

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

Today, sunshine and clouds, not as cold, high 33. Tonight, a bit of snow late, low 30. Tomorrow, wintry mix to rain, high 36. Weather map is on SportsSunday, Page 12.

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Arts & Leisure

The New York Times

SUNDAY, JANUARY 11, 2015

Always on His Own Terms

Ray Johnson evaded art world fame. Now he's an inspiration.

By RANDY KENNEDY

TWENTY YEARS AGO this week, the artist Ray Johnson jumped off a low bridge in Sag Harbor, N.Y., and backstroked placidly out to sea. Two teenage girls saw him plunge into the frigid water and tried to alert the police, but when they found the station closed they went to see a movie instead, a detail many of Mr. Johnson's friends said would have delighted him.

Why he took his life at the age of 67 —

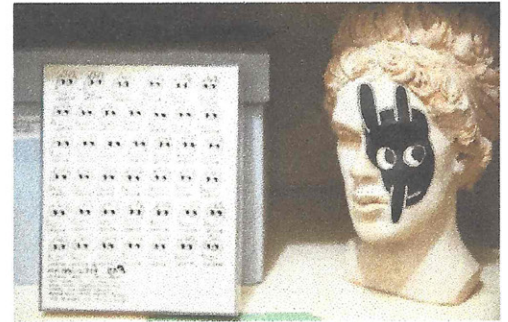
when he was healthy, had money in the bank for the first time and was one of the most revered underground artists of the last half of the 20th century — is a question none of those friends have been able to answer. (The poet Diane di Prima wrote angrily: "I can't imagine what you thought you were doing/what was the point of jumping off that bridge/after so many years of playing it cool.") But in many ways Mr. Johnson conducted his death exactly as he had conducted his life and his work — enigmatically, defiantly on his own terms and with an intense privacy that somehow coexisted with a compulsively

Two Ray Johnson works: a bust painted with a stylized bunny from the 1980s and an untitled collage.

public persona.

Mr. Johnson heralded several art movements, almost simultaneously. He was making work that looked like Pop in the 1950s, years before his friend and sometime rival Andy Warhol did. He was a performance artist before there was a term for such a thing. He mined ground later occupied by Conceptual art (whose preten-

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sions he loved to razz: "Oh dat concept art," says a figure in one of his collages.) And he was the father of mail art, spreading his collages and Delphic text works through a vast web of fellow artists, friends and complete strangers, making him a one-man social-media platform for a pre-Internet age.

But every time mainstream recognition approached, Mr. Johnson — who lived as frugally as a monk and played the art world's holy fool — seemed to dance away. Courted in the 1990s by the pinnacle of commercial acceptance, the Gagosian Gallery, he turned even that courtship into farce by demanding a million dollars each for collages then selling in the four-figure range; they've since advanced only into five figures.

"He was a guerrilla fighter against materialism and fame, and in a sense he's still fighting today," said Frances F. L. Beatty, president of Richard L. Feigen & Co., the gallery that represents Mr. Johnson's estate.

But the art world may be finally starting to conquer Mr. Johnson's will to resist it. A spate of books, exhibitions and museum acquisitions has come along in recent months, as his work has been discovered, yet again, by a generation of younger artists, like Matt Connors, Hanna Liden, Adam McEwen and Harmony Korine. This time, as money and power loom ever more

"We want to start it very early, so it will have time to grow extra arms and legs and heads," she said.

As correspondent and collagist, Mr. Johnson was manically prolific. Even now, bins, binders and file folders full of unseen and largely unstudied material reside in closets — and an unused bathroom — at the East 69th Street townhouse of the Feigen gallery, "the All Baba's cave of Ray's archive," as Ms. Beatty calls it. (Some of that work is on display in a show at the gallery through Friday, "Ray Johnson's World.")

Waiting recently for a visit from curators from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, who were interested in seeing some Johnson works for acquisition, Ms. Beatty flipped on a closet light to show floor-to-ceiling stacks of light-blue archival boxes.

"You could happily, as far as I'm concerned, spend the rest of your life right in here," she said. (A small army of doctoral students and scholars is indeed at work now sorting through his vast output.)

Raised in a working-class family in Detroit, Mr. Johnson hit the ground running as an artist before he was out of his teens. In 1945, he ended up at Black Mountain College, the Modernist hothouse near Asheville, N.C., where he studied with Joseph Albers and Robert Motherwell and began friendships with John Cage, Jasper Johns and the sculptor Richard Lippold, with whom he was romantically involved for many years.

After moving to New York and working as a studio assistant to the painter Ad Reinhardt, he began making works that he called "mosotics" — possibly an anagram of the word "osmotic" — filled to overflowing with the pop-culture imagery from magazines, advertising and television that was starting to saturate society. Elvis Presley and James Dean surfaced repeatedly, like twin deities, and Mr. Johnson often took this work to the streets, displaying it on sidewalks and in Grand Central Terminal to generally perplexed passers-by.

"Some people just didn't get it, and other people like me thought he was an absolute genius," said the painter James Rosenquist, with whom Mr. Johnson corresponded for years, often asking him to forward mailed artworks on to Willem de Kooning.

"Sometimes I did what he asked and sometimes I just couldn't part with them," Mr. Rosenquist said, adding: "I really miss him because I accumulate all these strange things that I'd like to mail him, but I can't because he's not there."



RAY JOHNSON ESTATE/RICHARD L. FEIGEN & CO.



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powerfully in art circles, it seems to be Mr. Johnson's role as a heroic-comic Bartleby that makes him particularly attractive to younger artists. But the shape-shifting ways in which he operated outside art's normal channels — through the post office street performances and artist's books — also resonate for 21st-century artists: whose work fits uneasily into the conventions of museums and galleries.

Performa, the performance-art biennial, is organizing a tribute to Mr. Johnson for its 2015 iteration, which takes place in November. One aspect will be the dissemination — through ads, mailings and websites — of Johnson material, like a silhouette of his profile that he mailed out during his lifetime and asked people to alter and send on. The idea, said RoseLee Goldberg, Performa's founder and director, is to stimulate a similar kind of free-form exchange now, online, on paper, and through other means, with Mr. Johnson as presiding spirit.



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"He was a guerrilla fighter against materialism and fame," Frances F. L. Beatty, above center left, president of the Richard L. Feigen & Co. gallery, said of the artist Ray Johnson (1927-1995), above far left. Much of Mr. Johnson's work is kept at the Feigen gallery, below, where it is being studied. Above center, a collection of personalized stamps Mr. Johnson used on his untitled collages, some on display here. Collages like these were mailed out, and modified, by other artists.

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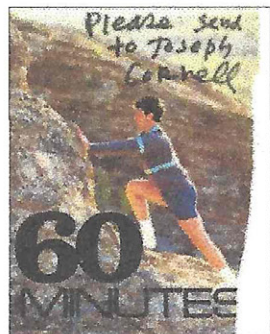
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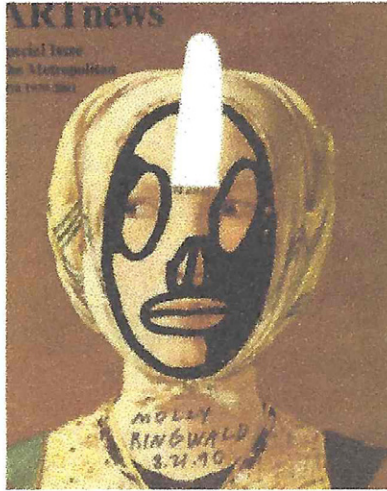
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Influenced by ideas of chance and Zen Buddhism, Mr. Johnson came to develop a hieroglyphic-like language in which image and word melted into each other, a language so complex it cried out not for curators but military code-breakers.

William S. Wilson, one of Mr. Johnson's closest friends and a leading scholar of his work, recalled the almost religious gravity with which Mr. Johnson viewed not only making art but also putting it into the world. Mr. Wilson once drove Mr. Johnson to see the publisher Harry Abrams, who was interested in buying work. Mr. Johnson emerged from Mr. Abrams's office in a fury with his briefcase of collages, Mr. Wilson said, "and flung himself on my lap crying because Abrams had asked him to throw in a 13th collage for free if he bought a dozen, as if Ray was selling eggs."

Of course, such a stance meant that developing a market for Mr. Johnson's work during his lifetime was next to impossible, and in many ways his critical stature still suffers because of this. "He kind of landed by default in the book and ephemera world, and to a large extent that's really where his work has been living," said Brendan Dugan, owner of the NoHo bookstore and gallery Karma, which organized an exhibition of late Johnson work last fall.

Mr. Dugan said he had been drawn to Mr. Johnson in part because of his avid following among younger, punk-influenced artists but also those whose work seems to have little affinity with Mr. Johnson's, like Mr. Connors, an abstract painter who is featured in "The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World" on view now at the Museum of Modern Art.

In an email, Mr. Connors said: "I am always very excited by artists who create their own very specific codes, languages and grammars. He's speaking his own language and talking to and about specific people, but he also loves to share it with you." The effect is "kind of like a queer and gossipy downtown Joseph Beuys."

For the show at Karma, Mr. Dugan was allowed to pore over reams of paper works in the Feigen archive, made by Mr. Johnson mostly in the last decade of his life, "and what I saw was a total discovery to me, because a lot of it was very raw and very punk," he said. "Here was this guy in his 60s, and he's still up to it, to the very end, pulling in new material from the culture and making this very weird stuff that feels very contemporary now."

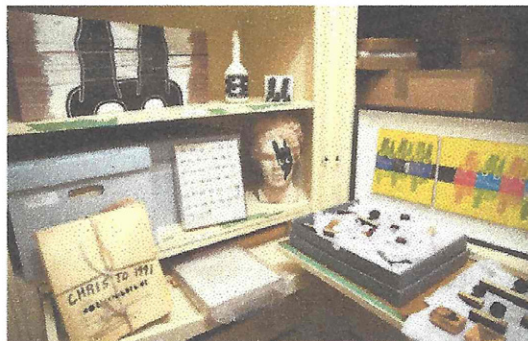
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Ms. Beatty, who struggled for years to get Mr. Johnson to agree to a major exhibition at the Feigen gallery, remembered that he called her three days before he died. "And he said, 'Listen, Frances, I'm planning to do something big and after that, you'll finally be able to do your show.' And I had no idea what he was talking about, but I thought maybe he was actually giving in, after playing cat and mouse for so long.

"Well, of course, little did I know, and that's how it always was with Ray — how little did we know," Ms. Beatty said, adding, "It was a lived-for-art life, 100 percent, all the way to the end."



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