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12

Must-See Museum Shows of 2015

DIANA THALER
BEETLEMANIA

Ray Johnson's
Ephemera

Tina Barney
Talks Interiors

A portrait of Gary Panter, a man with grey hair and glasses, wearing a black polo shirt, against a blue background.

GARY PANTER
DREAMS WEIRD



A SELECTION OF RAY JOHNSON EPHEMERA

■ Enigmatic in life, deftly funny in his art, Ray Johnson was a quintessential personality of New York's midcentury avant-garde. He counted among his friends such luminaries as James Rosenquist, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol, and created a robust mail art network that circulated among them.

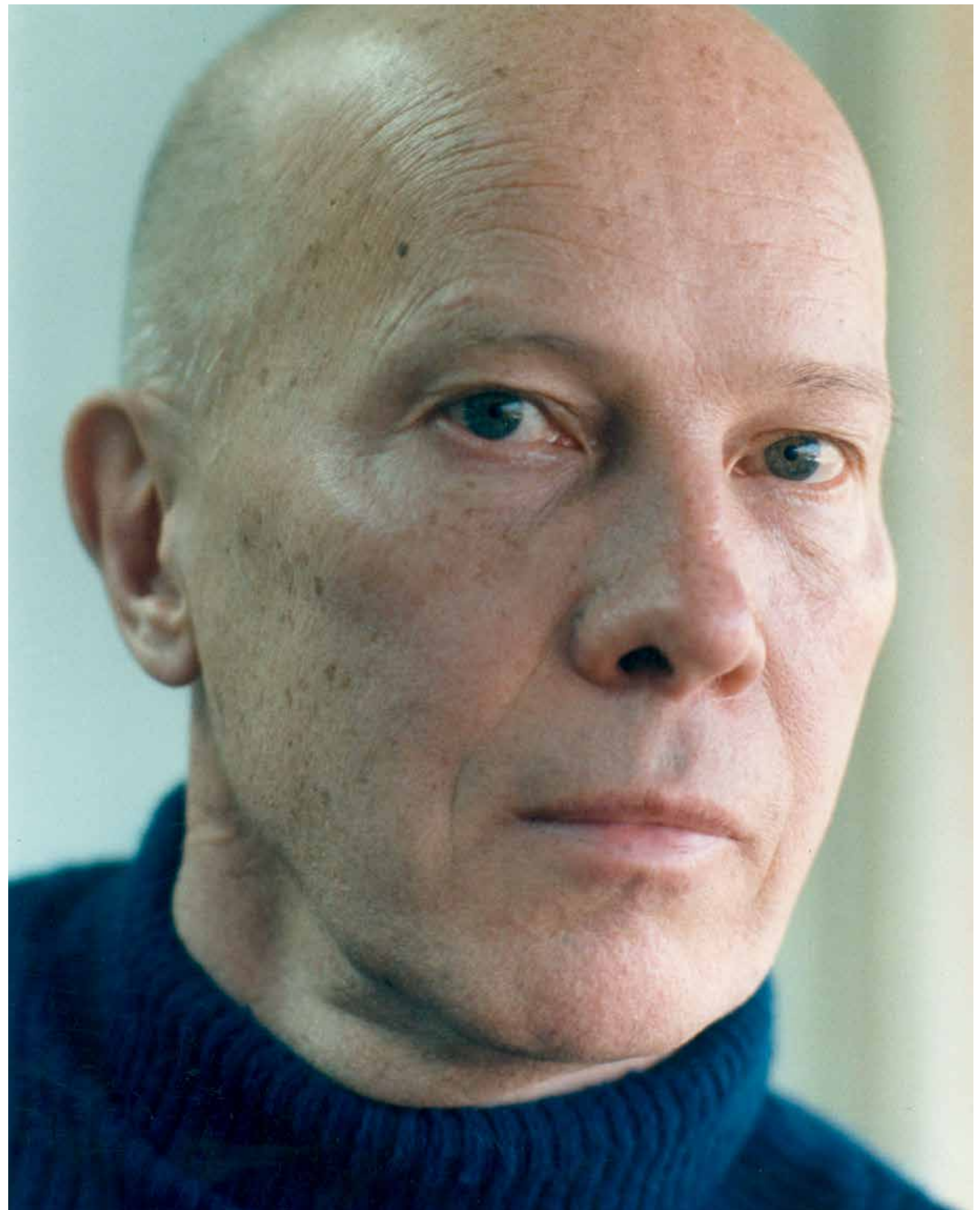
Beyond his art-by-post, Johnson was a prolific creator of collages, performances, and conceptual art, peppered with pop-cultural references, cartoonish imagery, and wordplay. Yet traditional art world gravitas mostly eluded the artist, who died at age 67 in an apparent suicide on January 13, 1995. *How to Draw a Bunny*, a 2004 documentary about Johnson's work, attests to a fringe figure whose death itself might have been a performance. Twenty years after his demise, Johnson's work has attracted renewed attention and inspired a cult following among a younger generation.

"Mail art anticipates the idea of the network," says Frances Beatty, the director of Johnson's estate and president of the New York gallery Richard L. Feigen & Co. She adds that the Internet "has made Ray Johnson fascinating to younger people." Describing his work as "radical, brave, and hilarious," Beatty says that his exquisite-corpse mail art experiments—adorned with commands to alter the work and send it back—"flies in the face of what the market demands."

The recent focus on Johnson has keyed in on his expansive network. Karma, a bookstore and project space in New York's East Village, mounted an exhibition of Johnson's work last fall, which included a wall with his mail art. Earlier in 2014, Siglio Press in Los Angeles published *Not Nothing*, a collection of his writing. "Ray Johnson's Art World," on view through January 16 at Richard L. Feigen & Co., traces the relationship between the artist and his creative correspondents. The show includes work by John Baldessari, Lynda Benglis, Chuck Close, Yoko Ono, and many others. In the spirit of Johnson's rhizomic oeuvre, we present a collection of images from his archive, many of which have not been previously published.

—Wendy Vogel

OPPOSITE:
Ray Johnson
in 1986.



LOMBARDO AND RAY JOHNSON ESTATE AT RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO., NEW YORK



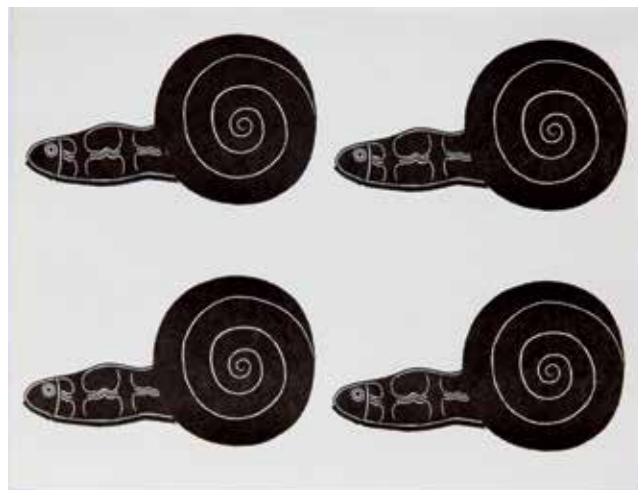
CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
T-shirt worn in
*The Ray Johnson
Correspondence
School 'Jean Dubuffet
Fan Club Meeting'* in
the formal garden of
the Nassau County
Museum of Fine Art,
Roslyn, New York, on
September 21, 1986.

Photocopied mailing
with snails. Snails
were a recurring motif
in Johnson's work,
which sometimes
morphed into
snails and turtles.

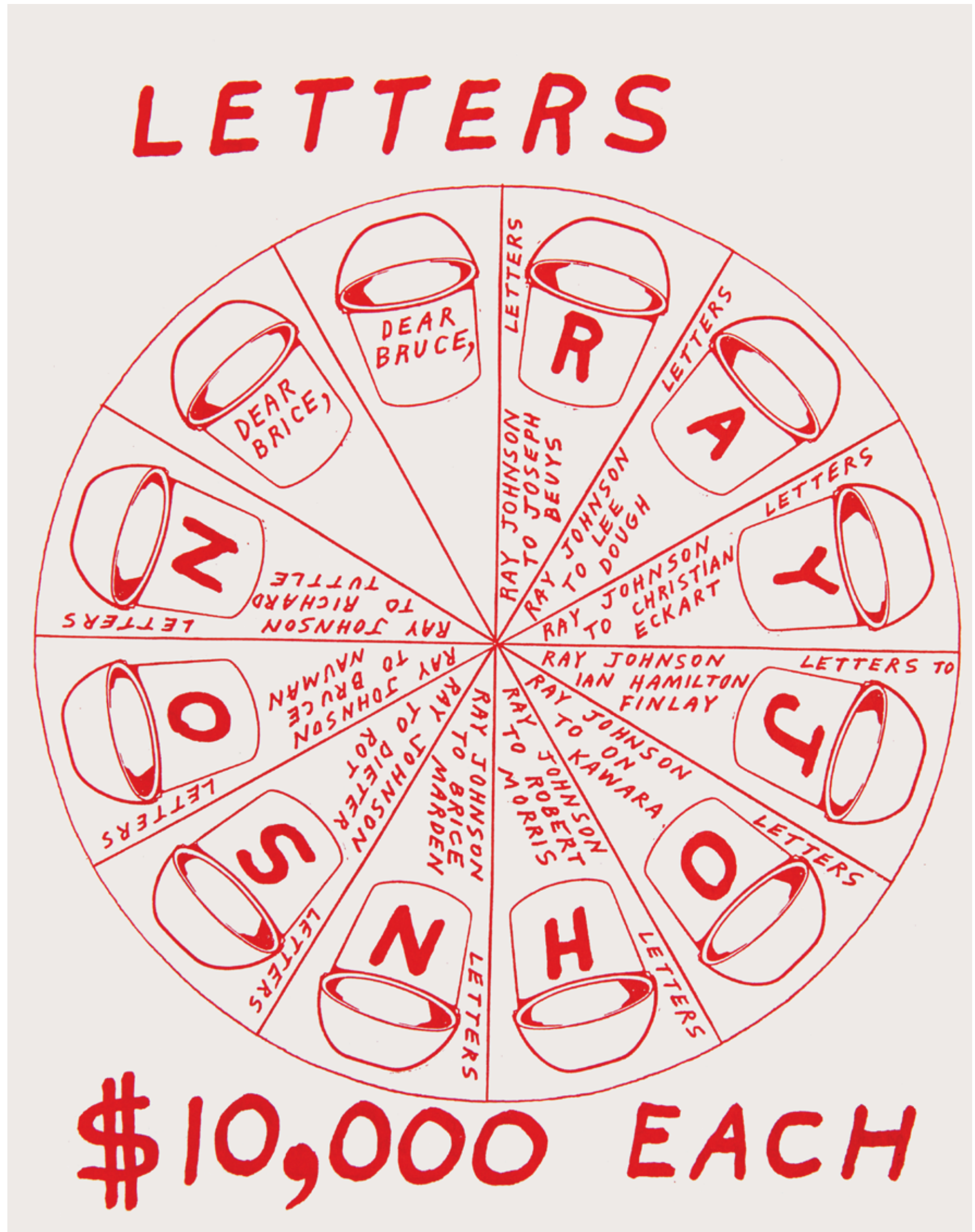
Photocopied mailing
with Japanese image
and Flop Art faces.
Johnson became
interested in Eastern
philosophy when
he worked at the
Orientalia bookstore
in New York in
1949. "Flop Art" is a
play on Pop Art.

An advertisement
for Ray Johnson's
graphic
design business.

OPPOSITE:
Photocopied mailing.
"Letters" wheel
with Ray Johnson
buckets and
inscription "Letters
\$10,000 each."
His pricing was often
tongue-in-cheek.



ALL IMAGES: KRISTINE LARSEN AND RAY JOHNSON ESTATE AT RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO.





ALL IMAGES: KRISTINE LARSEN AND RAY JOHNSON ESTATE AT RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO.



FROM TOP:
Two views of a
jacket worn in
*The Ray Johnson
Correspondence
School 'Jean
Dubuffet Fan
Club Meeting'*
in 1986.

Drawings
from Johnson's
high school
sketchbook,
ca. 1941-42.

OPPOSITE:
A photocopied
mailing. Johnson
often altered
magazine
or book images
by adding a
bunny head or
obscuring a
face. Here he
has done both.
He labeled the
bunny head
Cy Twombly, in
whose fireplace,
according to
legend, Johnson
burned his
early works.

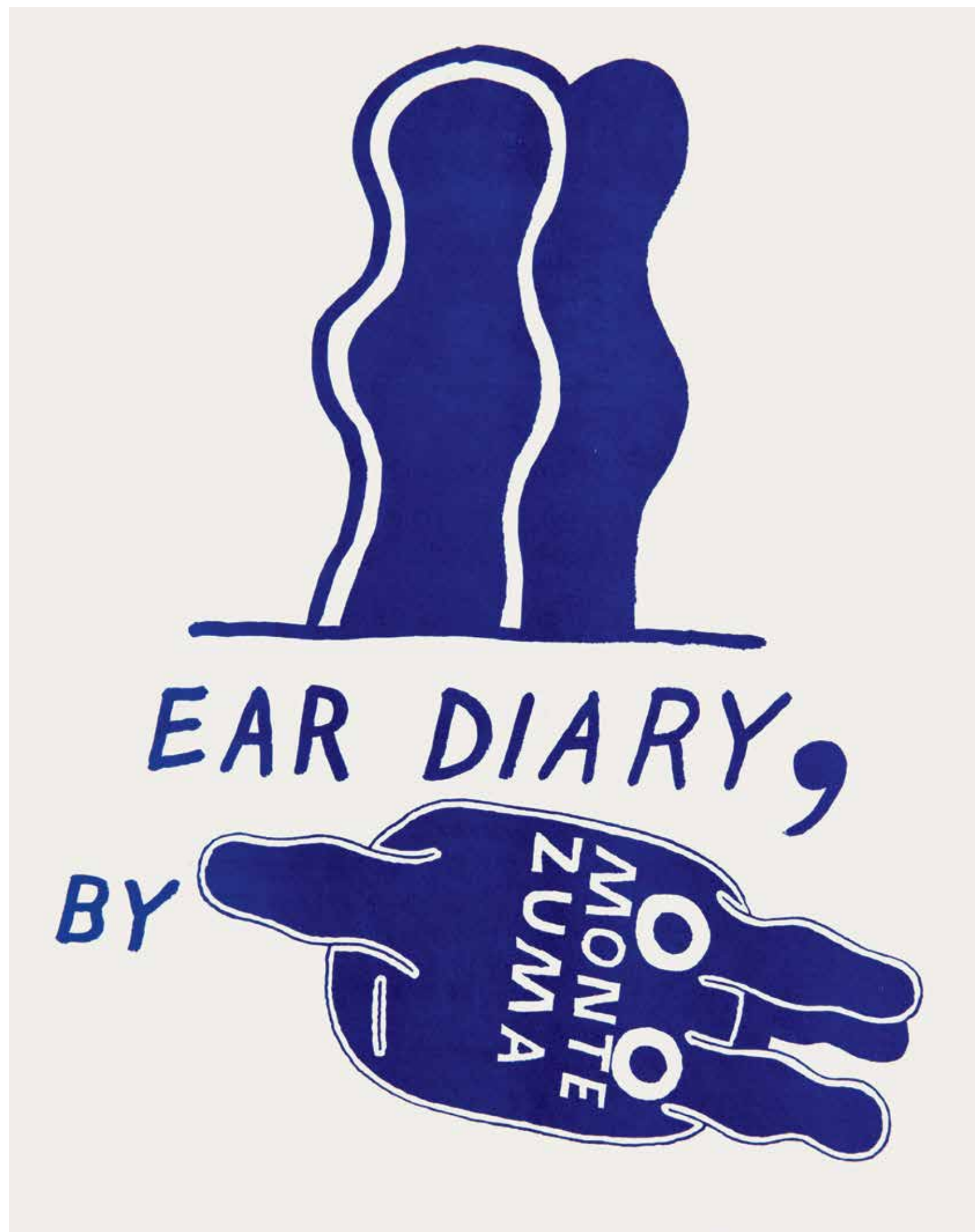


Envelopes from various mail art that Johnson sent to artists. The letter at the center right is from Talking Heads frontman and artist David Byrne. At the lower right is a letter that Johnson sent to his parents from Black Mountain College, where he studied from 1945 to 1948.

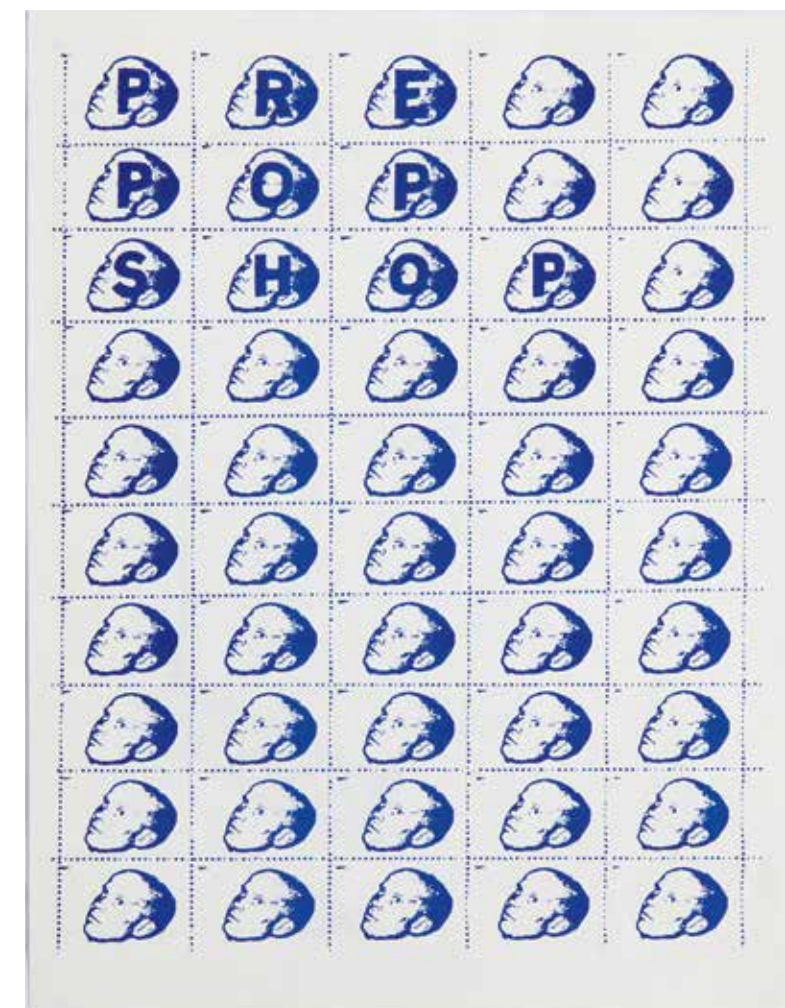
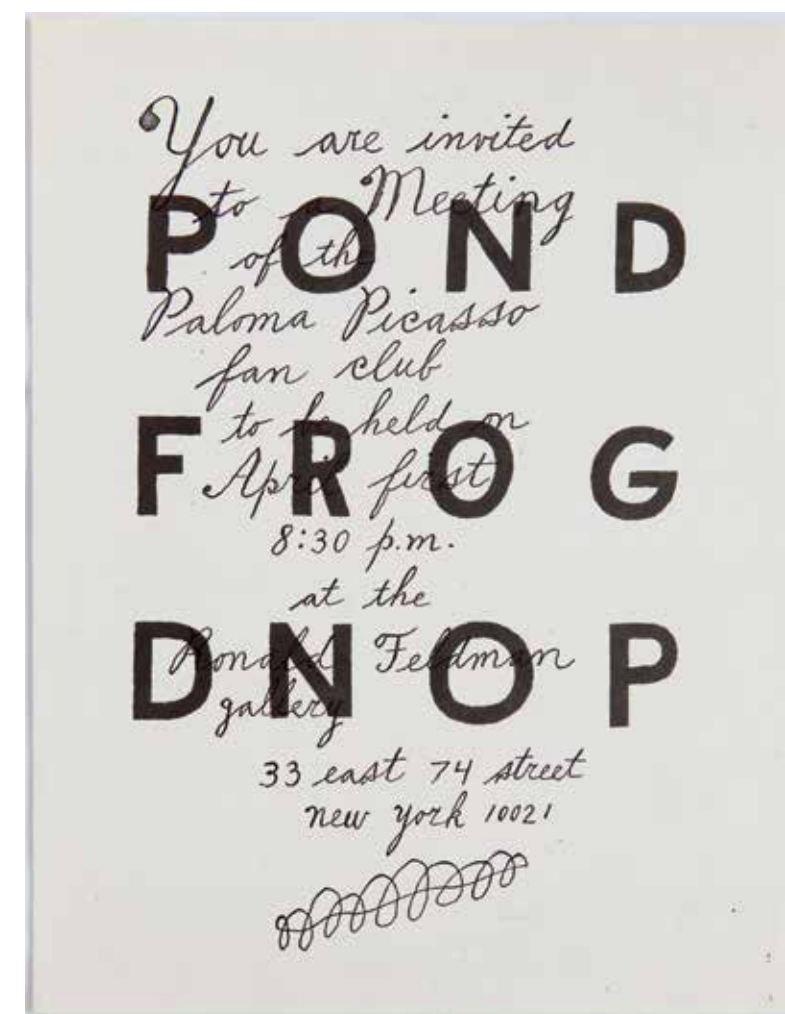
OPPOSITE:
A photocopied mailing for the Paris Correspondence School, a fictional institution.



ALL IMAGES: KRISTINE LARSEN AND RAY JOHNSON ESTATE AT RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO.



ALL IMAGES: KRISTINE LARSEN AND RAY JOHNSON ESTATE AT RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO.



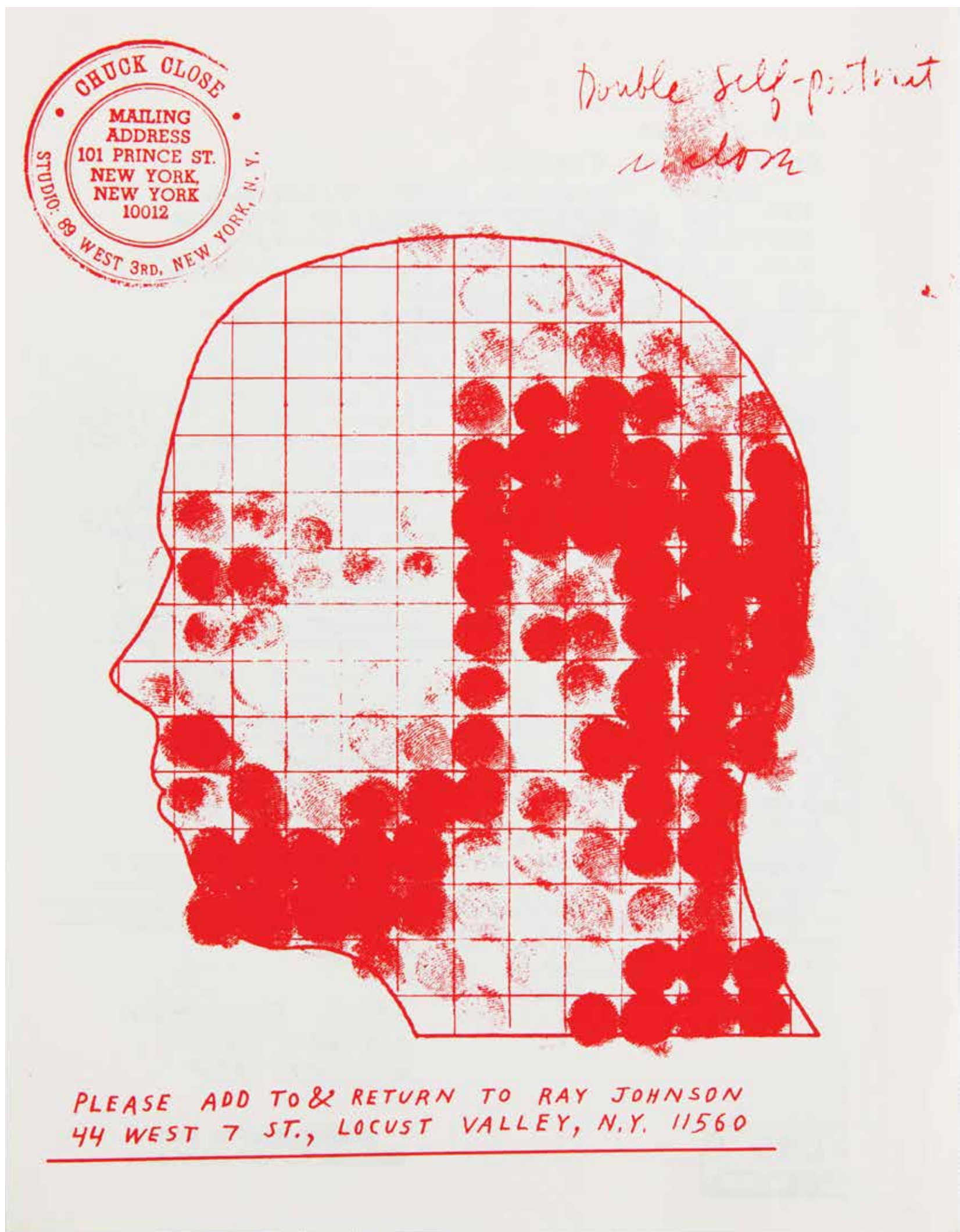
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Photocopied mailing for Paloma Picasso Fan Club meeting with added text "Pond Frog Dnop."

Untitled (Duane Michaels), 1993.
Two collage halves on corrugated cardboard, 13¼ x 8½ in.

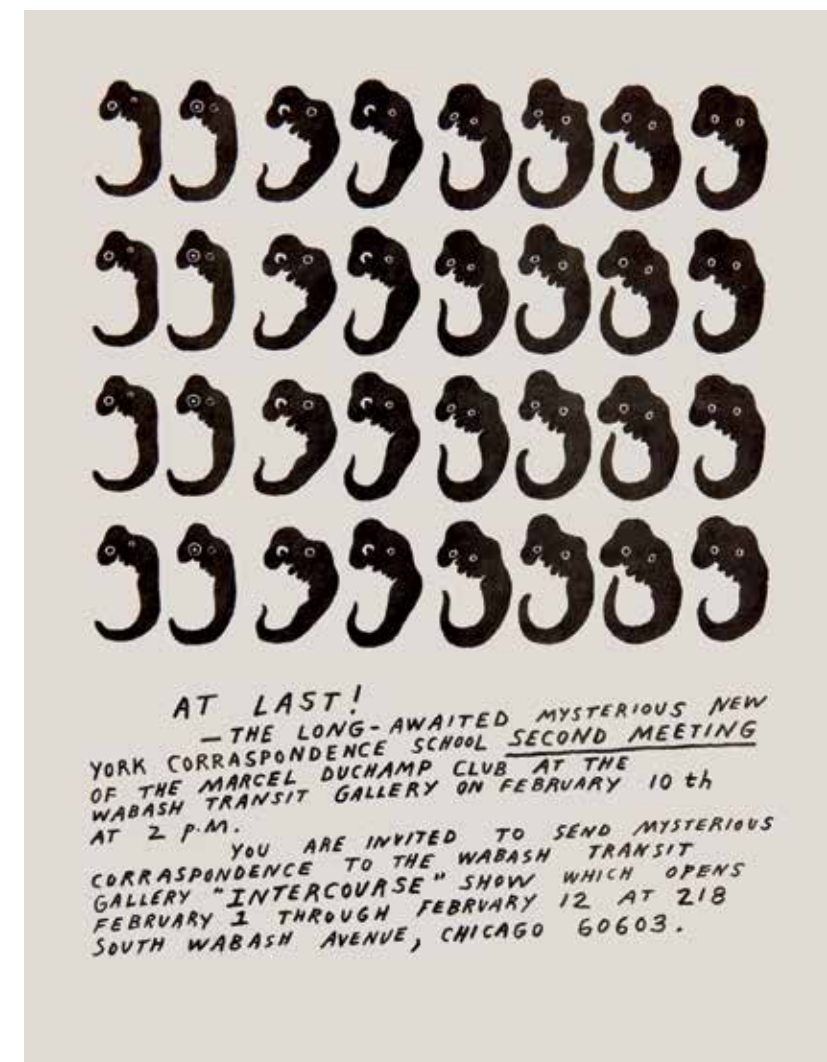
Two "Fake Ray Johnson" bunny heads with inscription "Fake Ray Johnsons Bill Dobbs Gallery New York City." The artist often played with concepts of authenticity.

Double-sided photocopied mailing with Ray Johnson head stamps. The verso of this image shows an image of Naomi Sims, who played the actress Anna May Wong in a performance Johnson organized in 1972.

OPPOSITE:
Verso of photocopied mailing of the Marcel Duchamp Fan Club Meeting, 1972. "Ear Diary" is a play on words and a reference to the ears of Johnson's ubiquitous bunny heads, which appear in the composition.



ALL IMAGES: KRISTINE LARSEN AND RAY JOHNSON ESTATE AT RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Photocopied mailing with "fetus" motifs announcing Marcel Duchamp Fan Club Meeting, 1972.

An ad for Johnson's graphic design business.

A stamp produced by the artist. He later scratched out the word festival.

A collage with images of bathing beauties. Johnson is pictured at center; an image of May Wilson, a frequent collaborator, is inserted at top right.

OPPOSITE: "Double Self-Portrait" photocopied mailing by Chuck Close and Ray Johnson. Close modified a silhouette portrait by Johnson, adding a grid and his thumbprints in the shape of his own beard and facial features. IMP

