

In the mid-1950s artist Ray Johnson (1927–95) began to send collages, messages, and found and altered objects to a growing base of artists and friends, asking that they continue to expand this networked correspondence through the mail system, initiating what in the 1960s would be named the New York Correspondance School [sic]. Perhaps Johnson intended the name as a pun on the New York School, another name for the Abstract Expressionist movement based in New York, which had dominated the avant-garde since the late 1940s. Intentionally disconnected from traditional systems of art production and consumption, Johnson and other mail artists set their work within the present tense of social reality. “Mail Art,” Johnson claimed, “has no history, only a present.”¹

Ray Johnson’s work—collages, correspondence art, and performance events—remains mysterious and a bit hard to pin down. As a young artist, he studied at Black Mountain College, the progressive arts school in North Carolina founded in 1933. Johnson’s early paintings nod to the Bauhaus heritage of his teacher Josef Albers. But soon after he settled in New York City in 1949, Johnson abandoned geometric abstraction and started making small collages. He moved in a new direction, toward chance-based expressions and explorations, more in line with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, whom he first encountered at Black Mountain, and their circle of friends in New York, including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly.

Johnson’s collage approach was diaristic, a stream-of-consciousness flow through the matter and memory of his everyday life and surroundings, shifting from one topic to another, across all variety of things. He often altered his collages over time, allowing potential and flux to operate materially in his process. In the mid-1950s he began to make small collage panels, which he called Moticos, using images cut from magazines and advertisements—often of celebrities and popular products of the time. Johnson altered iconic images of Elvis Presley, Shirley Temple, and Marilyn Monroe, among others, in these collages. James Dean was a particular favorite, appearing in several works. In some, Johnson used a classic publicity image from *Giant*, Dean’s last film before his fatal car crash in 1955 at the age of twenty-four. In a 1957 collage, Johnson brushed a thin red wash over the image of a rebelliously sexy, cigarette-smoking Dean, adding a strange network of symbols vaguely resembling hieroglyphs. Two bright red Lucky Strike cigarette labels flank Dean’s head like giant round ears. The Lucky Strike targets also appear in other collages, such as one dated 1958–60 originating from a photograph of Charles Lindbergh posing in front of his famous airplane, the Spirit of St. Louis (Billy Wilder’s popular film, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, had been released in 1957).

Of course, Johnson’s use of celebrity images brings to mind Andy Warhol and Pop Art. Warhol and Johnson already knew each other in the 1950s, and they remained friends. However, Warhol did not begin his famous portraits until the early 1960s,

while Johnson developed an approach that anticipated later Conceptual art practices. For instance, he was known to carry boxes of the collages with him, sometimes stopping on street corners, in cafes, or at Grand Central Station to show people his current archive of works and asking them to respond, as if initiating a performance with these coded images and materials. In 1956 Johnson wrote to the director of a Japanese magazine, “Most of my work is collage work which I call MOTICOS. I send out monthly newsletters about the work that I am doing which takes the place of formal exhibitions. The works cannot be exhibited in the usual way, because they continually change, like the news in the paper or the images on a movie screen.”²

In 1976 Johnson began a portrait project using silhouettes of figures. He made templates of these simplified silhouettes, using them over and over in different works. The ghostly profiles of friends and artists he admired, such as Marcel Duchamp and Joseph Cornell, appear in variously collaged contexts. In 1966, after becoming interested in Cornell’s evocative boxed assemblages, which incorporated a variety of found objects and mysterious references, Johnson wrote to Cornell asking if he could visit the artist. They continued their correspondence and visits until Cornell’s death in 1972. Andy Warhol’s distinctive profile is recognizable in a number of works and Johnson also made various textual references to Warhol. In *Man O’War* (1971-88-94), a dense networks of glyphs and patterns congregate around a simple, silhouetted horse. Johnson incorporates a nameplate: “MAN O’WARH9L7-1947.” A connection between the famous thoroughbred racehorse Man O’War and the celebrity artist is made, but is far from clear.

In 1988, New York–based collagist Robert Warner began a correspondence with Johnson. Until Johnson’s death in 1995, he and Warner continued their exchange, mostly by mail and telephone, and only occasionally in person. Over the course of their friendship, Warner received hundred of pieces of mail art from Johnson, ranging from collages to a piece of driftwood that was hand delivered. At one of their rare in-person meetings, Johnson gave thirteen cardboard boxes to Warner, tied with twine and labeled “Bob Box One”, “Bob Box Two”, and so on.

Johnson filled the thirteen Bob Boxes with an array of found objects and correspondence. In a 2011 interview with Tod Lippy, Warner described the contents as “a window onto the world of Ray Johnson in the ‘70s and ‘80s: everything from signed-and-dated empty toilet-paper tubes to a box that contained nothing but hundreds of envelopes that were addressed but never mailed.” “It was like Ping-Pong,” Warner explained when Lippy asked about the role of chance in his interactions with Johnson. “[He] really liked having a gaming partner; he really liked the back-and-forth.” In one conversation with Johnson, Warner brought up Gypsy Rose Lee, “and Ray said, ‘You know, Jasper Johns’s house was once owned by Gypsy Rose Lee. I’ll send you something and I want you to hand deliver it there.’” Indeed,

Warner delivered it without knowing what Johnson had sent. “Once...he Xeroxed the Declaration of Independence and asked me to take it to John Cage to have him sign it. And one day—it was Fourth of July—he called me and told me that John Cage was expecting me to bring it over. He told me where he lived, and I delivered it.”³

The Bob Boxes remained Warner’s personal treasures until invited by editor Tod Lippy to publish the archive in the spring 2011 edition of *Esopus*, an innovative arts magazine that features imaginative perspectives on contemporary culture. In concert with the publication, the boxes were also exhibited at Esopus Space, the magazine’s small gallery space in New York City. Over the course of the exhibition, Warner staged thirteen two-hour performances, progressively revealing and archiving the contents of the boxes. The following summer, Richard Torchia, director of the Arcadia University Art Gallery near Philadelphia, collaborated with Warner to exhibit the archive contents across a span of tables, vitrines, and gallery walls, adding a small group of Ray Johnson collages. BAM/PFA is carrying on the correspondence project with another iteration of the presentation. We are grateful to Richard Torchia; Tod Lippy; Frances Beatty, vice president of Richard L. Feigen & Co. and director of the Ray Johnson Estate; and especially Robert Warner for their enthusiasm to share this wonderful collaboration.

Lucinda Barnes

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¹ Quoted in Ina Blom, “Ray Johnson: The Present of Mail Art” (January 2008), <http://www.rayjohnson.org/Ray-Johnson-The-Present-of-Mail-Art/>.

² “Should an eyelash last forever? An Interview with Ray Johnson by Henry Martin” (1984), <http://www.artpool.hu/Ray/Publications/Martin.html>.

³ “Yesterday’s Mail: Interview with Robert Warner by Tod Lippy,” *Esopus* 16 (Spring 2011), 32–47.

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PUBLIC PROGRAM
ARTIST'S TALK: ROBERT WARNER
Friday, January 27, noon

TABLES OF CONTENT: RAY JOHNSON & ROBERT WARNER BOB BOX ARCHIVE

MATRIX 241

FRONT Ray Johnson and Robert Warner: Untitled valise from *Bob Box Archive*, 1988–95; mixed media; dimensions variable. Photo: Tod Lippy, from *Esopus* 16 (Spring 2011).

INSIDE Ray Johnson: Untitled correspondence from *Bob Box Archive*, 1988–95; mixed media. From *Esopus* 16 (Spring 2011).

