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2 X RAY JOHNSON OUT THIS SUMMER FROM SIGLIO
TWO ESSENTIAL AND EXUBERANT TITLES THAT REVEAL
THE SPRAWLING, FISSION-LIKE NATURE OF HIS WORK

NOT NOTHING:

SELECTED WRITINGS BY RAY JOHNSON, 1954–1994
EDITED BY ELIZABETH ZUBA WITH AN ESSAY BY KEVIN KILLIAN

NEW PUB DATE: JULY 30, 2014 \$45 PB 7.875 x 10 380 pages illustrated in bw & color throughout ISBN: 978-1-938221-04-0
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Make room for Ray Johnson, whose place in history has been only vaguely defined. Johnson's beguiling, challenging art has an exquisite clarity and emotional intensity that makes it much more than simply a remarkable mirror of its time, although it is that, too. —Roberta Smith, *The New York Times* (1995)

RAY JOHNSON (1927–1995), considered the progenitor of Correspondence art, blurred the boundaries between life and art, authorship and intimacy. The defining nature of his work were his letters (often both visual and textual in character), intended to be received, replied to (altered and embellished) and read, again and again. This lovingly curated collection of more than 200 mostly previously unpublished writings—including selected letters, minutes for “New York Correspondence School” meetings, hand-written notes and other writings—opens a new view into the whirling flux of Johnson’s art, highlighting his keen sense of play as well as his attuned sensitivity to both language and the shifting nature of meaning. Cumulatively, the writings reveal not only how he created relationships, glyphs and puzzles by connecting words, phrases, people and ideas, but also something about the elusive Johnson himself.

Addressed to both intimates and strangers, the letters and other writings are often populated by art world and literary luminaries from the mid-20th century (from Joseph Cornell to Yoko Ono, Marianne Moore to Marcel Duchamp, Germaine Greer to Andy Warhol, John Cage to Christo), some of whom were Johnson’s close friends, others acquaintances, and still others the objects of his interest. All however are reconstituted as something other (or more) than themselves as Johnson uses both arrangement and serendipity to set meaning in flux, to subvert the fixed (names, persons, objects, words), and to question the singular while having his own very particular point-of-view.

In its refusal to create a finished product, while producing innumerable altered versions of an “original,” correspondence art did sort of behave, as Johnson is said to have explained, as the logical “extension of Cubism.” It was Cubism gone wild, a zillion objects, more than the market, more than even capitalism, could bear. And who propelled it? We know Johnson through a series of masks, the way we know, or think we know Lewis Carroll. Even William S. Burroughs, who never stopped being “William S. Burroughs” the character, seems

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more available emotionally to his readers, and yet in the poems, letters, documents you'll be reading herein, like those in The Paper Snake, bits and pieces of an actual Ray Johnson wriggle into view, like feathers from a mattress, slithering out the sides.

—from “Ray Johnson Story” by Kevin Killian in *Not Nothing: Selected Writings by Ray Johnson*

Not Nothing: Selected Writings by Ray Johnson is but one possible selection from thousands of pieces from the Ray Johnson Estate archives. In this chronological presentation, Zuba’s intention is to make space for thoroughly experiencing a pervasive and often overlooked aspect of Johnson’s work—language. She says in her introduction: “If this selection feels like a force, an overwhelmingly begin-again-and-again planetary kind of force, it’s because it’s meant to. Not by me, but by Johnson. Imagine if you can that for almost every one of the pages in this selection, Johnson sent out some five to fifty versions of each, nearly every day for forty years . . . with the request that most of these be intervened in some way and then sent out again, to be passed along again and again: a massive chain letter field. Except the vectors of this energetic field are not limited to the movement of the artifact traveling through the U.S. postal system; the vectors (or Rays) are multiplicitous and simultaneous in every word of every text. In other words, we can’t chart this field in space and time, the old Einsteinian way; we have to account for the fact that the words themselves are flickering multiplicitously in and out of a state of perception or existence—we might call it a quantum field, or a “continuous present,” *sunyata*, or, in Johnson’s preference, Nothing. And the correspondence art itself? The not nothing, the picture pasted on the side of the speeding void.”

Not Nothing, as well as Siglio’s reprint of Johnson’s seminal 1965 artist’s book *The Paper Snake*, are currently the only Ray Johnson books in print. Both books are meant to delight long-time Johnson aficionados as well to entice audiences new to his work. With near full-size reproductions of the original pages in color and half-tones, the works in *Not Nothing: Selected Writings by Ray Johnson* are revelatory in their diverse but porous modes and in the way they deepen the understanding of Johnson’s entire oeuvre.

from the introduction by ELIZABETH ZUBA

Approaching the structures of our reality (language, body, place, time) as a shifting surface area is the primary impetus of Johnson’s practice—an impetus he articulated as much with the multiple, angular planes of words and context as he did with images, paste and sandpaper. Henry Martin has written that the origins of Johnson’s images “are so thoroughly concealed that one must look for correspondences rather than explanations . . . Essentially he has no subject matter at all, and that is what enabled him to deal with everything that comes to him.” In other words, Johnson is a poet, a modern one.

For Johnson, language and image are rarely metaphorical; all symbols are not what they were but newly open to serendipitous blunder, metonymy, parataxis, contextual transition and translation—correspondences. Words are contiguous; words can be followed in such a way that reveals their artifice/aesthetic screen; they can be followed in such a way that reveals their viral coding. So that rather than saying and reading what we’ve always said and read, words and letters can lead to new perceptions and those to other perceptions, and out and out, and on and on.

In the argot of Charles Olson, Johnson’s is an open form—an ever-expanding energy that frequently runs right off the page and pushes out into the margins and new corners of our reality and perceptions, an energy that runs right off the author and out into contact with new spaces, times and collaborators. Cutting up texts and pasting them together into new, wild hybrids or repeating a certain word, punctuation, or typographical arrangement, Johnson approaches the slippery physicality-vacancy of language as a space of movement, dance, play. A single typo, an accidental mark, the contour of an image or word, the sudden pull of an alternative usage, a homophone or rhyme or any other textile-textual property of words on paper initiates endless, vertiginous pivots of meanings and intentions. Valery describes the language of poetry as “abrupt returns of the fruit to the wild state.” I can’t think of a better description of Johnson’s work.

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THE PAPER SNAKE

A REPRINT OF THE SEMINAL 1965 ARTIST'S BOOK

NEW PUB DATE: JUNE 30, 2014 \$34.70 HB with dust jacket 10.75 x 8.75 48 pages, all color ISBN: 978-1-938221-03-3
ADVANCES AVAILABLE NOW. All Siglio titles are available directly at www.sigliopress.com as well as distributed to the trade by ARTBOOK/D.A.P.

Long out of print (and coveted by Ray Johnson fans), *The Paper Snake* is an essential work in Johnson's oeuvre and the second title published by Dick Higgins's extraordinary Something Else Press in 1965. A vertiginous, mind-bending artist's book, *The Paper Snake* was far ahead of its time in its subversive and exuberant confluence of art and life. Assembled and designed by Higgins from his amassed collection of Johnson's letters, tid-bits and artworks (said Johnson: "all my writings, rubbings, plays, things that I had mailed to him or brought to him in cardboard boxes or shoved under his door, or left in his sink, or whatever, over a period of years"*), *The Paper Snake* connects disparate elements to unbed fixed relationships and forge new systems of meaning by means of scissors, paste and the American postal system.

An introductory essay by Frances F. L. Beatty, Director of the Ray Johnson Estate, is included as a separate insert, and in the spirit of the original, the print run is the same (1840 copies). This reprint is four-color offset, a different method than the original in which Higgins used a two-color process with innovative ink combinations.

*quote from "Interview with Ray Johnson" by Diane Spodarek and Randy Debelke, *Detroit Artists Monthly* (1978).

from WILLIAM S. WILSON'S INTRODUCTION to THE PAPER SNAKE (1965)

(written on the dust jacket flaps)

The first principle of Ray Johnson's art is that anything isolated is beautiful, albeit opaque. The second principle is that meaning awakens in that isolated beautiful thing when it is juxtaposed to something like it (counterparts, like rhymes, for the romantic; counterpoints, like puns, for the ironic). Ray Johnson said, "I deal in invisibilities and anonymities." He said, "Andy Warhol says my snakes aren't snakes—they're worms because they aren't lifesize. But some of my snakes are imaginary and inarticulate snakes, and what is lifesize about inarticulateness?" To Dick Higgins he has written, "I want to live and die like an egg." Ray Johnson's art is always *see and say, show and tell*; it is also imaginary, inarticulate, and eggshaped.

Ray Johnson is the master of the form or line or color that corresponds with another form or line or color; hence the New York Correspondence School of Art, in which he mails to friends and strangers his correspondences. Ray Johnson plays the U.S. mails like a harp. His art is not of social comment, but of sociability. The equations in this intimate algebra cannot always be explained; they usually seem self-evident at the time, although Ray Johnson likes to make sure people catch on. Since a change in style is a change in meaning, this book is a translation of Ray Johnson into Dick Higgins; reading these is like reading over Dick Higgins' shoulder, or hearing him read them aloud. Ray Johnson makes eggs out of omelets and Dick Higgins eats them.

from "THE HATCHING OF THE PAPER SNAKE" by DICK HIGGINS

(a 1995 essay included in *Lightworks*, No. 22: *The Ray Johnson Issue*, 2000)

I was fascinated by the way that the small works which Ray Johnson used to send through the mail seemed so rooted in their moment and their context and yet somehow they seemed to acquire new and larger meaning as time went along. . . . Since a book is a more permanent body than a mailing piece or even than our own physical ones, I could not help wondering what it would be like to make a new body for Johnson's ideas as a sort of love letter or time capsule for the future. . . . The book was not understood. I think that of the dozen or so reviews which appeared none was favorable . . . None saw the relevance of doing a book which would shared the private with a public world in the way that this book did. However the artists seemed to understand and they have used it as a paradigm ever since.

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TWO REVIEWS OF *THE PAPER SNAKE* FROM 1965

(found in the Ray Johnson Estate archives and unattributed/sources unknown)

1. *This is not a bk of poems to be “read” & then yell “GREAT! GREAT!” this is not a bk of poems. this is not a bk. GREAT! GREAT! the best thing to do i’ve found, to approach this “bk” is by picking it up only when you feel like it, say hello, or whatever you say to a friend & then pick out a pg that is appetizing to all of yr senses. eventually every pg will magnetize you. there is nothing in here which won’t be chewed on & researched by all mental cells, but NONE OF IT will be “read” the way we are accustomed to reading anything. it will be “read” the way a scrap bk is thumbed thru or a dream is recollected, piece by piece; for this is nothing more than a man forming a few thoughts & occurrences into a collection via postcards, photographs, check stubs, torn pieces of cloth. whatever is attracted to him becomes him & he, in return, offers it to us along w/words designed not to “say” anything but to recreate these material attachments & incidents for us to behold. GREAT! GREAT!*

2. *A reviewer ought to read a book when he reviews it, so I read The Paper Snake. He ought to mention the subject and give you a notion of the author’s competence in dealing with said subject. Reader, dear, here I have let you down. I tried to find out what the subject of The Paper Snake is, but I’m still mystified. Somewhere along the line I missed the point or lost the thread of the argument and was unable to retrieve it.*

It’s supposed to be no fair peeking at the dust-jacket blurb, but this time I peeked. The blurb is by William Wilson. . . . Mr. Wilson doesn’t say what Mr. Johnson is talking about. He himself seems a competent writer, and he is fairly successful in putting a good face upon the situation in which he is confronted. Mr. Wilson says, among other things, “The meaning in Ray Johnson’s work is not logical . . .” I shall not contest that judgement. The Paper Snake is copyrighted, I don’t know why—that seems excessive caution. The book is priced at \$3.47. Again I wonder why.

ABOUT RAY JOHNSON

Almost twenty years after his death, Ray Johnson (1927–1995) continues to be revealed as one of the most quietly consequential figures in American contemporary art. An influential pioneer of Pop art, Conceptual art and Mail art (though he eschewed all of these monikers), Johnson’s extrasensory perception and insatiable curiosity resulted in an immense body of work that spans collage, correspondence, performance, sculpture, drawing, painting and book arts. While a student at Black Mountain College (1945–48), Johnson forged friendships and mentorships that would prove to shape and guide his work; Josef Albers, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Richard Lippold and Robert Motherwell, and later Ad Reinhardt and Joseph Cornell in New York, were some of his most influential mentors. When Johnson moved with Lippold to New York in 1949, he was primarily working in abstract geometric painting. By 1953, Johnson’s art had shifted definitively into the medium and concept of collage. In the 1950s, Johnson used the term “moticos,” a neologistic anagram of the word “osmotic,” to refer to most of his collage work and texts as well as to the glyphs that appear throughout his work. Johnson’s early incorporation of popular imagery in his collages earned him a place as one of the earliest exponents of Pop art. By 1957, Johnson was fragmenting and diffusing art, texts, found objects and images through the U.S. postal system, a practice he called correspondence art; and by 1968, was holding regular meetings for his New York Correspondance School, the rubric he used to refer to his extensive network of artists and laypersons exchanging missives and art through the mail.

Johnson’s work centered in large part around the idea of what he described as “nothingness”; and from 1961 onward, Johnson frequently staged “Nothings,” impromptu enactments of the concept of void that extended from and communicated with his collage and correspondence art. Much of Johnson’s work hinged on relationships; his circle of friends—including Ruth Asawa, George Brecht, John Cage, Christo, Chuck Close, Albert M. Fine, Dick Higgins, James Rosenquist, Cy Twombly and Andy Warhol, among others—reads like a *Who’s Who* of 1950s–70s American art. Despite sharing major exhibitions between 1957–1978 (with the likes of Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow and Andy Warhol, among others) as well as having important solo shows at major galleries, biennales and museums around the world (including the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970 in an exhibition titled *Ray Johnson: New York Correspondance School*), Johnson systematically refused or flouted most opportunities to popularize his work through mainstream art commerce. By 1978, Johnson refused offers for solo exhibitions with commercial galleries, following suit with museums by 1991. On January 13, 1995 Johnson leapt from the Sag Harbor bridge in Long Island in an apparent suicide.

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