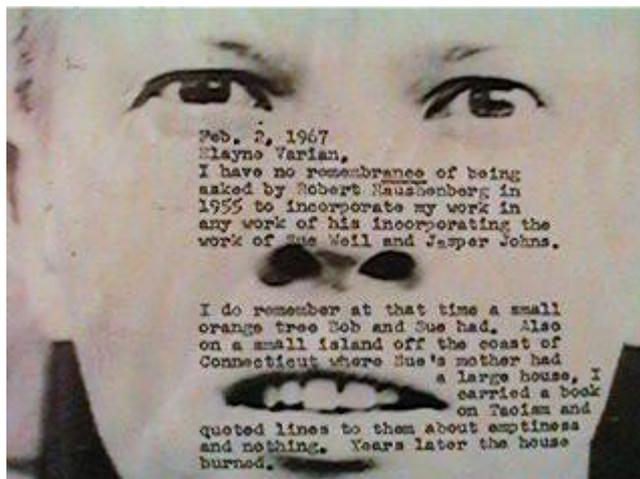


Ray Johnson en el MACBA. *Please add to return*

06/11/2009 - 10/01/2010 MACBA 



Ray Johnson (Detroit, 1927 – Nueva York, 1995) es uno de los artistas norteamericanos más desconocidos e influyentes de su generación. Esta exposición, la primera que se le dedica en España, plantea un recorrido a través de sus collages y correspondencias.

A finales de los años cuarenta, Ray Johnson estudió pintura con Josef Albers en Black Mountain College, donde conoció a Bill de Kooning, Richard Lippold, Merce Cunningham y John Cage. Tras esta etapa se traslada a Nueva York, donde a mediados de los años cincuenta abandona la pintura en búsqueda de un nuevo modo de expresión, construyendo collages a partir de fragmentos de sus pinturas abstractas. Se trata de collages que a su vez se convertirían en elementos con los que construirá piezas más complejas, en las que estos fragmentos se intercalan con elementos procedentes de la cultura popular. Para ello utiliza imágenes de Elvis Presley, James Dean, Shirley Temple y Marilyn Monroe, entre otros, anticipando el imaginario que emplearía Andy Warhol durante los años sesenta. Entre sus primeros collages destacan los «moticos», unos paneles de formas irregulares que reutilizaría a lo largo de su carrera y que supusieron una crítica a la rigidez abstracta del rectángulo.

También durante los años cincuenta, en paralelo al desarrollo de los collages, Ray Johnson comienza a explorar las posibilidades del Arte Postal, construyendo una red de contactos con los que intercambia ideas y trabajos. A través de este circuito envió gran cantidad de elementos, desde postales hasta partes de sus collages, dibujos con instrucciones (*please add to & return...*), objetos encontrados y recortes de prensa con anotaciones. En 1968 esta red de intercambios postales se consolida como la *New York Correspondence School*, que llegaría a ser el centro de un sistema de comunicación artística que pronto alcanzaría la dimensión de un fenómeno global.

La obra en papel de Ray Johnson se basa en la unión de imágenes e ideas con el fin de generar nuevos significados a través de las yuxtaposiciones que construía y distribuía. Son yuxtaposiciones que, en muchos casos, y sobre todo en los collages, tuvieron el

refuerzo de la creación de múltiples estratos que se iban añadiendo a lo largo del tiempo, por lo que la mayoría de sus collages datan de varias fechas sucesivas. También tuvo un gran interés por los sistemas semióticos y los códigos que estos crean, de modo que es frecuente encontrar en su obra juegos de palabras que le llevan a crear nuevos vocablos. La crítica institucional y una relación ambivalente con el mundo del arte también están presentes en su obra a lo largo de toda su trayectoria.



Además del Arte Postal y sus collages, las performances son parte importante de su obra. En 1961 inició la serie *Nothings* en respuesta al trabajo de Allan Kaprow y Fluxus, aunque repetirá estas y otras performances a lo largo de su vida.

Ray Johnson. Please add to & return se presenta en el MACBA al mismo tiempo que *John Cage y el arte experimental. La anarquía del silencio*, con lo que es una oportunidad para explorar las relaciones entre ambos artistas. En el caso de Ray Johnson las referencias a la figura y la obra de John Cage son frecuentes. Su trabajo refleja un profundo interés por la idea del azar aplicada a la práctica artística, según la desarrollara

John Cage.

Comisaria: Alex Sainsbury en colaboración con Chus Martínez

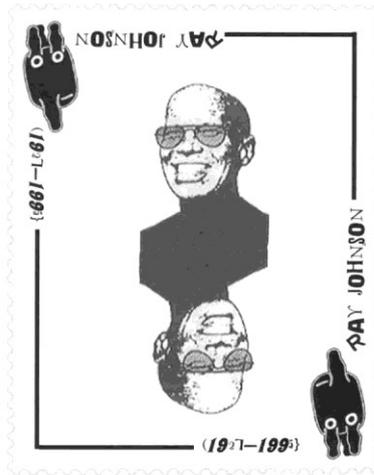
Producción: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona



Early Years and Education

Born in Detroit, Michigan, on October 16, 1927, Johnson attended [Cass Technical High School](#), an occupational school, where he enrolled in the Advertising Art Program. From 1945-1948, Johnson attended [Black Mountain College](#), a progressive school in North Carolina, where he studied painting under [Josef](#) and [Anni Albers](#) and Robert Motherwell. While at Black Mountain, he also studied with and worked alongside many important figures of the avant-garde, including [Willem](#) and [Elaine de Kooning](#), [John Cage](#), [Merce Cunningham](#), and [Richard Lippold](#). In 1948, Johnson moved to New York, where he joined the downtown art scene, befriending [Andy Warhol](#), [Robert Rauschenberg](#), [Jasper Johns](#), and [Cy Twombly](#). He worked part-time at the Orientalia Bookstore in the [Lower East Side](#), where he strengthened his interest in and understanding of Zen philosophy and the concept of chance; these interests later shaped his collages, performances, and mail art. In these early years, Johnson focused on abstract paintings, reflecting his training with Albers, but by 1953, in search of a new mode of expression, he turned to collage. By 1955, Johnson had completely rejected his early abstract works and purportedly burned many of them in Cy Twombly's fireplace.

Work



Johnson's initial collages were mainly abstract works made of cut, painted and distressed paper strips and irregular designs. He referred to these early collages as "moticos," a term he coined and used for several different elements in his work, including these collages and early poetic texts that he wrote at this time. Following his lifelong practice of cutting and recycling various materials, Johnson cut apart many of his early collages and used the fragments in later works. As Johnson once said, he created "Chop Art, not Pop Art."

By the mid-to late-1950s, Johnson's collages became increasingly referential, as he combined fragments from earlier works and ink drawings with images from popular culture. He included fragments of popular advertisements and images of Elvis Presley, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Shirley Temple, and others in a way that anticipated the 1960s works of Pop artists, such as Warhol. Due to his early use of popular imagery, Johnson is considered one of the earliest exponents of Pop Art. Johnson also included references to art world celebrities and personal acquaintances. In the late 1950s, Johnson began creating "tesserae"—small, highly worked blocks he created from layers of cardboard glued together, painted, and sanded—to add a three-dimensional element to his works.

Throughout his career, Johnson repeatedly returned to and re-worked his collages, adding additional elements and recording the dates of his progress directly on the collage. He developed several motifs and series in his collages, including silhouettes of artists and acquaintances, "Lucky Strike" symbols, Cupids, "Tit girls," Dollar bills, Potato Mashers, and "Fingernails." Johnson juxtaposed images, words, and ideas to create new meanings and endless associations.

In the late 1950s, Johnson began exploring the possibilities of Mail Art. He developed a network of friends, acquaintances and strangers to whom he sent highly conceptual images and texts. Like Marcel Duchamp, Johnson was one of the first artists to incorporate instructions for active participation in his artwork, as he encouraged the recipients to "add to" his work or to "please send to..." or to "return to Ray Johnson." In 1962, Johnson founded the "New York Correspondance (sic) School," a name invented by Ed Plunkett and used by Johnson for his international network of Mail Art participants he spawned by mailing an enormous amount of material, including

fragments of cut-up collages, drawings with instructions, found objects, snake skins, and annotated newspaper clippings.



One of the first performance artists, Johnson began staging what he called “Nothings” in 1960. These performances paralleled Allan Kaprow’s “Happenings” and later Fluxus events. Johnson described his “Nothings” to William S. Wilson as “an attitude as opposed to a happening,” and he staged numerous performances throughout his life, including his “Throwaway Gesture Performances.”

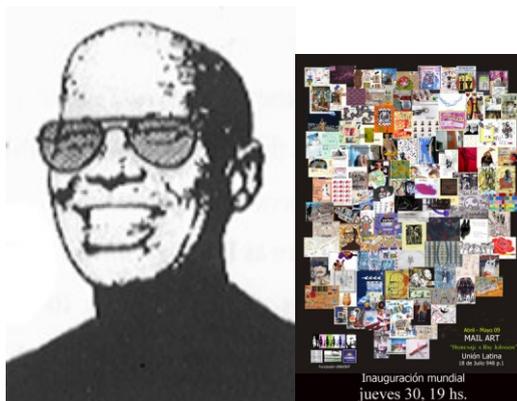
Severely shaken after being mugged and attacked in lower Manhattan on June 3, 1968, the same day that Andy Warhol was shot by Valerie Solanas (and two days before Robert Kennedy was assassinated), Johnson decided to move to Glen Cove, Long Island, and then to Locust Valley. Until his death in 1995, Johnson continued his work in collage, sent out volumes of mail art, and staged numerous performances, but he became increasingly reclusive. As his contemporaries became famous, Johnson cultivated his role as an outsider, parodying celebrity through performances, fake openings, and photocopy-machine art. From 1982 on, he repeatedly refused offers from numerous galleries to exhibit his art, and for the last five years of his life, he refused all public exhibitions of his works.

Death

On January 13, 1995 Ray Johnson’s body was found floating in a small cove in [Sag Harbor](#), NY. All aspects of his death, revolved around the number "13". His age $67 = 6+7=13$, the room number at his hotel was 247 which adds to 13, the date: Jan 13, etc. He jumped off the bridge on a cold winter night, and his body was found the next day. As with much of the particulars of his life, little is known about the circumstances of his death. Those who knew him best, inasmuch as they knew him at all, have even speculated that his suicide was his final performance (or [Nothing](#) as he then called his pieces). Johnson lived frugally, but had \$400,000 in bank accounts at the time of his death. He left no will and his 10 first cousins inherited his estate.

With the help of Frances Beatty, Vice President of Richard L. Feigen & Co. and Director of the Estate of Ray Johnson, filmmakers Andrew Moore and John Walter spent the next six years exploring the mysteries of Johnson’s life and art. In 2002, they released *How to Draw a Bunny*, an award-winning documentary about Johnson, including interviews with his friends and fellow artists such as [Chuck Close](#), [Roy](#)

[Lichtenstein](#), [James Rosenquist](#), and Jeanne-Claude and [Christo](#). The film examines the importance of Johnson's enigmatic life and work and his influence on Pop and Performance artists. The cable television network [Ovation TV](#) has aired the film.



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