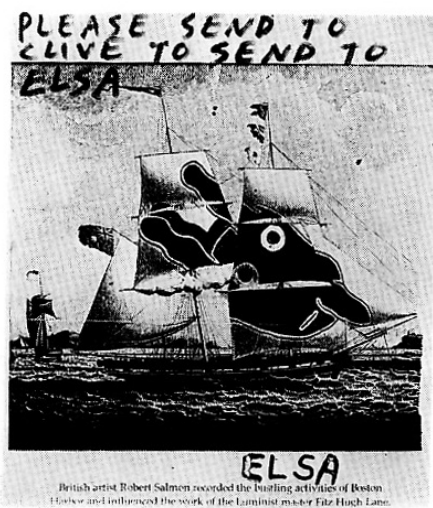


The Present, Tense

Ray Johnson is the great master of mail-art, arguably its creator, and it reached its apotheosis in his hands. His letters were inventive drawings and wordplays, often with instructions to modify or add to the contents and send them on to a third party. Not everyone followed his directives, but many wrote back or carried out their charges, keeping the game alive. This activity became known as the New York Correspondence School, and it is the reason there was a Ray Johnson show at Arcadia University this year.



If you corresponded faithfully with Johnson, there was a remote chance he would suddenly show up with a load of cardboard boxes of his work for you to store. This happened one day in 1990 to collage artist Robert Warner, who dutifully preserved his trove of thirteen boxes. Even after Johnson died in 1995, Warner did not open them. This past summer Warner finally unpacked the boxes and cataloged their contents at the Esopus Foundation's gallery in New York's West Village. It is Philadelphia's great fortune to have this archive temporarily available at Arcadia, along with a selection of Johnson's masterful collages lent by his Estate. Because Johnson eschewed art world norms, exhibits of his work are hard to come by, making this exhibit an especially valuable opportunity. Moving through the show's idiosyncratic drawings and objects, I felt warmed by Johnson's particular form of engagement; it runs through his work like an underground stream.

The warmth in Johnson's art can be understood, at least in part, in terms of gift exchange. Let me emphasize that I am saying *in part*, because Johnson, like all great artists, made work of enormous complexity that cannot be exhausted by a single conceptual frame. Yet it's clear that Johnson thought about the nature of gifts in relation to his art, a topic discussed by the critic Ina Blom. In her essay, "Ray Johnson: The Present of Mail Art", Blom highlights one of Johnson's punning statements, "Mail Art has no history, only a present," a joke that cuts Johnson free from the weight of art's canon by situating him in an ahistorical *now*, but also directs our attention to his work as a gift.

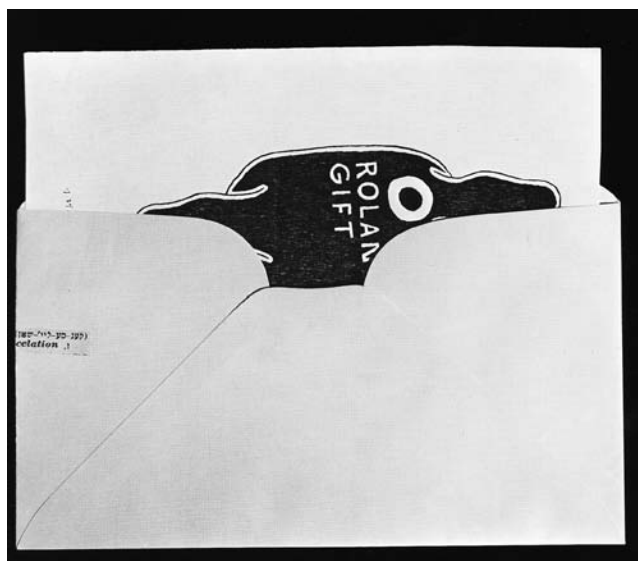
The Gift, Lewis Hyde's investigation of creativity and gift exchange, offers numerous examples of gift economies, many bearing similarities to Johnson's mail art. In an essay for a 1991 exhibition at Philadelphia's Moore College, Clive Phillpot wrote: "When one receives mail art from Ray Johnson, one 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."

Phillpot's specific indication that developed countries lack formalized gift systems relates directly to *The Gift*. In the very first chapter, Hyde describes the Kula, a ceremonial gift system of the Massim who populate the islands off the eastern tip of New Guinea. Two different types of ritual gift objects, armshells and necklaces, are transferred from person to person through the islands in an infinite ring. One does not give a gift to the person from whom a gift was received, but rather to someone else, on the next island along the chain.

Hyde characterizes the Kula's circular path as necessitating three points because two points merely make a line, but three points also describe a triangle. The triangle figures prominently as a motif in Johnson's drawings, and it's also key to the operation of his mail-art. Warner likes to imagine Johnson's method as a three-sided ping-pong table in which each player hits the ball to their neighbor, rather than only two people playing back and forth. Johnson would mail an item to Warner with instructions such as "bring this to Chuck Close," or "slip this under Jasper Johns' door." Johnson's letters would frequently include the directive "please send to" thus roping a third person into Johnson's machinations.

Hyde points out that as with the Kula, "most of the stories of gift exchange have a minimum of three people." A third person enlarges gift-giving beyond the confines of binary reciprocity. This expanded dynamic avoids a quid pro quo and thus stands in stark contrast to the movement of commodities, which change hands only to generate a calculated profit. Johnson was notoriously difficult to buy from, and while part of the challenge arose from his penchant for playing the trickster, there is evidence suggesting that Johnson was uncomfortable with his artwork being treated as an object to be purchased.



The documentary *How To Draw A Bunny* provides numerous examples of the mischief Johnson made around the sale of his work. In one case, famed literary agent Morton Janklow describes his efforts, beginning in 1981, to buy 26 collage portraits Johnson had made of him. Johnson offered the 26 for a total of \$42,400, to which Janklow responded with an offer of \$13,000. Hyde cites the ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowski's detailing of Kula gift exchange ethics, the first of which "prohibits discussion...with the equivalence of the two objects discussed, bargained about and

computed." The Kula sharply distinguish gift exchange from barter. Janklow's \$13,000 counter-offer resulted in an endless series of letters between him and Johnson involving continuous permutations of the price, and even of the portraits themselves. With each passing year, the portraits of Janklow were transformed and increasingly inscrutable, taking on images of Paloma Picasso and more deeply obscuring Janklow's visible presence. This byzantine process not only dissolved Janklow into a larger communal collective including Picasso and others, it turned price-negotiation into an absurd caricature. It did not end until some twenty years later, after Johnson's death, when Janklow managed to buy the full set from Feigen Contemporary for, as he told the *New York Times*, "considerably more than originally asked."

How To Draw A Bunny provides another excellent example of Johnson's reaction to people bargaining over his art. The artist Peter Schuyff relates how he asked to buy a collage portrait of Andy Warhol, for which Johnson named a price of \$2,000. Schuyff replied with an offer of \$1,500. Johnson delivered the piece to Schuyff with the bottom-right quarter of the collage cut out: the full artwork less 25%. "I learned my lesson," Schuyff dryly concludes.

Hyde points out that while gifts create bonds, commodity exchange prevents intimate involvement or lasting obligation: market value is precisely determined and the commodity is traded for currency or an object of equal value. Upon the transaction's completion the two parties no longer have a connection. We typically know nothing about the clerk from whom we buy an item at a store, and we don't think about the clerk two weeks later. Johnson's absurd and sometimes endless machinations around the sale of his work may have been a means of struggling with the intersection of his art and the market, of forcibly disturbing the cold calculation of commodity exchange. Without the third party inherent in a gift-economy, Johnson needed another means to subvert the quid pro quo of commerce.

Schuyff does not explain the lesson he learned, but I'd like to hazard a guess. Though Johnson maintained continuous contact with others through the phone and the mail, he kept himself relatively isolated. Johnson seems to have been exquisitely, perhaps even painfully sensitive to the tensions between gift and commodity, intimate relationships and isolation, and community and individuality. His mail art and his life balanced these opposing forces in a shifting and finely calibrated performance.

How To Draw A Bunny includes a brief story told by the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. When they asked Johnson if they could buy something, he named a price and they immediately got their checkbook. Johnson tried to tempt them into haggling over the price, but they insisted on simply giving him what he'd asked. In a separate incident, Johnson had expressed interest in buying their work but admitted he had little money. They mailed him their work as a gift.

By Daniel Gerwin