organic life. He also knows how to animate the page, how to make the white spaces buzz. He combines pictures and texts in new, hybrid forms that seem genetically determined.

Mailings from Ray Johnson are a concatenation of ideas, sometimes distinct or decipherable on the constituent sheets of a correspondence, sometimes slipping and sliding into one another. Thus, Johnsonian physiognomical and biographical images mingle with recycled images of earlier work, with facets of a current preoccupation, with texts, with such new ideas as flop art or buxus, with bunny-head variants, with references to current art, and with other uncategorizable motifs and insertions, almost paralleling the flux of thought itself. Any of these elements may also be overprinted with other images or texts, so that a mailing may be literally multilayered. Reading such mail is simpler than reading a collage, for the layered elements can generally be isolated and examined. But Ray Johnson's mind is so fertile, information-rich, and cross-connected, so full of potential visual and verbal associations, metaphors, puns, and rhymes, that while the flavor of his work may be enjoyed, some of the ingredients may remain mysterious. An unanticipated incident, image, or remark sets the Johnsonian circuits humming, and images and ideas print out that relate overtly or obscurely to the stimulus. Ray Johnson's thinking is marvelously fluid and full of Leonardesque eddies. His ideas move and change, swerve and submerge, but continue on like a river.

