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Processes of identification in Ray Johnson's correspondence art and his mailings to Henry Martin"

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Introduction

In institutional and academic circles, Ray Johnson's collages, and his correspondence, in particular, have gained new attention posthumously. Johnson's work has been shown in numerous smaller and larger exhibitions, including several significant shows that focused on his correspondence activities since his death in 1995. Currently, at least two books on Ray Johnson have appeared with prominent academic publishing houses.[1] Nevertheless, Johnson's work is still mostly unknown to a broader audience.

Much of the more recent literature on Johnson addresses the network or system of the New York Correspondence School, or NYCS, which is the most commonly used name for his correspondence activities. In most cases, however, this perspective is primarily used to register Johnson's art as a critical reflection on the role of the artist and his work in the network or system of the art world, thus, to register it as a kind of early institutional critique. I do not think that these observations are incorrect. However, such an image of Johnson's artistic practice remains incomplete unless some elements are added. A more knowledgeable and appropriate insight into the various effects of Johnson's artistic practice can only be obtained by incorporating the complex strategies of the language-games and the performative effects of the correspondence's content into the analysis. Last but not least, it is the processes of subversion and transformation of identity and of (auctorial) subjectivity—effects of the correspondence practice—which receive the highest attention in this thesis, and which I argue are the most important and productive aspects of Johnson's interconnected artistic practices. One reason why the recent literature on Johnson's correspondence misses these qualities might be found in the fact that much more attention is paid to the structural conditions of the postal network than to the mailed items. If, by way of exception, the often difficult-to-interpret objects in the envelopes are discussed, it is only by tearing a letter out of the context of the correspondence or by using a single small collage as evidence for a previously formulated thesis. Much of what is said about the actual contents of the envelopes is based on hearsay and remains vague. No study exists that accounts for a larger body of correspondence.

[1] One of them is currently being written by Johanna Gosse, Assistant Professor of Art History & Visual Culture at the University of Idaho. Her book project, *Imitation of Life: Ray Johnson and Network Aesthetics*, was awarded an Arts Writers Grant from the Creative Capital/Andy Warhol Foundation in 2015.

This thesis aims to remedy this situation. In 2010, Henry Martin sold his collection of the 140 letters that had been sent to him by Ray Johnson to the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok) in Vienna, Austria. Martin and Johnson had been introduced to each other by their common friend, William Wilson, in 1961 or 1962. Soon after that, the artist began sending enigmatic letters to Martin, who was an undergraduate student at the time. Insecure at first about how to react, Martin eventually decided to join in what the two of them would later refer to as "the p. o. game."[2] After moving to New York in 1963, he would often meet Johnson, who would, as Martin remembers, "take [him] to places, introduce [him] to people and things."[3] Their relationship turned into a friendship that would last for over thirty years, until the artist's death in 1995. The 140 envelopes that Johnson sent to Martin over a period of 28 years—from January 1963 to August 1990—constitute the material basis of my study. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I had to limit the scope of my investigation to the fifty-five letters that Ray Johnson sent to Henry Martin between 1963 and 1965. The reason for the restriction to this relatively short period lies with Martin's permanent relocation to Italy in 1965. From that point onwards, the correspondence between him and Johnson changes and turns into a typically known correspondence of written letters, an exchange of news from the art scene and their private lives. The first part of the correspondence dating from January 1963 to July 1965, on the other hand, consists of envelopes filled with the kind of fragmentary material that is typical of Johnson's postal activities of the first half of the 1960s. Because this thesis is specifically interested in Johnson's handling of the correspondence network otherwise known as the New York Correspondence School (NYCS), it was thus necessary to focus on this portion of the correspondence at the Vienna museum. The sheer mass and diversity of the items in these envelopes made it impossible to analyze all the objects in this study or make any significant claims about all of the fifty-five letters. The particular focus of this study on specific aspects of Johnson's practice also explains why a limited number of items was selected for individual analysis. Nevertheless, the items that are referred to in this study came from seventeen different envelopes out of the total of fifty-five, thus constituting a good sample of Johnson's letters to Martin in that period.

During my first encounters with the mailings at the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok), the materials revealed themselves very slowly and with much difficulty. It

[2] Ray Johnson in letters to Henry Martin from September 20, 1965, and October 11, 1965, mumok—Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, inventory number ÖL-Stg 434/0.
[3] Henry Martin in Held 2015, p. 109.

seemed challenging to make connections within the individual envelopes or to identify the references with which Johnson might have endowed individual objects. Among the contents that were clearly recognizable were the countless wordplays and puns. Some of them seemed to include double meanings, which were directed at sexual desire between men. I knew from the literature that Ray Johnson had been struggling with the heterosexist norms of his time since his high school years and was later known as a gay artist. I also knew that Johnson was notorious for his puns and the overload of multiple-meaning in his works. The question seemed to arise as to whether the two points of reference, namely Johnson's problems with identifying himself and his artistic strategies, had a deeper relation in his mailings to Henry Martin from 1963 to 1965. In trying to answer this question, *nota bene*, no essentialist classification of Johnson's art as an example of a "queer aesthetics" should be made. For Douglas Crimp,

> identification is, of course identification with an other, which means that identity is never identical to itself. This alienation of identity from the self it constructs . . . does not mean that any proclamation of identity will only be partial, that it will be exceeded by other aspects of identity, but rather that identity is always a relation, never simply a positivity. . . . And if identity is relational, then perhaps we can begin to rethink identity politics as a politics of relational identities formed through political identifications that constantly remake those identities.[4]

It is for these reasons that this study follows the art historian Amelia Jones in the assumption that, in order to evade the problems that arise in the wake of binary conceptions of fixed identity positions, "identification/disidentification (and meaning in general)" should be understood as "processes that are relational, flowing among subjects."[5] Ray Johnson's multi-faceted artistic practice, with its strong processual components, and which repeatedly plays with the multiplicity of meanings and identities, is particularly suitable for such an analysis. In particular, Johnson's correspondence, which plays on the infinite potentiality of attributing different meanings to found material in dialogical and networked situations while simultaneously constructing coalitional identifications through similarities and analogies, calls for an analysis in the interrelational and durational terms proposed by Amelia Jones. This study's main objective is thus to trace in the correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin between 1963 and 1965 those identification processes that contribute to a transformation of the models of subjectivity and (sexual) identity dominant in the New York art scene at the

[4] Crimp 1992, p. 12.
[5] Jones 2012, p. 8.

time, as well as in post-war US society. The term "correspondence machine," which is used occasionally in this thesis, is intended to emphasize the processuality and the open-endedness of Johnson's manic production. It is a variation on the term "desiring-machines," as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Contrary to "technical social machines, . . . desiring-machines . . . continually break down as they run, and in fact run only when they are not functioning properly: the product is always an offshoot of production, implanting itself upon it like a graft, and at the same time the parts of the machine are the fuel that makes it run."[6] These and other properties of the "desiring-machines" are easily recognizable in the moments of Johnson's correspondence where conventional communication breaks down because of the ostensible illegibility of its contents or because of strong ambiguities. Because of this breakdown, however, other aspects of the mailed material appear, feeding back into the processes of signification, and forming new and ephemeral alliances of meaning. Johnson undermines the technical machine of the postal service and the idea of a clear transmission of meaning through the sending of pictures and letters between two individuals by appropriating it, thereby turning it into his correspondence machine. The artist fuels this machine with fragments of magazines, advertisements, and old letters; with obscure slang and misspelled words; and with other broken signs, images, and objects that have been torn out of context. He thus transforms the signifying chain of the postal machine into the "chain of decoding and deterritorialization" of the correspondence machine whose signs are "under the order of the included disjunctions where everything is possible." If the mailed items effectively form codes, these same items undo the codes in the next moment "by unfolding along a molecular fiber that includes all the possible figures."[7]

After a short chronological overview of the most important stages of Johnson's artistic work of the 1950s and 1960s, the second chapter of this study opens up a field of references within which Ray Johnson's artistic practice is to be understood as part of developments in the post-war New York art scene. The subjectivity and identity models that were produced and reproduced in the then-dominant New York School play a role as well as those responses to these models that arose from emergent artistic positions. Ray Johnson's education at Black Mountain College and his proximity to other gay artists such as John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg—personally and artistically—are therefore also covered in chapter 2. Situating Johnson's practice in the field described thus contributes to enhancing the understanding of the

[6] Deleuze and Guattari 2000, p. 31.
[7] Deleuze and Guattari 2000, p 328.

historical relevance of his artistic practice, as well as that of the so-called neo-avant-garde of the post-war period.

The third chapter is then devoted to a closer analysis of the workings of Johnson's postal activities, the “New York Correspondence School,” or “New York Correspondance School,” as Ray Johnson often called his practice. The comparison of the findings of the mailings at the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok) with a description of his correspondence that Johnson himself wrote in 1964, verifies the assumption that the contents of the envelopes that Johnson sent to Henry Martin may be considered representative of his correspondence activities of the early to mid-1960s. This chapter also expands and consolidates the queer-theoretical foundations of the investigation of Johnson's work. In addition to the authors mentioned above, Jones and Sedgwick, above all José Esteban Muñoz's interpretation of Ray Johnson's work as a manifestation of a “queer utopia” is put to use and weighed against the readings of other authors. The application of the theoretical concepts developed in chapter three concerning the correspondence activities leads to the conclusion that the two most important structural aspects of the NYCS in terms of concepts of identity and subjectivity are to be found in their processuality and their interrelationality.

The fourth chapter aims to review, sharpen, and supplement the theses regarding Ray Johnson's postal activities that were developed in chapter three, using the material of Johnson's mailings to Henry Martin. A selection from the collection of objects sent by Johnson over three years shows that a number of objects that follow similar artistic strategies can be found throughout the entire period, and in various constellations. The groups I have formed within this selection serve as an indication of connections between the various mailings, like crossing threads that together weave the fabric (*textus*, in Latin) of the correspondence. The groups are not designed as exclusive, but as overlapping areas. First, contents are introduced that focus on Johnson and Martin's relationship and shared experiences. This is followed by objects that employ mechanisms that establish or strengthen the interconnection of NYCS participants. The third grouping includes a series of contents that Johnson uses to provide recipients with verbal or visual puns that refer to gay desire and gay culture in a more or less direct way. In a striking overlay with these “queer” contents, the fourth group presents content that Johnson uses to demonstrate empathy for the struggle of another social minority against discrimination and structural violence. Thus, it is shown how the correspondence establishes a coalitional and intersectional axis between the minority subject position of the gay white man Ray Johnson and

that of the straight African American man Henry Martin. The fifth group consists of other examples of Johnson's puns, which in many cases manifest the split of identities that Johnson's longtime friend, William S. Wilson, associated with the artist's inner division. The sixth and final group that I designate collects all materials from the correspondence with which Ray Johnson staged his subject position as an artist in the networks of the art world.

As a result, the examination of the concrete material of the letters to Henry Martin confirms the theses elaborated in the previous chapters. In his correspondence in the NYCS network, Ray Johnson infiltrates conventional models of rigid identities and one-dimensional attribution of meaning using a variety of strategies. These artistic strategies promote an understanding of signification and identification as fluid, open processes in interrelational networks between persons and things. In his correspondence, Johnson performs his fluid and multi-layered subject position in relation to his friends, to other actors in the art world, and to his own art production. He performs his own identification as a gay man in times of powerful anti-homosexual social currents. He also performs his roles as a joker and a clown, as a "switcher" between insider and outsider positions in the field of art. Ultimately, it is his empathy towards the addressees of his mailings, who themselves become senders and authors, which keeps Johnson's correspondence machine running for more than 30 years.

Despite the increased attention that Ray Johnson's work has received since his death in 1995, Johnson still appears as a footnote in popular narratives of American art of the 1950s and 1960s. Possible reasons for this are of several types. It is with certainty that the overwhelming complexity of Johnson's artistic production has made a swift evaluation of its artistic value, if not impossible, substantially more difficult. The dense interweaving of various artistic techniques and strategies exhibited by his works has, in any case, prevented his practice from being categorized as pop or conceptual art, or any other of the trends emerging in the 1960s. Lucy Lippard, for example, comments on this in a catalog entry for Johnson's large posthumous exhibit at the Whitney Museum in 1999: "While I wrote a good deal about Pop, Conceptualism, and Surrealism in the 1960s and 1970s, it never occurred to me to place [Ray Johnson] in any of these contexts, although with hindsight I can identify individual works that would make a good case for any one of them."[8] Instead, Johnson was perceived either as a collage artist of lower significance, as the organizer of curious meetings of the New York scene, or as the father

[8] Lippard 1999, p. 142.

of Mail Art. Ultimately, Johnson is "architect of his own obscurity," as his gallerist Richard L. Feigen put it.[9] At a young age, the artist avoided regular exhibitions and explored alternative ways of presenting his works. After one and a half decades of bustling exhibition activity, from 1978 onwards he did not allow commercial galleries to exhibit his works. Johnson's reasons for this are not entirely transparent, but in line with his comments on gallerists made to Henry Martin, may have to do with his ever-growing frustration with the same art market mechanisms he routinely traced in his parody mail-outs.

Hence, this thesis represents an attempt to contribute to an art historiography that does not only seek to question the official canon and to supplement it with previously marginal positions—positions that were not driven upwards by the mechanisms of the art market and the institutional networks, but were deliberately and repeatedly withdrawn from them. It also aims to pursue a form of art history that is not limited to forcing an artist's multi-faceted and multi-layered practice into one of the standard categories (neo-dada, pop, conceptual, institutional critique etc.) that are set forth and reproduced in this discipline. Consequently, the comparison with other similar artistic practices is not the primary intention of this work. To simply discuss four or five examples of the contents of Johnson's countless letters to members of the NYCS, and to relate those examples to other artists' practices, would not do justice to the complex strategies at work in Johnson's postal practice. Instead, this thesis focuses on a more in-depth analysis of Johnson's artistic strategies, with a focus on the material of the letters sent by Johnson to Henry Martin. It is only by looking closely that one can discern the wit and intelligence of Johnson's operations, and the transformative potential of his dealings with names, words, images, meanings, identity and difference. The necessity of studying the sheer mass of mailed fragments that constitutes the collected mailings sent by Johnson to Henry Martin also explains the selection of the monographic model for this master's thesis. There are, after all, 418 different items in the correspondence from 1963 to 1965 that this thesis investigates. Although much has been written about Johnson's correspondence activities, there is currently no investigation into a coherent body of mail to the same person.

The relevance of contributing to what has already been written about Johnson's artistic practice, however, arises from yet another reason. While it is a matter of course in the contemporary art world to look at artistic positions from the vantage points of feminist theory, gender studies or

[9] Richard L. Feigen, quoted in Schuyff 1999, p. 27, and in Peter Marks, "Friends of an Enigmatic Artist See a Riddle in His Death." *New York Times*, February 12, 1995. URL: https://www.nytimes.com /1995/02/12/nyregion/friends-of-an-enigmatic-artist-see-a-riddle-in-his-death.html (accessed August 12, 2019).

queer studies, this applies only to a minimal extent to the works of artists of the pre-Stonewall era.[10] Jonathan D. Katz and Caroline A. Jones have made valuable contributions to placing the work of John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg or Jasper Johns in a relation to their identity as gay men in a heteronormative and homophobic social environment. Having said this, it must be stressed that the contributions of Katz and Jones are anything but mainstream in the field of art history. In most popular monographs on Cage, Rauschenberg, and Johns, their sexual identity, if anything, is only touched on in passing, relativizing their role in their work.[11] While in the literary sciences queer-theoretically informed readings of great writers such as those of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick received much attention in the 1990s, a queer art history seems still in its early stages. It should be noted, however, that it is not the primary purpose of this work to present Ray Johnson's work as mainly "queer art." In dealing with the topics of subjectivity and identity in his work, however, one should not ignore the fact that the artist's personal experiences in a homophobic and discriminatory social environment are manifested significantly in this work, precisely in relation to these themes. Amelia Jones contends that there is a widespread belief that we are living in a "post-identity" phase of Euro-American history, in which questions of race, sex, gender, and sexuality have supposedly become irrelevant. However, it remains as urgent as ever to remind ourselves both of the still ongoing "systematic violence perpetrated against a vast range of subjects across the world based upon their presumed identities," and of the "history of identity politics and the past that enabled whatever freedoms are had in the present."[12] It is mainly for this reason that, for Jones, "acknowledging processes of identification is key to performing an honest, politically viable art history or criticism for the 21st century."[13]

When writing an academic thesis about an artistic practice that has not received the same critical attention and commercial success as its immediate contemporaries, one has to ask oneself about the possible effect that this renewed attention to an artist could have on the canonization of his/her work. In the case of a Master's thesis, the effect will admittedly be minimal, but this study might lead the author to further investigations and publications, and even the conception of a museum exhibition. Conversely, one might ask about the possible effects of a particular

[10] On June 28, 1969, a police raid of the gay bar "Stonewall Inn" at 51 and 53 Christopher Street in New York was met with resistance that led to a series of demonstrations by members of the gay community. These demonstrations are widely considered to mark a significant turning point in the history of the fight for LGBTQ rights in the USA and worldwide.
[11] Cf. Joseph 2007, 67.
[12] Jones 2012, p. xx.
[13] Jones 2012, p. 239.

canonization with regard to the future reception of the artistic practice? Since the analysis performed in this thesis is explicitly rooted in a queer minoritarian perspective, the specific canon being discussed must first be clarified. Is it the originally—and arguably still—patriarchal, Eurocentric, and heteronormative master-canon? Alternatively, it could be a specifically queer canon, as one instance of an infinite plurality of mini-canons. In the comparable situation of gay studies/queer studies discussing literary texts, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it this way: "The relation of gay studies to debates on the literary canon is, and had best be, tortuous."[14] The same applies when relating an analysis of art practices that is informed by queer theory to debates regarding the art historical canon. It does not really matter if we speak about different canons or about inserting one's research into the master-narrative of Euro-American art history—or its extension, the so-called "Global" art history—vis-à-vis the writing of different minoritarian art histories. The problems are very similar. For Sedgwick, in terms of literary studies,

> the most productive canon effects . . . have occurred, not from within the mechanism either of the master-canon or of a postfractural plurality of canons, but through the interaction between these two models of the canon. In this interaction the new pluralized mini-canons have largely failed to dislodge the master-canon from its empirical centrality in such institutional practices as publishing and teaching, although they have made specific works and authors newly available for inclusion in the master-canon. The more important effect, however, has been to challenge, if not the empirical centrality, then the conceptual anonymity of the master canon.[15]

As an example, Sedgwick names the effect that feminist studies have had on the literary master-canon:

> On the one hand confronting it with alternative canons of women's literature, and on the other hand reading rebelliously within the master-canon, has not only somewhat rearranged the table of contents for the master-canon but, more important, given it a title. If it is in still important respects the master-canon it nevertheless cannot escape naming itself with every syllable also a particular canon, a canon of mastery, in this case of men's mastery over, and over against, women.[16]

[14] Sedgwick 2008, p. 48.
[15] Sedgwick 2008, p. 48.
[16] Sedgwick 2008, p. 48.

There are more complications involved, however, with trying to apply the same model to the closely related, yet differently structured, form of oppression that is modern homophobia. There is a side to the struggle against homophobic oppression and anti-homosexual violence that cannot be mobilized from within any closet. As Sedgwick reminds us, "it requires very many people's risky and affirming acts of the most explicit self-identification as members of the minority affected."[17] The theoretician argues that, therefore, the critique and the dismantlement of the master-canon, and the naming of it as a canon of mastery, can only be part of the strategy of an antihomophobic project. It must work, Sedgwick continues, in a kind of "pincers movement" with the re-creation of minority gay canons from currently noncanonical material.[18] This thesis attempts to perform this kind of "pincers movement." In recalling the homophobic environment of the New York art scene in the era after World War II, it tries to make the conditions of the canonization of important gay artists visible as those of the closet. By stressing Ray Johnson's personal identification as a gay man in a historically homophobic society and connecting his identity struggles to the processes of identification and subjectivation in his artistic operations, it tries to position the, at best, semi-canonical figure of Ray Johnson firmly in the minoritarian queer art historical canon.

A short note on terminology seems necessary when dealing with the terms *queer*, *gay,* and *homosexual*. Even though some of the most important considerations in this thesis draw on scholarly work from the fields of queer theory, queer studies or queer art history, it seems somewhat wrong to simply equate *queer* with *gay* when operating in the historical context of the post-war USA. In the 1950s and 1960s, the word *queer* was one of the most common pejorative terms used against people with same-sex desire. According to historian George Chauncey, *queer* had been used by the 1910s and 1920 by "men who identified themselves as different from other men primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status."[19] Chauncey quotes a man active in New York's gay world in the 1920s who recalls that "Queer wasn't derogatory, it wasn't like kike or nigger. . . . It just meant you were different."[20] However, Chauncey sees the late 1930s and especially World War II as marking a turning point in the usage of the terms *queer* and *gay*:

[17] Sedgwick 2008, p. 58.
[18] Sedgwick 2008, p. 58.
[19] Chauncey 1994, p. 101.
[20] Chauncey 1994, p. 101.

> The term *gay* began to catch on in the 1930s, and its primacy was consolidated during the war. By the late 1940s, younger men were chastising older men who still used *queer*, which the younger men now regarded as demeaning. . . . Younger men rejected *queer* as a pejorative name that others had given them which highlighted their difference from other men.[21]

It was not until the 1980s that the term *queer* was re-appropriated by activist groups such as Queer Nation. Beginning in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *queer* has since served as the central term for the emerging academic disciplines of queer studies and queer theory. The term *homosexual* was coined in 1869 by the Swiss doctor Karoly Maria Benkert. It entered Euro-American discourse during the last third of the nineteenth century.[22] It has since marked same-sex desire as a deviation from a privileged and naturalized heterosexuality. For the queer-studies pioneer Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, there is "no satisfactory rule for choosing between the usages 'homosexual' and 'gay,' outside of a post-Stonewall context where 'gay' must be preferable since it is the explicit choice of a large number of people to whom it refers."[23] Given the consolidation of the term *gay* during World War II as noted by Chauncey, and the clinical connotation of the term *homosexual*, it seems legitimate to extend this preference for the usage of *gay* over *homosexual* to the decade prior to Stonewall. Therefore, I have tried to use the word *gay* as the standard term for all matters that have to do with the affirmative (self-)identification of artists and beholders, and the senders and receivers of the correspondence. My usage of the terms *homosexual* and *homosexuality*, on the other hand, is limited to the descriptions of the oppressive and discriminatory homophobic and heteronormative social conditions of the post-World War II era in the United States, and the psychological and emotional consequences of these conditions for the individual. Through the usage of the term *queer*, I have tried to designate specific instances in which the queer-theoretical concepts surrounding processes of subjectivation and identification resonate with my reading of Ray Johnson's artistic practice.

With regard to what has been written on Ray Johnson and his correspondence activities, his lifelong friend, fan, and expert of his art, William S. Wilson, deserves special mention. Wilson taught as a professor of English in Queens College, City University of New York from 1962 until the early 1990s. His first encounter with Ray Johnson took place in the artist's studio in 1956. Wilson last talked to him on the day of Johnson's death, "that final Friday in January

[21] Chauncey 1994, p. 19.
[22] Sedgwick 2008, p. 2.
[23] Sedgwick 2008, p. 16.

1995, in his brief collect-call announcing a mail art event that he was going to perform."[24] Beginning in the 1960s, Wilson would write many articles and essays on Ray Johnson, until shortly before his own death in 2016. As early as 1966, Wilson was describing the NYCS as "a curious tissue of relationships, a society of sorts, associating people who might think in images."[25] In a philosophical reading of Johnson's correspondence, Wilson points to problems of identity, difference, and repetition, analogy and focus, which he sees Johnson as playing with in the construction of his correspondence. The relevance of this early interpretation of Johnson's mail art activities for this thesis cannot be underestimated. It proves that the questions of identity and subjectivity, that I claim were an integral part to Johnson's practice, were also identified by one of the recipients of Johnson's letters as early as 1966, in close chronological proximity to the correspondence analyzed. It is only in later essays—after Johnson's death—that Wilson draws analogies between the structure of Johnson's splitting of meanings in his works and his own split identity as a gay man in the post-war United States.[26] However, Wilson's mention of problems of identity and difference with regard to Johnson's art demonstrates that the foundations for these analogies had already been discernible for him in the 1960s.

The critic and friend of Johnson's, David Bourdon, refers to the interwoven relations of the iconographic elements of Johnson's collages in 1984 in the catalog of the exhibition *Works by Ray Johnson* at the Nassau County Museum of Art at Roslyn Harbor, New York. He describes Johnson's artistic universe as a world in which everything refers to everything, "becoming part of an elaborate, ever-expanding mental fabrication of mutually interlocking references."[27] However, these references are never stable, but always relative and cumulative, and are always reassigned depending on the context. According to Bourdon, Johnson's works lack a single and unchanging meaning. Instead, they constitute "an intricate, gossamer fantasy world of crisscrossing associations and references."[28] All this is to be agreed with at first glance. What escapes Bourdon, however, are the various critical effects that accompany Johnson's artistic strategies. Although these effects cannot be pieced together into a monolithic meaning, this thesis shows that the artistic value of Johnson's work is not exhausted in an imaginative jumble of references.

[24] Wilson 1997, p. 2.
[25] Wilson 1966, p. 55.
[26] Cf. Wilson 2009, pp. 42–43.
[27] Bourdon 1984.
[28] Bourdon 1984.

The posthumous reception of Johnson's work from the late 1990s onwards is characterized, among other things, by a shift in attention to those aspects of his work that can be understood as institutional critique. This rediscovery of Johnson is undoubtedly linked to the centrality of institutional critique in art discourses since the late 1980s. In the catalog of the large retrospective titled *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, which was exhibited at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio (January 14–March 14, 1999), and at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (September 17–December 31, 2000), curator Donna De Salvo examines how Johnson's ambivalence towards the institutions of the art world led him to explore alternative ways to market and exhibit his works. In doing so, Johnson drew attention to the system of the art world as well as the power of art dealers and museums to institutionalize art.[29] The present work builds on this opinion and supplements it with the question of how Johnson staged his subject position in relation to these institutional actors in his correspondence.

In his contribution to the 1999 catalog, William S. Wilson discusses Johnson's "flow of images" as an "open system always under construction."[30] In this system, Johnson activates the images through their combinations in clusters or constellations. In his essay, Wilson also presents his view that Johnson draws the viewer's attention to phenomena that are taking place on the surface of reality, as opposed to a hermeneutic depth of meaning. Wilson further developed this concept in two other essays, which were published in catalogs of the Richard L. Feigen Gallery in the years 2007 and 2008.[31] For the purposes of this study, Wilson's commentaries, as those of a longtime confidant of the artist, bear important testimony with regard to the possible meanings of the mailed items, particularly those that refer to gay desire. They also testify as to the inner functional logic of Johnson's operations. This seems to stand in contradiction to Wilson's own theses regarding the relationship between surface/constellations and depth/meaning. The solution to the dilemma lies in the open-ended, processual logic of Johnson's operations. Wilson recalls that Johnson "directed one's attention to surfaces, not to meanings behind surfaces. However, if one asked, he usually would be happy to explain the background, but even as he decoded his codes for someone, he was already constructing a different event within a new foreground."[32] This thesis takes its cues from Wilson and others regarding the hidden meanings, whether obvious or obscure, that the correspondence might refer to. However, my

[29] De Salvo 1999, pp. 19–21.
[30] Wilson 1999, p. 165.
[31] Wilson 2007 and 2008.
[32] Wilson 1999, p. 167.

reading of the items in the correspondence, and of their connections across Ray Johnson's art practice, is a reading of singular aspects of these items. It is by no means an act of interpretation of any "true" meaning. The recurrence of similar motifs and similar operations over time and across various artifacts, however, points to a historically and socially situated and interrelated practice that can be experienced and experimented with. In this endeavor, the cues from Wilson, Henry Martin or others can be very helpful guides.

The catalog of the 1999 exhibition also includes an interview with Ray Johnson, conducted by Henry Martin in 1982. The interview is preceded by an introductory text that Martin originally wrote and published, together with the interview, in 1984. In this text, Martin explains that for him, the central metaphor of the New York Correspondence School is the "dynamic flow of interrelating sensations" that can be recognized in it.[33] Like his collages, Ray Johnson's postal activities are linked to a view of consciousness as a collage. For Martin, the practices that are commonly referred to as "mail art," and that often refer to Johnson as the founder of the "mail art movement," do not respect the spirit that makes NYCS so unique. To Martin, Johnson's motivations behind the correspondence do not appear in any way to be explicitly ideological. Instead, Martin saw the NYCS as an attempt to create as many significant human relationships as possible, relationships that were private and intimate, but were constantly on the move, with a "secret libidinal charge" that the participants in the correspondence could experience.[34] Since the interview and its introductory text were written the early 1980s, about twenty years after the correspondence studied in this thesis, Martin's impressions of the NYCS only have limited importance for the arguments developed in this thesis. After all, it was typical for Johnson to constantly introduce changes to his practices. Regarding the central role of human relationships and experiences in Johnson's postal practice, however, Martin's statements are coherent with his recollections of Johnson's mode of operations of the early 1960s, which he shared with me in a personal interview in November 2016. In this respect, Martin's perspective supports this thesis's claim that interrelationality between the participants in the NYCS formed an integral part of the processual models of identification and subjectivation in Johnson's practice.

In the catalog of the 2003 exhibition *The Name of the Game. Ray Johnson's Postal Performance* at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo, Norway, curator Ina Blom makes a series of observations regarding the ambiguities in Johnson's "postal performance." She believes that

[33] Martin 1999, p. 183.
[34] Martin 1999, pp. 185–186.

Johnson's postal system does not merely embody a communitarian ideal of art, as has been the case with most mail art activities since the 1960s. In contrast to these tendencies, Johnson's practice exposes the very ideals and pathologies of that concept of communication, on which so-called mail art is usually programmatically based.[35] This distinction between the NYCS and what is commonly known as mail art is very much aligned with the claims of this thesis. However, in my opinion, it would be wrong to ignore the specific effects of community that membership and participation in the NYCS produced in the experience of its mailed content. This was as a result of the same subversive tactics for dealing with structures of meaning and identity that, as Blom rightfully observes, counteract the free flow of communication.

In *A Book About A Book About Death*, which was published in 2009, one can find an accompanying text written by William S. Wilson to the illustrated pages of Ray Johnson's *A Book About Death*. This "book" consists of thirteen "unbound printed sheets that Johnson sent to correspondents separately, over time, so virtually no one could ever hope to receive a full set."[36] Johnson had these pages printed between 1963 and 1965, starting with Page 1 on March 8, 1963.[37] Some of the pages of *A Book About Death* can also be found in the correspondence with Henry Martin. Wilson's commentary on the motives and various references and puns that he makes in those pages is beneficial for the purposes of this thesis. In many places, the longtime friend of Johnson and connoisseur of his works recognizes allusions to the themes of identity, sexuality and gender. In the structure of ubiquitous puns and the escalating referentiality of used images, names and words, Wilson sees examples of "Ray's own structuring of himself as a person who manifests an intersection and overlapping of two selves."[38]

Also published in 2009 is José Esteban Muñoz's book *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. In it, the queer and cultural theorist devotes the larger part of a chapter to the impression that the visit to a Ray Johnson retrospective has made on him.[39] Muñoz is particularly interested in "the utopian impulses that animated queer preidentitarian politics," with the aim to reanimate these impulses and make them useful for the present and future of queer practices. With the term "preidentitarian politics," the theorist refers to the historical moment before the birth of the modern gay and lesbian movement, often identified with the

[35] Blom 2003, pp. 22–23.
[36] Uchtrup 2011. Wilson 2009, p. 9.
[37] Wilson 2009, pp. 9, 12.
[38] Wilson 2009, p. 42.
[39] Muñoz 2009, pp. 115–130.

Stonewall riots in 1969, that "initial eruption that led to a formalizing and formatting of gay and lesbian identities."[40] Although Muñoz deems this turn to the identitarian important and even historically necessary, he directs the attention to what was lost, in his eyes, by this particular process of formalization:

> Before the rebellion there was another moment in which the countercultural map was perhaps a bit queerer, which is to say more expansive and including of various structures of feeling and habits of being that the relatively restrictive categories of gay and lesbian identities are incapable of catching.[41]

It is precisely this understanding of *queer* that informs the usage of the term in this thesis with regard to the inclusive, interrelational, and open-ended identification processes that are recognizable in Ray Johnson's practice. Some of the concepts developed by Muñoz are included in this work, complemented and combined with concepts from other authors, to be used implicitly or explicitly in the study of the mailed material. They include, above all, the "world making performativity" and the "queer potentiality" that Muñoz attributes to Johnson's work. The present work also follows Muñoz's assessment when it locates the effects of Johnson's "queering" in the areas of "temporality, relationality, [and] epistemology."[42]

The aspect of institutional critique in Ray Johnson's practice is the focus of an article by Johanna Gosse published in the Black Mountain College Studies Journal in 2012. The author sees Johnson's critique of the mainstream art market and institutions as fundamental to his artistic production.[43] Gosse proposes a list of interests along which his practice has evolved. Each of these interests deal in one way or another with the relationship between producer and consumer of art. They include market-based concepts of artistic value and artistic performance; creative process versus result; alternative sites for the exhibition and exchange of art; the embedding of art in everyday experience. Especially with regard to the latter, Gosse argues that Johnson's aesthetic and philosophical objectives can be traced back to his formative education at Black Mountain College, and there to the writings of the philosopher John Dewey in particular. Gosse's observations on Johnson's diverse strategies all appear to be accurate. However, one must ask whether Johnson really pursued these goals with absolute conceptual clarity.

[40] Muñoz 2009, p. 115.
[41] Muñoz 2009, p. 115.
[42] Muñoz 2009, pp. 115–130.
[43] Gosse 2012.

Moreover, one should question whether his stance toward the institutional and commercial art scene might have been more ambivalent and contradictory than Gosse assumes.

In her introduction to the collection of Johnson's writings, which was published as a book under the title *Not Nothing*, editor Elizabeth Zuba contradicts the belief that institution-critical considerations were central to Johnson's decision to distribute his artworks and writings in the postal service in 2014. She is convinced that Johnson's approach to individual expression, through words or images, is critical to the understanding of his work. Zuba reveals two specific articulations in Johnson's collages, which are also central to his writings: "the differentiation of the identical and the bisection of the singular."[44] According to Zuba, Johnson also reveals in his writings the essential structural nothingness of any expression or identity, using multiple, opaque, and changing narrators, henceforth negating the self-contained "I." In his contribution to the book, Kevin Killian tells us that Ray Johnson is one of his heroes, an openly gay artist "in difficult times."[45] He shows some examples of playful queer speculation in the writings of the artist. Moreover, Killian suggests that Johnson uses social conditions such as pop art and "celebrity culture" to "create new mythologies that engender the construction of transhistorical . . . and transnational . . . queer populations."[46] Although the focus of this thesis is not on Ray Johnson's writings, Zuba's and Killian's findings are very much in tune with my reading of Ray Johnson's practice. One reason for the congruencies between my description of the NYCS and Zuba's and Killian's accounts might be that they share a source in the writings of William S. Wilson.

Another instance of the repeated focus on Johnson's dealings with the institutions of the art world is provided by Stephen Moonie's 2016 article "A Poet of Non-*'ressentiment'?* Lawrence Alloway, Ray Johnson, and the Art World Network." In it, Moonie examines the convergences between the ideas of the British art critic and curator Alloway and Johnson's correspondence activities with regard to their own view of the art world as a networked system. Alloway adopted aspects of the then-popular system theory in his writings of the early 1970s and was familiar with Johnson's multiple artistic strategies, especially his correspondence network and his use of images and materials from the mainstream culture. In this thesis, Alloway's position in the New York art world plays a role in the discussion of one of Johnson's mailings, in which the artist writes about the nature of his "composed letters." The information that Moonie

[44] Zuba 2014, p. 13.
[45] Killian 2014, p. 23.
[46] Kilian 2014, p. 21.

provides on Alloway's ideas was helpful in identifying Johnson's mailing as a kind of open letter directed, among others, to Alloway. Moonie also discusses the role of gossip in Johnson's correspondence and his ambivalent feelings toward the art world. Although his work can be read as an early appearance of institutional critique, Moonie argues, Johnson has never hidden his desire to be recognized as a serious and important artist. As Moonie summarizes, "Johnson's mail art is a function of this networked system, and his relationship with it was complex."[47] I can only subscribe to both parts of this statement, as I completely share these observations. Both of them inform the conclusions of this thesis.

The collection of letters sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin between 1963 and 1990 serve as the most vital source for this MA thesis. The 140 letters and envelopes, which are filled with fragments and objects, have been in the collection of the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok) since Henry Martin sold them to the museum in 2010. The general interest of this thesis in questions of (queer) identification arose from a close consideration of all of the material at the Vienna mumok. Because the focus was narrowed to the functional logic of the mailed fragments circulating in the network of the New York Correspondence School, the scope of the analysis had to be limited to the portion of Johnson's correspondence with Henry Martin that could be treated as representative of NYCS activities in general. This is why the first 55 envelopes that Johnson sent to Martin between 1963 and 1965—before the character of the correspondence changed with the latter's move to Italy—receive most of the attention in this study. Due to the difficulty with deciphering and decoding any of the mailed material, and due to the large number of items in these fifty-five envelopes, a selection of items was made that allowed for the experimentation with the mailed content within the thematic scope of this thesis.

A second important source for the understanding of Johnson's *modus operandi* in its correspondence activities was the interview with the recipient of the letters, Henry Martin. On November 12, 2016, I met Martin at his home in Fiè allo Sciliar, near the city of Bolzano, Italy. Martin's anecdotes and his answers to my questions about the contents of the correspondence completed my observations of Johnson's practice in many ways. In particular, they strongly reinforced my impression that Johnson was deeply concerned with the interpersonal

[47] Moonie 2016, p. 174.

relationships spun in the correspondence network and that next to all the subversive and critical acumen in Johnson's vision, generosity and empathy also played a central role.

To complete the study, sources from the Ray Johnson Estate's archive, formerly at the Richard L. Feigen Gallery, now at Adler Beatty, in New York are also used. As per the nature of the correspondence network, there are only a few materials left that date back to the early 1960s. However, the filing system of Johnson's own archive, in which he collected and arranged materials for his mailings, provides a good insight into Johnson's activities of collecting and selecting material on a daily basis and assigning them to potential recipients. Additionally, the other half of the correspondence, the letters with which Henry Martin had answered Johnson's letters from 1965 onwards, and which were missing in Vienna, could be examined at the estate's archive.

The archive of the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) helped me to compare Johnson's letters to Martin with those the artist sent to other friends and acquaintances. Among the recipients of Johnson's correspondence dating from the late 1950s and early 1960s, available in the MoMA archives, are most prominently Robert Rauschenberg and the art critic and Warhol intimus David Bourdon.

In the examination of the items mailed by Johnson to Henry Martin, this work follows a methodology constructed along the following considerations. At the center of interest is the empirical investigation and description of the material at the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok) in Vienna. All representations of Johnson's practice and its interpretation by other authors are intended to identify the artistic strategies that seem relevant to this material. The focus on the concepts of subjectivity and identity—or subjectivation and identification in their active form—resulted from the first viewing of the contents of the mailings and the subjective impression of the author of this study that these areas are of central relevance. The use of concepts from queer-feminist theory and art history, or the use of the term *queer* in general, is not solely due to the fact that Ray Johnson in his privately as well as publicly lived desire did not meet the heterosexist norm. It is also not founded solely on the fact that Johnson repeatedly included references to gay desire and gay culture in his works. The main reason for the theoretical foundation of this thesis in the concepts of Amelia Jones, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, José Esteban Muñoz and, to some extent, Judith Butler and Rosi Braidotti is of a more structural nature. It lies in the fact that the concepts of subjectivation and identification processes developed by these authors prove to be extremely productive for the

treatment of Johnson's artistic strategies, even where these go far beyond the performance of a queer identity. That Johnson *was* gay, and repeatedly alluded to this fact in his correspondence, even with Henry Martin, must be discussed in this context, nonetheless. These circumstances suggest the thesis that Johnson's artistic strategies of subverting conventional attributions of meaning and stable identities are deeply connected with his subject position as a gay man in the New York art scene as part of post-war American society. Hence, one chapter is dedicated to Johnson's positioning in this historical and geographic environment. However, this connection is not intended to misread Johnson's practice as a manifestation of a "queer aesthetic" to be understood as an essentially homosexual aesthetic. Rather, it helps the term *queer* and the theoretical concepts based upon it to an instance of a particular application that goes beyond this limited understanding and connects to other areas of subjectivation and identification processes.

In this study, I have sought to include both historical interpretations of Johnson's practices and later interpretations by historical addressees and beholders of Johnson's artworks. The testimonies of William S. Wilson and Henry Martin are certainly the most relevant to my thesis. In Ray Johnson's art practice, with its open-endedness and multiplicity in terms of interpretations, conscious choices were made against a unified meaning. There are even parts that appear virtually illegible, and seem to negate the possibility of interpretation completely. In this context, there appears to be a set of methodological problems at the core of my research: How do these historical testimonies relate to the variability and plurality of the significations of Johnson's letters? What is the value of these recollections, as accounts of a historical legibility, for my re-reading of Johnson's correspondence practice? After all, the queer theoretical concepts I am applying in my reading were developed decades after the letters had been composed, sent, and received. It seems impossible that Johnson or any of the recipients of his correspondence have seen the aspects of his practice that I am presenting here with the same conceptual coherence and clarity.

These problems also lead to another, more fundamental, methodological problem that touches all art historical analysis, which is the question of this thesis's goal. Is it to re-create a historical reading of the art practice in question—in the case of my thesis, of those aspects that relate to processes of queer subjectivation and identification? Would a successful re-creation of the historical reception legitimize my own reading of the artistic practice? There are at least two problems connected to a such project. The first problem is the relationship between the different

historical positions of the different interpreters. On the one hand, I am an interpreter who is claiming that these aspects can be identified in Johnson's work. On the other hand, there are the historical interpreters who I claim saw those aspects. The second, and more significant, problem has to do with the role of the interpreter— or any interpreter—within the discursive framework that surrounds and permeates the object of investigation.

As Robert Brinkley points out in his editor's note to a reprint of portions of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book "What Is a Minor Literature" in the *Mississippi Review* in 1983, "typically the interpreter is an agent of a dominant social code; the interpretation reproduces the material it considers as instances of the code."[48] In this context, Brinkley refers to Jean Baudrillard who remarks that "there is always a desire not to be interpreted, not to be produced and expressed in the terms that an interpretation employs."[49] This desire not to be interpreted seems to be an inherent trait of Ray Johnson's art production, with its plurality of meanings, it's open-endedness, and its myriads of indecipherable details. Answering both this apparently inherent desire of Johnson's art and the problematic discursive status of the interpreter, this study attempts not to interpret Johnson's practice in the conventional sense of finding a sort of unified symbolic meaning in its form, style, and/or iconography—a symbolic meaning which can then be connected to the historical social context. Instead, it follows the "principle of multiple entrances" proposed by Deleuze and Guattari as their approach to reading Kafka, in order to resist any simplified interpretation of "a work that only offers itself to experimentation."[50] These different "entrances" to Ray Johnson's "Correspondance" are, for one, marked by the subjects of the four chapters: the development of Johnson's different artistic practices, the (art) historical social context, the structure and functional logic of the correspondence network, and the close look at the contents of the envelopes that Johnson sent to Martin. Within that last, and most important, "entrance", I selected some instances of the mailed material that appeared to have specific visual, textual, or contextual aspects in common. Around each of these aspects, I established groups which served again as different "entrances." The interrelation of these "entrances" and aspects are central to this thesis's methodology, as the paths that they lead to are interwoven and interdetermined. I adopted the same approach to the relationship between the historical testimonies and my subjective reading of the mailed content. My reading was informed by the information provided by Wilson and Martin, to name just these two most

[48] Robert Brinkley in the editor's note to Deleuze, Guattari, and Brinkley 1983, p. 13.
[49] Jean Baudrillard quoted by Robert Brinkley in the editor's note to Deleuze, Guattari, and Brinkley 1983, p. 13.
[50] Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 3.

important sources. Conversely, my selection of Wilson and Martin as sources was determined by my initial impressions and my reflections on the mailed material from my knowledge of recent queer-theoretical concepts. My "experimentation" with Johnson's practice is therefore rooted in (at least) two different perspectives that show me the way through the jungle of references and artistic devices used by the artist, with one of these perspectives guiding and correcting the other. It is clear to me that such an experimental "mapping" of an artistic practice can only yield a description of certain aspects of it, but it can never yield its authentic and true essence, or its original historical meaning. In the case of the material that circulated through the network of the NYCS, any such attempt to find its essential meaning would be at odds with the inscription of a conceptually infinite potentiality of different attributions of meaning performed by multiple interpreters in their changing roles of recipients and senders.

The aspects of Johnson's work that I have chosen to investigate, which I see in his works, bear a certain likeness to particular queer-theoretical conceptions of identification and subjectivation processes. In my opinion, a coherent argumentation that makes these aspects and likenesses visible and perceivable to others would suffice to make a valid and productive statement about this artistic practice and its cultural value for a present-day recipient. It is questionable, however, whether such a statement by itself would be valid and productive within the confines of the field of art history. It could amount to something like a literary appropriation of Johnson's work, which could be useful on its own. For the validity of such a thesis as art history, however, in my view it is indispensable to at least try to connect the subjective contextual reading of an art practice to the historical conditions of its making and of its reception. The outcome of such an investigation could be that a historical reading in those terms was, in fact, impossible, or at least very unlikely. Then one could go on and ask for the reasons of this "failure" to signify, or to shift the focus to other historical moments of reception when the art was suddenly read in this way.[51] Here, I must repeat that, by fueling my analysis of Ray Johnson's art practice with historical testimonies, I do not claim that my reading is fully consistent with historical readings. I do not contend that the conceptual coherence that I am proposing was fully visible to each and every recipient of Johnson's mail. It is possible that it was not even fully visible to Johnson himself. I only attempt to demonstrate that certain specific aspects of this practice were visible and legible for some of the recipients of his correspondence. By doing so, I try to endow my

[51] C. f. the discussion between T. J. Clark, Peter Wollen and Art-Language around the "failure" of Édouard Manet's painting *Olympia* (1863) to be understood by contemporary critics: Clark 1980; Wollen 1980; Baldwin, Harrison, and Ramsden 1981.

reading with the necessary inter-subjectivity to prevent it from becoming too subjective and speculative. Furthermore, since my reading is based on the assumption that the artist's sexual identification within the historical social context played a role in his art-making, it is crucial for me to look for evidence that this was actually the case. One of the sources that help me make this case is the iconographic content of the correspondence. In some cases, the queerness of the sexual puns is evident without further questions. In other cases, however, and especially in terms of structural analogies between the ramifications of meanings in Johnson's works and the artist's split identity, Wilson's commentary has proven to be informative. [52] The same can be said of Henry Martin's recollections of the interpersonal connections and shared experiences inherent in Johnson's correspondence practices.[53]

When José Esteban Muñoz sees in the membership in the NYCS a "queer kinship, an alternate chain of belonging," he does so by registering Ray Johnson as a queer artist.[54] In fact, all of the theoretician's interpretations of Johnson's various practices as queer practices seem to be caused by the original assumption that they were structurally determined by Johnson's social position as a gay man. However fruitful Muñoz's observations have proven to be for this thesis, it is this original assumption that needs a more robust foundation. By saying that, I do not mean that Muñoz's very productive contribution to the literature on Johnson is lacking empirical evidence. It does not need any legitimizing to be a politically valuable re-reading of a historical practice. However, I do think that specific historical evidence that supports this underlying assumption will add to the continuing cultural agency of Johnson's practice as a minoritarian practice. The presentation of the social context, both on the more general level of the conditions of gay people in the post-war United States, and on the more specific level of the New York art scene of that time, serve as a wider cultural framework in which Johnson's work can be placed. However, his minoritarian position in the social context alone does not automatically make Johnson's practice a minoritarian practice. It is only through the process of making visible specific artistic operations or strategies—aspects of Johnson's production—that we can connect his artistic practice to his historical social position. Even if the historical interpretations or later recollections by privileged recipients of his correspondence can be helpful in this process, the agency lies with the author of this thesis. To paraphrase Douglas Crimp's words on Andy Warhol's art historical reception, we make of it the art we need and the art we deserve.[55] There

[52] E. g. Wilson 2009, pp. 42–45.
[53] See chapter four.
[54] Muñoz 2009, p. 123.
[55] Crimp 1999, p. 64.

is no use in denying the inherent subjectivity and political agency of any interpretation—or "experimentation"—of a particular artistic practice. The primary focus of this thesis is on Ray Johnson's correspondence as an instance of a *queer* artistic practice. Crimp called for a queer reading of Warhol,

> not because it reflects or refers to a historical gay identity . . ., but because it disdains and defies the coherence and stability of all sexual identity. That to me is the meaning of *queer*, and it is a meaning we need right now, in all its historical richness, to counter both the normalization of sexuality and the art historical reification of avant-garde genealogy.[56]

The reasons for choosing a queer perspective on Johnson's correspondence in this thesis might even go a step further than that. Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick argues that there are "minoritizing" and "universalizing" views of homosexuality. The first refers to viewing it as "an issue of active importance primarily for a small, distinct, relatively fixed homosexual minority," while the latter refers to viewing it as "an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of sexualities."[57] This thesis is an attempt to present the *queer* aspects of Ray Johnson's correspondence in a way that enables both a minoritizing and a universalizing perspective on his artistic practice. It does so by means of a historically informed "close reading," whose central methodological position in this thesis is also the main reason for the choice of the monographical model.

The most significant limitation of this thesis is its focus on the material of the correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin at the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok). In addition, the investigation is limited to the correspondence from 1963 to 1965. The reasons for doing so have already been set out and will be reexamined in the fourth chapter. For future research on Ray Johnson, the study of further correspondence from the 1970s to the 1990s would be of interest. Above all, the collection of Johnson's correspondence in the estate of William S. Wilson would be the most relevant as it amounts to one of the most significant collections of Johnson's collages and mail art—"an unofficial archive of Johnson's work" (Sofia Kofodimos in June 2016).[58] However, at the time of my stay in New York in May 2016,

[56] Crimp 1999, p. 64.
[57] Sedgwick 2008, p. 1.
[58] Sofia Kofodimos runs the blog *William S. Wilson: Collected Writings* (URL: https://williamswilsonwritings.wordpress.com/, accessed August 12, 2019) and refers to her friend and mentor's collection in the blog's "About"-section.

which I used to conduct research into the archives of the Ray Johnson Estate and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Wilson's collection was unfortunately inaccessible due to his recent passing. Further archival visits that would have exceeded the reasonable scope of this master thesis research would lead to the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution's in Washington, D.C., and the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, California.

A research question that could be further investigated in the light of the results of this study could be formulated with relation to the increasing commodification of social interactions in late capitalism, the role of mass media in the development of subject models, and the role of sexual freedom in these subject models. This commodity of social interactions, which has so far found its culmination in the social media of the world wide web, is interwoven with the history of mass communication and the mass media. Both mass communication in the postal service and the use of content and references from mass media and popular culture represent essential elements of Ray Johnson's social interactions within his correspondence network. How the economics of gifting of the New York Correspondence School and Johnson's subversion of conventional communication relate to such a concept of social interactions as commodity would be an interesting question for further research.

With regard to the queer component of Johnson's practice, it would also be interesting to see if other artistic positions could be found that operate in the same or a similar historical and social environment in similar ways with concepts of subjectivity and identity. Perhaps the results of the present work could even be supplemented by a re-reading of Robert Rauschenberg's, Jasper Johns's, or Cy Twombly's works, to name only the most prominent contemporaries of Johnson's in the New York art scene.

Despite the limitations of this thesis concerning the analyzed material, it contains a number of new contributions. The correspondence that was selected for this work, and which Henry Martin received from Ray Johnson in the years 1963 to 1965, may appear as a small part of the overwhelming volume of mailings, which Johnson sent over 30 years of postal practice to more than 200 participants. However, the research fills a gap in the literature about Ray Johnson. For to date, no cohesive corpus of mailings to the same recipient has been examined.

The present study additionally aims to contribute to the steadily growing field of queer studies in the field of art history. Hence the focus is, on the one hand, on the processes of subjectification and identification, around which various of Johnson's artistic strategies

revolve, and on the other hand, on the connections between these processes and the sexual identification of the artist. This study thus is an important contribution to providing support and substance to the theses expressed by some commentators regarding the role of Johnson's sexual identification in his artistic practice through concrete evidence from the findings from the correspondence at the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok) in Vienna. Moreover, it links various theories to acknowledge a more comprehensive and complete picture of the productive effects of Ray Johnson's correspondence activities in this area. In highlighting the relationship of Johnson's practice to important positions and tendencies in post-war New York art, the historical and geographic specification is also precluded from any essentialization of a "queer aesthetic." A goal of the present work is also to encourage its readership to pay increased attention in future studies of artistic practices to the role of processes of sexual identification against a particular historical background.

Chapter 1: Overview of Ray Johnson's life and artistic practice

Ray Johnson was born on October 16, 1927, in Detroit, Michigan. As a teenager, he attended art classes during the summer vacation to deepen his knowledge and skills in drawing, design and theory. When his school friend Arthur Secunda, with whom he had been diligently exchanging notes and doodles during their time together at the Cass Tech High School in Detroit, moved to New York City in 1943, Johnson began to send him abundantly illustrated letters. Later, Johnson was to see in these letters the beginnings of his mail art activities: "I actually started in 1943, which is the actual date on those very first letters with drawings and all the other sort of things that I'm still doing today. That's really the infancy of the activity."[59]

From 1945 to 1948 Johnson studied at Black Mountain College in Asheville and Black Mountain, North Carolina. He only paused for a few months during the spring semester of 1946, which he spent in New York, took lessons in the Art Students League and worked in the New York Public Library. According to historian Emma Harris, the Black Mountain College represented for Ray Johnson, "more than an education; it was the foundation on which he was to build for the remainder of his career."[60] Johnson immersed himself in Josef Albers' teaching of color, design, drawing and painting; he attended the courses on graphic arts with Alvin Lustig and Paul Rand, as well as those on painting with Ilya Bolotowsky, Lyonel Feininger, and Robert Motherwell. The central figure for Johnson during his time in Black Mountain, however, was undoubtedly Josef Albers.[61] In 1947, he arranged for Johnson to design the cover of the November issue of the magazine *Interiors*. Later, in New York, Johnson was still earning money with commercial design, as did his more famous contemporary and friend Andy Warhol, Kate Erin Dempsey reports. [62] During the summer classes of 1948, faculty at Black Mountain College also included teaching artists such as Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and sculptor Richard Lippold, whose inclusion was organized by Josef Albers.

After the summer courses of 1948, Johnson moved with Lippold to Pennsylvania. A year later, the two moved into a flat on 119th Street in Manhattan. Through Lippold, Johnson got to know

[59] Ray Johnson, quoted in Martin 1999, p. 188.
[60] Harris 1997, 67.
[61] Cf. Gosse 2012; Thomson 2010, p. 17.
[62] Dempsey 2010, p. 23.

other young artists at Black Mountain, as well as in New York, among them Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. Johnson soon made the acquaintance of poets such as John Ashbery, Diane Di Prima, and Jackson Mac Low, and contributed drawings and short texts to avant-garde literary magazines such as *Unmuzzled Ox* or *Mudfish.*[63] During the year 1951, Johnson and Lippold moved into an apartment in a house in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Johanna Gosse mentions that a veritable colony of former Black Mountain teachers had settled there, among them John Cage, Merce Cunningham and the composer Morton Feldman.[64] Like John Cage and many others, Ray Johnson delved deep into the world of Zen Buddhism at the time, and from 1951 to 1952 he worked part-time in an Orientalia bookstore on East 12th Street. Around this time, Johnson was invited to decorate the entrance to the Living Theater, for which he designed flyers and advertisements throughout the 1960s.[65]

Ray Johnson's early work may have consisted mainly of abstract paintings—formalistic, geometric compositions in which the influence of Albers' teaching was still strongly palpable.[66] An example is the work *Calm Center* from 1951 (Plate 1). In 1953 Johnson participated in an exhibition of the American Abstract Artists group, which included artists like Ad Reinhardt and Leon Polk Smith. However, little is known about Johnson's works from the early 1950s. Johnson was reported to have destroyed much of his paintings until 1955. Johnson himself may have said repeatedly that he had also burned works in Cy Twombly's fireplace, but this has never been confirmed.[67] In the early 1950s, Johnson began to experiment with collage, "cannibalizing" fragments of his earlier works in new works, as Donna De Salvo puts it. [68] At that time, Johnson also began to send collaged postcards, on which he processed clippings from newspapers, magazines and comic strips. One of the earliest series of such mailings is one which Johnson sent in 1953 to Isabella Fisher, a dancer and friend. On the postcards, on which he glued pieces of comic strips and fragments of text, Johnson operated in a way with references and puns that would become typical of his later collages as well as his correspondence

[63] Jones 1999a, p. 202.
[64] Gosse 2012. Jones 1999a, p. 202. See also the article "Four Artists in A Mansion" by John Stewart, published in *Harper's Bazaar*, July 1952, in which Ray Johnson is titled as "painter" and one of "four friends—experimental, even stratospheric artists."
[65] Jones 1999a, p. 202.
[66] De Salvo 1999, p. 17.
[67] Jones 1999a, 203. See also the *Ray Johnson Chronology*, *compiled by Muffet Jones and Michael von Uchtrup with Clive Phillpot, William S. Wilson et al.*, on display at the Ray Johnson Estate, Adler Beatty, New York.
[68] De Salvo 1999, p. 18. According to the *Ray Johnson Chronology* at the Ray Johnson Estate, New York, Johnson began to experiment with collages in 1952. See also http://www.rayjohnsonestate.com/timelines/1927-1953/ (accessed August 12, 2019).

activities (Plate 2).[69] Soon after, Johnson no longer pasted fragments of newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and other materials onto postcards, but would simply put those items in envelopes in order to mail them.

That Johnson has been repeatedly referred to as an early progenitor or predecessor of pop art is probably due to the images of good-looking heroes of mass culture such as James Dean and Elvis Presley, around which some of his early collages of the 1950s are built. Works like *James Dean* from 1958 (Plate 3) or *Elvis Presley # 1* from 1955 (Plate 4), in which red tears seem to roll from the King's closed eyes, appear regularly in publications on pop art.[70] However, although images of pop-cultural celebrities and fragments of mass media appear countless times in Johnson's works, there are significant differences from the popular image of pop art. They consist primarily in the handling of the material. Mason Klein refers to the simple fact of the size of the works: "At a time when most of his contemporaries, from Claes Oldenburg to James Rosenquist to Andy Warhol, were enlarging the image to mythic dimensions (a typical strategy of pop art), Johnson's scale is resolutely small."[71] An even more significant difference is how most of Johnson's collages place these images and fragments in complex networks of cryptic relationships with other elements.

In 1954, Johnson invented a new name for his collages, which he now also produced in a standardized size. These "moticos," as he called them, measured about 11 by 8 inches. Both name and size were products of mere random decisions, in the spirit of the readymade. As support of his collages made up of fragments of mass-produced imagery, Johnson used discarded shirt cartons, the size of which corresponded approximately to a US standard letter size sheet of paper (11 x 8.5 inches).[72] The name *moticos*, however, is an anagram. In an e-mail to Donna De Salvo, Johnson's friend Norman Solomon recalls how the artist was looking for a new name for his collages and asked him for suggestions. After Solomon had already suggested "*Eskimos*" and "*Mexicos,*" Johnson asked him about the word he would read in the dictionary right now. The word was "*osmotics*," and Johnson replied, "I think I'll call them *'Moticos'*."[73] The word evokes a number of potential associations. Wendy Steiner points to "motion" as well

[69] De Salvo 1999, p. 29, footnote 8.
[70] C.f. Russell and Gablik 1969, Figures 49, 50 et pass. See also Livingstone 1990, p. 28. The chapter, in which Johnson appears, is titled "*the foundations of Pop.*"
[71] Klein 1999, p. 47.
[72] De Salvo 1999, p. 21.
[73] Ray Johnson, quoted in De Salvo 1999, p. 29, footnote 16.

as to the French word *mot*.[74] One could also think of "motive," or—looking at the second half of the word—of "icon," which opens up interesting combinations, such as word (*mot*) and image (*icon*) in motion (*motion*). Johnson applied the term moticos to most of his collages in the 1950s, and even to some of his writings. As Steiner notes, Johnson uses moticos to mean both the collaged whole and its modular parts, "articulated modules on the one hand and totalities on the other, in which meaning leeches across internal barriers in an osmotic ooze."[75] Sometimes a moticos was just the inked silhouette of a figure or an element of Johnson's collage, sometimes a cut-out fragment from earlier work. The isolated, irregular shapes were often arranged by Johnson in rows and columns of figures painted in ink, which might bear the memory of the Albers' preference for geometrical order and grid, although brought into tumultuous motion (Plate 5). Elsewhere, they reappear as parts of collages (Plate 6).

An excerpt of his manifesto-like essay "*What is a moticos?*" from 1954 was published in the first edition of the newsweekly *Village Voice*, founded in 1955 by Dan Wolf, Ed Fancher, and Norman Mailer. In his column "Village Square," John Wilcock talks about the question and elicits a simple explanation during the interview with Ray Johnson: "I've got a big pile of things at home which will make moticos. They're really collages—paste-ups of pictures and pieces of paper, and so on—but that sounds too much like what they really are, so I call them moticos. It is a good word because it's both singular and plural and you can pronounce it how you like. However, I'm going to get a new word soon."[76] However, Johnson's essay also contains much more enigmatic hints:

> The next time a railroad train is seen going its way along the track, look quickly at the sides of the box cars because a moticos may be there. Don't try to catch up with it; it wants to go its way. . . . Have you seen a moticos lately? Perhaps you have. They are everywhere. As I write this I wish someone were here to point out one to me because I know they exist.[77]

Johnson seems to point out, among other things, an aspect much noted in later literature on his practice, namely, the fact that he chose to present his works in the mid to late 1950s, in locations outside the conventional gallery and exhibition scene. He would, for instance, gather groups of his freestanding moticos to installations on the floor and on doorsteps, as part of informal and

[74] Steiner 1999, p. 75.
[75] Steiner 1999, p. 72.
[76] John Wilcock,"The Village Square," *The Village Voice*, 26 October 1955 (first issue): 3.
[77] Ray Johnson, "What Is a Moticos?", 1954, quoted from Zuba 2014, plate 1.

usually private exhibitions and performances.[78] Johnson chose unconventional environments for these installations, a warehouse in Downtown Manhattan, for instance, where his moticos were placed in the gaps between the floor strips in 1955 (Plate 7 and Plate 8). In the book *Pop Art Redefined* (1969) by John Russell and Suzi Gablik, photographs by Elisabeth Novick from 1955 show such arrangements of moticos, once "on the street" and once "on the studio floor."[79] Gablik comments: "Johnson's work has always depended on chance encounters and odd connections. Until recently, he never exhibited in galleries or museums, but would only show his work in places like Grand Central Station or the street. The random arrangement of 'moticos' . . . on a dilapidated cellar door in lower Manhattan . . . may even have been the first informal Happening."[80] Gablik's reference to "chance encounters" echoes a famous surrealist dictum. Isidore-Lucien Ducasse (1846–1870) published the prose poem *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869) under the pseudonym Comte de Lautréamont. Surrealists such as André Breton and Man Ray took a line of its sixth canto describing a young boy as "as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table" and turned it into a kind of "heraldic motto for surrealism."[81] According to Krzysztof Fijalkowski, surrealism's adoption of Lautréamont's line is connected to the author's repeated suggestions that beauty

> is forever in need of redefinition, and lies above all in the strategy of comparison, one in which every object, person, experience or state is linked to every other, their qualities available and transmitted to each other as if through poetic contagion.[82]

This surrealist strategy of linking everything to everything is also a central property of Ray Johnson's collages, and it would go on to be at the heart of his correspondence practice. In the choice of the materials for his moticos, however, it connects to an emergent "pop" aesthetics that seems to be less interested in the psychological effects of these combinations than in the socio-cultural matrix of post-war consumer culture. In the context of the unconventional and marginal sites of their exhibitions, these surrealist and pop sensibilities meet the figure of the "hobo," the dropout, which seems to come straight out of the Beat literature of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957).

[78] De Salvo 1999, p. 19.
[79] Russell and Gablik 1969, figures on pages 18 and 19.
[80] Russell and Gablik 1969, p. 17.
[81] Fijalkowski 2016, p. 186.
[82] Fijalkowski 2016, p. 186.

In his search for alternatives to the traditional system of galleries and institutions, Johnson was by no means limited to exhibiting his works in remote locations. He also experimented with various types of distribution in the mid-fifties. For example, like the door to door salesman that would be the subject of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, he would fill a suitcase with collages and visit potential buyers at their homes to show them one by one the work he had specifically selected for them.[83] At that time, Johnson also started sending small collages to friends and acquaintances by mail. But unlike those collages he carried in cardboard boxes across New York, the recipients of his postcards and correspondence received them without Johnson expecting any remuneration. Of course, his growing fame as an orchestrator of the postal network, which evolved in the following years, also served Johnson as a means of promoting himself. He may well have been aware of this when, in the 1960s, he began to copy galleries' promotional material in his mailings and to send invitations to fictitious exhibitions as well as exhibition reviews or inventory lists of his actual shows to various recipients. In letters that resembled those that galleries sent to protagonists of the art establishment, and in which they recommended the artists they represented, he wrote about himself in a clearly parodic tone. In the following years, Johnson kept the various strategies through which he organized his system of presentation, distribution, and promotion up and running. In the process, all information about his work constantly oscillated between fact and fiction—a work that, although linked to the established art world, was at any point also separable from it.

In addition to the aforementioned spheres of presentation, distribution, and promotion of his artistic production, it is not least of all that of the production itself, in which Johnson sought ways of subverting the conventions of the established art system. Starting with the moticos of the 1950s, cutting up collages and reusing their fragments becomes an integral part of Johnson's artistic practice. One result is that very few works exist today that date from this decade. The artist used most of them as the base for later collages. He also frequently resumed work on a collage he had not worked on for ten or twenty years to add new elements. In this way, Johnson deliberately undermined the concept of the finished, self-contained artwork or of its chronological coherence.[84]

This artistic approach is in line with one of the central features of the emergent aesthetics of the 1950s and 1960s in New York. In place of the belief in social progress through single, heroic

[83] De Salvo 1999, p. 20.
[84] Cf. De Salvo 1999, pp. 18–19; Gosse 2012.

acts of artistic creation, there gradually emerged a focus on processes and corresponding modes of artistic production. Several contemporary New York underground art undertakings at that time operated at the level of processes, among them Happenings, Fluxus, The Living Theater, improvisational dance, and young performance art. Ray Johnson also came in close contact with all these activities, groups and tendencies. The destabilization of the singular, self-contained art object in form and content, also brings with it the dismantling of the dominant ideas about the interpretation of works of art. Not only the objects and their form, but also their content, their meaning remains in motion, in a state of flux without an end. When Ellen Levy once suggested to him that Johnson should record a tape of the collages to capture a bit of his persona and humor, Johnson responded as follows:

> Well, these collages are really like playing cards, and everybody gets a different selection; so every time they're shown, they're reshuffled and become a different story, a different tape. We've just been talking, for example, about Cornell's brother, Robert, and the rabbits he drew, but the next time these works are shuffled and shown, they'll bring up other people and images and ideas. It's constantly and kaleidoscopically different.[85]

This idea of recurrent mixing applies even more to the contents of the envelopes that Johnson sent to a circle of over 200 people starting in the late 1950s. One of these envelopes could contain over 30 different fragments of different types of printed, written or drawn material. Each time you took them out of the envelope, you could look at them in a different order. Each time, different possible connections between the individual objects would emerge, other associations could be awakened, other meanings could be assigned. The processes of signification would branch out even further and interweave if the recipient of a mailing followed the occasionally appearing instructions, such as "please send to" or "add to and send to." Hence, individual objects became part of another and new collection of signifiers and made new potential connections. What all this means with regard to the subject positions of the author as well as the recipients—of the artwork in particular, but also of information in general—will be assessed in the next two chapters. What becomes evident the more one delves into the study of Johnson's practice is that his two main activities, beginning with the early 1950s until his death in 1995, namely the production of collages and the feeding of the correspondence machine, are

[85] Ray Johnson, quoted in Martin 1999, p. 185.

conceptually intimately intertwined. In his collages, Johnson uses recurring motifs in various combinations and connections. Seriality and variation, repetition and difference open the works to their relationships with each other and the potentiality of their multiple chains of signification. The interrelationality in time and space, of which the collages are permeated, is much more evident in Johnson's correspondence practice. The objects circulating in it remain in the flux of their ongoing, unfinished and recurring referentiality. For Johnson's correspondence machine keeps the conversation going, keeping the physical materials moving endlessly through the relays of the postal system and placing them in ever-new combinations, with each recipient possibly interpreting them differently to the person before them.

In July 1961, three years after Allan Kaprow coined the term "*Happening*," Ray Johnson organized the first of several performance events he titled "*Nothing*." Later, in 1977, Johnson stated that a *Nothing* should convey "an attitude as opposed to a happening."[86] Kaprow's Happenings—as well as those staged by numerous other artists in the 1960s—initially ran strictly according to script and later turned into busy performative events full of possible experiences for the participants.[87] Johnson's *Nothings*, on the other hand, are more reminiscent of John Cage's strategy of silence. If there was any interaction in them at all, it was very minimalistic and not meant to convey any deeper experience except for the absence of experience. The first *Nothing* took place on July 30, 1961, in the AG Gallery of George Maciunas and Almus Salcius in New York. Alison Knowles recalls a later edition of such a *Nothing* meeting in the mid-1970s, at René Block's New York Gallery: "We had all leaned against the walls looking at one another for some time. He [Ray Johnson] came over and asked me to please lean against the opposite wall, which I did."[88]

In the early 1960s, Ray Johnson appeared several times as a performer in events related to the Living Theater, the Judson Dance Theater, and Fluxus. From 1968 onwards he combined the idea of *Nothings* with the concept of the correspondence network. On April 1, 1968, the "New York Correspondence School's" first meeting took place at the Society of Friends Meeting

[86] Ray Johnson, quoted by William S. Wilson in Plunkett et al. 1977, p. 238.
[87] In February 1960, for example, an evening of performances organized by Claes Oldenburg took place under the title *Ray Gun Spex* at the Judson Memorial Church in Washington Square. The varied events planned and performed by Robert Whitman, Allan Kaprow, Al Hansen, Dick Higgins, Jim Dine and Red Grooms were all "thrown together by the press under the general heading of 'happenings', following Kaprow's *18 Happenings*. . . . Whether they liked it or not, the term 'happening' remained. It covered a wide range of activity, however much it failed to distinguish between the different intentions of the work or between those who endorsed and those who refuted Kaprow's definition of a happening as an event that could be performed only once." (Goldberg 1988, p. 132).
[88] Alison Knowles in an e-mail to William S. Wilson, October 8, 2002, quoted in Blom 2003, p. 19.

House in New York. The name New York Correspondence School was given to Johnson's postal activities in 1962 by artist Ed Plunkett. It was meant to be a joke that alluded to the New York School of Painting, and probably also to Colleges offering correspondence courses. Johnson adopted the name but often changed the spelling to "Correspondance" or "CorresponDANCE," or used the acronym "NYCS." In the Spring 1977 issue of the *Art Journal,* Johnson's close friend Toby R. Spiselman says that until then, 30 NYCS meetings and lectures by Ray Johnson had taken place in churches, schools, galleries, museums, theaters, and parks.[89]

Until April 1973, when Johnson announced the death of NYCS, the meetings were called "New York Correspondence School Meetings." After that, they continued for a few years under different names. The title *MEETING SEATING*, for example, refers to the seating plans that Johnson sent out in his mailings before each meeting. Other meetings were dedicated to famous people. In *A MEETING FOR ANNA MAY WONG*, the role of the well-known Asian-American actress was played by Naomi Sims, one of the first African American women who became known worldwide as a model. In *A MEETING FOR RUTH FORD*, "Ruth Ford Made a Gracious Appearance with Rex Reed," the film critic and presenter of the television program *At the Movies*.[90] Other examples of such meetings would be *A PALOMA PICASSO FAN CLUB MEETING* or *A MARCEL DUCHAMP FAN CLUB MEETING*.

Johnson's obsession with celebrities was not limited to the meetings. It is probably one of the constants, especially of his later work from the late seventies, in which works by iconic artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Salvador Dalí, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Andy Warhol[91], as well as celebrities from the mass media appear in large numbers in collages, correspondence or as subjects of his events and performances. Johnson's fascination for female Hollywood divas can be traced back to the days of correspondence with his high school friend Art Secunda, who remembers:

> Ray loved to satirize the outlandishness of such glamorous female stars of the day as Carmen Miranda, Lana Turner and Gypsy Rose Lee, among others. We joked, drew and

[89] Plunkett et al. 1977, p. 241.
[90] Plunkett et al. 1977, p. 241.
[91] C.f. Joseph-Lowery 2009.

> painted the marvelous colors we thought Hollywood reflected. Handsome men like Gary Cooper were also included in our carnival reflections of the day.[92]

During the 1960s, Johnson's activities within the NYCS became increasingly systematic. In 1964 he sent out a flyer addressing the New York Correspondence School for the first time, many more were to follow. What began as a sending of postcards and envelopes to a small circle of friends—initially with a relatively manageable content—gradually expanded into an ever-growing network. More and more people who heard about it were also interested in attending. In 1965, critic Grace Glueck wrote in the *New York Times* about "Ray Johnson, who may well be New York's most famous unknown artist."[93] His temporary celebrity beyond a small scene in New York was certainly due to his postal activities and meetings.

In the meantime, Johnson had strayed from his earlier refusal to exhibit his work in galleries. In the spring of 1965, Ray Johnson had a solo show at the Willard Gallery, his first at a gallery in uptown New York, the following year, another one at Willard in New York and one in the fall, at Richard Feigen Gallery in Chicago.[94] 1967 was the year in which, in addition to two solo exhibitions at Willard and Feigen, he was represented in eight different group exhibitions.[95] These included shows in Philadelphia, New York, Washington D.C., Detroit, and an exhibition organized by Ben Vautier in Nice, France.[96] The inaugural exhibition of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago included works by Ray Johnson, Shusaku Arakawa, Gianfranco Baruchello, Mary Bauermeister, George Brecht, Oyvind Fahlström, Allan Kaprow, R. B. Kitaj, Alison Knowles, Jim Nutt, Gianni-Emilio Simonetti, and Wolf Vostell.[97] In his New York Gallery, Richard Feigen presented Johnson's collages alongside works by Joseph Cornell, Marcel Duchamp, Robert Indiana, Jasper Johns, Paul Klee, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert

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[92] Secunda 2010, p. 15.
[93] Grace Glueck, "What happened? Nothing," *The New York Times*, Sunday, April 11, 1965.
[94] Solo exhibition (title unknown), Willard Gallery, New York, April 6–May 1, 1965. *Ice*, solo exhibition, Willard Gallery, New York, April 26–May 21, 1966. *Ray Johnson*, solo exhibition, Richard Feigen Gallery, Chicago, October 19–November 19, 1966.
[95] *Duchamp Combs*, solo exhibition, Willard Gallery, New York, April 25–May 27, 1967. *Ray Johnson*, solo exhibition, Richard Feigen Gallery, Chicago, October 21–November 18, 1967.
[96] *162nd Annual Exhibition: American Watercolors, Prints and Drawings*, group exhibition, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and Philadelphia Watercolor Club, Philadelphia, January 20–March 5, 1967. *Art in Process: The Visual Development of a Collage*, group exhibition, Finch College Museum of Art, Contemporary Study Wing, New York, March 9–April 25, 1967. *69th National Exhibition*, group exhibition, Washington Watercolor Association at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Washington, D.C., April 30–May 27, 1967 (Juror: Jules Olitski). *Five Artists show Collage*, group exhibition, Gertrude Kasle Gallery, Detroit, October 16–November 7, 1967. *La Bouteille et l'Assiette*, group exhibition organized by Ben Vautier, Galerie Ben Doute de Tout, Nice, France, November 17–30, 1967.
[97] *Pictures To Be Read/Poetry To Be Seen*, group exhibition, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, October 24–December 3, 1967.

Rauschenberg, Kurt Schwitters, and others.[98] In June 1968, Johnson collaborated with Nam June Paik on the work *TV Chair Video*, which was shown at the Galleria Bonino in New York. In 1968, Richard L. Feigen also became Johnson's exclusive gallery.

Just as Johnson's career seemed to make a significant leap, a series of events changed his life forever. On June 3, 1968, Valerie Solanas shot Ray's friend, Andy Warhol. Later that same day, Johnson was robbed at knifepoint. Three days later, the United States experienced the shock of Robert Kennedy's assassination. In a letter dated October 9, 1968, Johnson wrote to his friend Henry Martin: "I am now living in the country after a rude Spaniard attempted to plunge an eight-inch switchblade into my back."[99] As a possible response to these personal and political events, Johnson first moved to a house in Glen Cove, Long Island, near the Lippolds. In November 1969, he bought a house in nearby Locust Valley in Nassau County, New York. There, he lived until his death.

At first, it seemed that Ray Johnson's career had been undamaged by his move from the city to the countryside. From September 2 until October 6, 1970, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York showed the exhibition *Ray Johnson New York Correspondence School*. Johnson was invited by the curator Marcia Tucker, who was later to establish the New Museum for Contemporary Art in New York. The exhibition in the main gallery of the Whitney Museum featured letters, postcards, collages, drawings, and objects sent to the museum by 106 NYCS participants. Johnson had called for submissions in a mailing. As Tucker and Johnson had agreed, everything that the Whitney had received was on display. Sharla Shava notes:

> The exhibition, because it was displayed in a prominent and publicly sanctioned institution of art, marked a crucial turning point both in terms of Johnson's own practice and in terms of the status correspondence art acquired within the avant-garde. Through this inaugural display the defiant stance of mail art joined rank with many other contemporaneous practices in an adamant rejection of the conventional art object.[100]

However, the feedback to the Whitney exhibition was mixed. Kasha Linville's review in *Artforum*, for example, points to an inherent contradiction in the institutional exhibition of mail

[98] *Words*, group exhibition, Richard Feigen Gallery, New York, October 1967.
[99] Letter from Ray Johnson to Henry Martin of October 9, 1968, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation, inventory number ÖL-StG 434/0.
[100] Shava 1999, p. 121.

art: “The only sad note about Johnson's Whitney diversion is it seems a shame to catch a living thing in flight, to pin it down and make a museum display out of it.”[101]

For the purposes of this study, it seems sufficient to note that after the mixed success of the Whitney exhibition, and after Johnson's return to the countryside, his presence in the New York scene slowly declined during the 1970s. In 1978, Johnson permitted one last time to exhibit his works in a commercial gallery.[102] The 1980s and 1990s were followed by only a few solo exhibitions of Johnson's works. However, he was still actively participating in group exhibitions—some of them already historical retrospectives of American art of the 1950s and 60s. Johnson continued his correspondence activities until his alleged suicide in January 1995. After his death, Johnson’s gallerist Richard L. Feigen represented the artist’s estate until April 2017. As of May 1, 2017, the Ray Johnson Estate has been exclusively represented by Adler Beatty.

[101] Kasha Linville, “New York,” *Artforum* 9, no. 3 (November 1970): 86.
[102] *Ray Johnson Chronology, compiled by Muffet Jones and Michael von Uchtrup with Clive Phillpot, William S. Wilson et al.*, on display at the Ray Johnson Estate, Adler Beatty, New York.

Chapter 2: Subjectivity and identity in the post-war New York art scene. Ray Johnson between Abstract Expressionists, Black Mountain, and the neo-avant-garde

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, during Ray Johnson's first years in New York, the art scene was dominated by a group of artists known as the "Abstract Expressionists" or the "New York School." It was an informal network between a large number of painters and sculptors. Among them were Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Robert Motherwell. Their art was considered by many to be the first authentic American art movement and soon became one of the most internationally influential, if not the most influential, artistic currents of that time.[103] However, during the 1950s, a younger generation of artists who attacked some of the dominant paradigms of Abstract Expressionism managed to attract more and more attention. Some of the key figures of this new generation were artists with whom Ray Johnson was in close contact.

One of the places in which some of the protagonists of historical and new avant-garde met in the late 1940s was Black Mountain College in Asheville and Black Mountain, North Carolina. For instance, the head of the painting program in Black Mountain, Josef Albers, invited Robert Motherwell and Willem de Kooning to teach there. Among the students were Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and Ray Johnson. Due to his work at the Black Mountain College, Albers is seen as one of the most important mediators between the European avant-garde, the American abstract painters of the 1940s and 50s and the subsequent generations of American artists.[104] Although the German allegedly despised the art of Robert Rauschenberg, the latter would later identify Albers as his most important teacher.[105]

According to his student records, Ray Johnson took most of his classes with Albers.[106] Subjects included design, color, drawing, and painting. It seems that Albers valued Johnson's specific talent for design and typography because in 1947 he gave him a commercial assignment. Albers

[103] Cf. Guilbaut 1983. After World War II, the New York art scene around the Abstract Expressionists even "stole," as Serge Guilbaut put it, the fame of being the center of modern art from the city of Paris.
[104] Knapstein 2015, p. 288.
[105] Christopher Knight, "Robert Rauschenberg, 1925–2008. He led the way to Pop Art," *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 2008.
[106] Thomson 2010, p. 17.

arranged for him to design the cover for the November 1947 issue of the magazine *Interiors* (Plate 9). Edited by Olga Gueft from 1945 to 1974, *Interiors* was a leading magazine for interior design. It showcased the work of emerging designers like Florence Knoll, Vladimir Kagan, and Edward Wormley. With Gueft as its editor, "*Interiors* was the primary source for designers of industry news, trends, and musings on the processes of pioneering practitioners."[107] In the 1950s, Gueft had several of the magazine's covers designed by a young commercial illustrator named Andy Warhol. The editors of the November 1947 issue described Ray Johnson's cover design as a painting in which the artist "obtained riotously colorful effects with only black, red, and blue."[108] Years later, Johnson would complain that "design" was exactly what people did not like about his work.[109] Graphic design was not the only discipline taught at Black Mountain College that kept the avant-garde tradition of connecting "art and life" alive, which Anni and Josef Albers had imported from the Bauhaus. While the Albers were on sabbatical, Ray Johnson studied painting and drawing with Russian painter Ilya Bolotowsky, an apprentice of Piet Mondrian and co-founder of the cooperative of "American Abstract Artists," attended lessons in working with wood taught by Mary "Molly" Gregory, and learned about weaving and textile design from Franziska Mayer and Trude Guermonprez.[110] Norman Solomon, who also studied at Black Mountain College, remembers his first encounter with Ray Johnson:

> This would have been in December of 1950. We were all from Black Mountain College and on vacation, and we all, except for Ray, went back. Ray had a small intro feature in Vogue or Harper's and something coming up in Craft Horizons, BMC at that time was a noted weaving center imprinted by Annie Albers, who with Josef A. had come to it from the Bauhaus. Ray's paintings, then, were tall, sectioned, and looked like painted weavings. The crafts angle was not only evident but had led to New York arts/crafts connections. But, Ray escaped all that by throwing his paints and brushes out![111]

We do not know what really drove Johnson to abandon a promising career as a painter. After all, he exhibited in the years 1949-1952 with the American Abstract Artists. In their publication "The World of Abstract Art," published in 1957, Johnson is listed under the "Former Officers of the American Abstract Artists/Treasurers."[112] In 1955, Johnson allegedly burned a large part

[107] Sirabella 2017.
[108] Norman Solomon, quoted in Harris 1997, p. 66.
[109] Wilson 1997, p. 8.
[110] Harris 1997, 67. Knapstein 2015, p. 291.
[111] Norman Solomon in Cernovitch et al. 1997, p. 81.
[112] American Abstract Artists 1957, p. 161.

of his paintings in Cy Twombly's fireplace.[113] Twombly belonged to a circle of young artists who had come to New York from Black Mountain College in the early 1950s. Since their time in North Carolina Twombly was close friends with Rauschenberg, who would later meet Jasper Johns and start a lifelong relationship with him. One of the influential personalities for these young artists and, later on, far beyond the New York art scene was a man who had been invited to Black Mountain College in 1948: John Cage. As part of the teaching staff of the summer of 1948, which included Merce Cunningham, Richard Lippold, Winslow Ames, Beaumont Newhall, and Buckminster "Bucky" Fuller, Cage directed a festival for the music of Erik Satie. (According to the program of the final performance of *The Ruse of Medusa* on August 14, 1948, Ray Johnson was responsible for "telephone" under the heading "special props.")[114] Cage's classes at Black Mountain College did not attract much attention. But there were other spaces for the exchange of ideas, as he explains:

> What I think was so important at Black Mountain was that we all ate our meals together. For instance, I was teaching music composition, but no one was studying with me. I had no students. But I would sit at a table three times a day and there would be conversations. And those meals were the classes. And ideas would come out.[115]

An event in the summer of 1952, initiated by Cage at Black Mountain College and at that time untitled, was to be remembered in twentieth-century art and theater history as "a forerunner, as the igniting spark of performance art," or as "performance art *avant la lettre*, that is, as a hybrid and transgressive genre which prefers an aesthetic of presentation and process over one's representation and works."[116]

The contributors of the event otherwise known as *Theater Piece No. 1* included pianist David Tudor, poets Charles Olson and M. C. Richards, dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham with several members of his troupe, and Robert Rauschenberg, with whom Cage would engage in a long-term collaborative relationship. The work of Cage and his entourage in the early 1950s is seen by many as the seed that led to developments in artistic production stretching well into the 1960s. In a connection with the work of Marcel Duchamp and other representatives of the European avant-gardes, the attention shifted from the final work and its meaning to the

[113] Jones 1999a, 203. Gosse 2012.
[114] Program for *The Ruse of Medusa*, August 14, 1948. In Blume et al. 2015, p. 315.
[115] Lehmann 2015, p. 101.
[116] Lehmann 2015, pp. 105–107.

processes of production and reception.[117] It was no coincidence that the fateful connection between Cage's radical innovations in the field of musical composition, and the fields of theater and fine arts took place in Black Mountain. The interdisciplinary approach that Josef and Anni Albers, Charles Olson, and many others lived and taught at Black Mountain College, provided the perfect framework for *Theater Piece no. 1.* In 1935, Josef Albers had written in an essay:

> Under the term "art" I include all fields of artistic purposes – the fine and applied arts, also music, dramatics, dancing, the theatre, photography, movies, literature, and so on. . . . If art is an essential part of culture and life, then we must no longer educate our students either to be historians or to be imitators of antiquities, but for artistic seeing, artistic working, and more, for artistic living.[118]

The title of the essay "Art as Experience" cites John Dewey's influential text of the same title, which was published in 1934. As Johanna Gosse notes, Johnson, as Alber's devoted disciple, most likely benefited from Dewey's ideas. Gosse identifies a central commonality between Dewey's thinking and Johnson's practice in the fundamental conceptual continuity between art and everyday experience. Gosse emphasizes that for Dewey, "an experience" is not a passive event but an active process which the subject of that experience undergoes as something singular, transformative and meaningful.[119] In Johnson's use of the metaphor of osmosis for his "moticos," Gosse sees evidence that the artist was aware of the importance of the continuity between art and everyday life for his own practice.

As a teacher, and from 1948 to 1949 as rector of the Black Mountain College, Josef Albers pursued a concept that put experiment above tradition while being strongly informed by results of the psychology of perception.[120] What is more, Albers regularly emphasized the processual and performative side of art making:

> Art is concerned with the HOW and not the WHAT; not with the literal content, but with the performance of the factual content. The performance – how it is done – that is the content of art.[121]

[117] Lehmann 2015, p. 107. Knapstein 2015, p. 288.
[118] Josef Albers, "Art as Experience," *Progressive Education* 12 (October 1935): 391–393, quoted in Knapstein 2015, p. 284.
[119] Gosse 2012.
[120] Lehmann 2015, p. 102.
[121] Josef Albers, quoted in Lehmann 2015, p. 102.

It is statements like this one that point in the direction of Happenings, performance art, Fluxus, etc., and moreover, in the direction of conceptual art and all those contemporary art practices that focus on the processual and conceptual aspects of artistic production. However, looking in the other chronological direction, it should be reiterated that the project of Anni and Josef Albers and all others in Black Mountain had its models and forerunners not only in the Bauhaus but also in the various practices of the European avant-gardes. The transfer of artistic positions from the old to the new world was not carried out solely by emigrants. As was mentioned earlier, John Cage played a crucial role in sharing knowledge of pre-World War II European avant-garde practices. Robert Motherwell, to give another example, taught during summer sessions at Black Mountain College in 1945 and 1951. His students included Twombly and Rauschenberg. During the summer of 1951, the following scene was observed by writer and artist Fielding Dawson:

> Rauschenberg and Twombly on the gravel patio beneath the Studies Building gazing down at a large canvas, covered in parts by tar. They tossed handfuls of pebbles on it. Motherwell, between them, gestured. Said to throw more and they did.[122]

Motherwell had recently compiled and published a book entitled *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology,* which contained manifestos, essays, and illustrations by Hans Arp, Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, Erik Satie, Kurt Schwitters and Tristan Tzara.[123] In the 1940s he had spent time with the exiled artists Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and André Masson.[124] Motherwell's example illustrates that the notion of a binary antagonism between the younger cohort of the so-called "Neo-avantgarde" and the older generation of Abstract Expressionists is not quite accurate. Instead of a sudden patricidal renunciation, it might be of more use to imagine a fluid transition, with a combination of multiple factors and agents involved. It is the time of transition from the supremacy of Abstract Expressionist painting to a new, process- and experience-oriented art that ties in with the art of the European avant-gardes, in which Ray Johnson experienced his formative years as an artist. To better understand the historical relevance of Johnson's artistic production in terms of issues of subjectivity and identity, it is worth looking at some of the historic hubs that show important developments in this transition in a condensed form. Two highly profitable studies can be found in Michael Leja's formidable

[122] Fielding Dawson, "Summer of '51," in *The Black Mountain Book: A New Edition* (Rocky Mount, NC: Wesleyan College Press, 1991), p. 113, quoted in Knapstein 2015, p. 287.
[123] Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology,* first published in 1951 by Witterborn Schultz, Inc., New York.
[124] Knapstein 2015, p. 287.

Reframing Abstract Expressionism and Brandon W. Joseph's book *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*.[125] Both representations pay close attention to the models of subjectivity that are associated with artistic production.

In his project, Leja links the term "subject" in the sense of "subject matter" of a work of art, with the human subject and its subjectivity. The self-proclaimed goal of *Reframing Abstract Expressionism* lies in the attempt to historicize subjectivity by reconstructing "how an image of the self is changing at a particular moment and under particular conditions."[126] Leja shows that:

> New York School artists took their subjectivity as thematic in their work, a subjectivity they imagined as "interior." . . . The "subjects of the artist" were the artists as subjects. They believed that the representation or mobilization of newly discovered structures and contents of human nature, mind, and individuality was of central importance in their art.[127]

According to Leja, this common interest was also crucial for their emerging identity as a group. It was not least the premise of Sam Koontz's important exhibition *The Intrasubjectives* in the fall of 1949, under which the group came together and defined itself. Leja situates the painters of the New York School in the broader cultural context of the so-called *Modern Man Discourse*. The categories of the unconscious and the primitive, which both emerge prominently in the context of Abstract Expressionism, serve as points of contact.[128] Leja traces the historical roots of these interests to the discourses that emanated from *Modern Man* literature and philosophy, and to categories that had previously articulated themselves in and for American culture, long before New York School artists addressed them.[129] For the art historian, the subject called Modern Man, and the discourses focussing on it, began in the late 19th century. Its development continued well into the post-war period. Leja explains:

> [W]hat defines and characterizes New York School art (its "subject") is its effort to devise a form of modernist visual representation that could accommodate and enrich developing models of the human individual, models that attributed new importance to irrational others within human being. These models were historically conditioned and

[125] Leja 1993. Joseph 2007.
[126] Leja 1993, p. 9.
[127] Leja 1993, p. 269.
[128] Leja 1993, p. 7.
[129] Leja 1993, p. 12.

> ideologically charged: the Modern Man subject was largely a refurbishing of the culture's prevailing model of self as essentially autonomous, integral and effectual which was faltering under pressure from historical cataclysm and social conflict and change. Insofar as it participated in adjusting and resecuring the dominant ideology's model of subjectivity, New York School art engendered historical effects much less radical and progressive than its unconventional look and its stormy public reception might lead us at first to imagine.[130]

For Leja, the representations of the self as the scene of a heroic struggle, which the autonomous human subject carries out between the poles of light and darkness, occupy the central thematic space in the art of the New York School. He concludes that these representations ultimately only helped to adapt and consolidate the dominant middle class ideology. The restabilization of bourgeois ideology, in the face of the shock of historical events of recent modernity, required the psychologizing explanation of these events. The insights of studying "primitive" human life and the unconscious mind were of critical importance.[131] Although the artists had found it revolutionary to incorporate the very recent findings from the fields of psychoanalysis and anthropology into their art, the limiting constraints of the dominant ideology had been an integral part of the artists' experience. As a result, their efforts to liberate themselves from certain limitations of the imagined self had paradoxically helped to refresh and elaborate the dominant ideology and its models of human nature, the human mind, and human subjectivity.

In particular, it was the male, white, heterosexual, middle-class individual portrayed as the "locus of the conflict at the source of modern life's tragedies," both in the Modern Man discourse and in the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists.[132] "Abstract Expressionism has been recognized, from its first accounts, as a male domain, ruled by the familiar social construction of ‚masculine' as tough, aggressive, sweeping, bold."[133] Jackson Pollock has readily volunteered as a paradigmatic example of such stereotypical projections. In this context, Leja refers to T. J. Clark's remark that those features of such artistic production that have gained the most popularity in critical and historical literature—size, action, energy, space, etc.—functioned as "operators of sexual difference," part of "an informing metaphorics of masculinity."[134] Among the groups that were excluded from the Modern-Man project, which

[130] Leja 1993, p. 9.
[131] Leja 1993, p. 270.
[132] Leja 1993, p. 270.
[133] Leja 1993, p. 256.
[134] Leja 1993, p. 256. Clark 1990, p. 229.

severely impacted Abstract Expressionism, were, according to Leja, African Americans, Native Americans, women, and non-heterosexual men. They served as foils, in contrast to which the subjectivity of white, heterosexual, middle-class men was restored.[135] Leja also raises the question of why so few women even attempted to join Abstract Expressionism during the late 1940s and early 1950s. He sees the answer in the specific form of subjectivity inscribed in it: "the particular beliefs about and experiences of self, individuality, identity, human nature, and mental process that both inform and take form in this art."[136] The internal divisions that ran across the subject's imagination were represented as gendered. The "other within" the modern man was identified with the feminine, the un-masculine, and consequently objectified. In Film Noir, which Leja declares to be part of the Modern Man Discourse, women often symbolize the force fields with which the rational and conscious part of the male protagonist struggles in order to restore his balance and harmony. Leja identifies a similar structural use of gender in some works of the New York School, from Pollock's early paintings to Willem de Kooning's depictions of women. The latter gave a contemporary critic the impression that the artist was in a "terrible struggle with a female force."[137]

Thus, Leja places Abstract Expressionism and its model of subjectivity and identity in an ambivalent, if not reactionary, position within the broader sociocultural context of a struggle for hegemony along the fronts of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In the epilogue to *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, Leja takes a look at the decline of the subjectivity model of the *Modern Man Discourse* and its New York School version. Pointing to an oppositional emergent model, he writes:

> Within a decade of its appearance, the subjectivity inscribed in Abstract Expressionism had begun to seem to a significant number of artists and viewers melodramatic, even hysterical. A new attitude toward self, which we have begun to call postmodern, made early appearances in the art of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, Roy Liechtenstein, and others. The self they rendered—without center, depth, or internal turbulence—dissolved into a fabric of repetitions and appropriations.[138]

With regard to Ray Johnson and the questions in this study, two details from Leja's remark should be highlighted. Firstly, Leja identifies a crucial distinction between the Abstract

[135] Leja 1993, p. 254.
[136] Leja 1993, p. 257.
[137] Leja 1993, pp. 259–265.
[138] Leja 1993, p. 330.

Expressionists and the subsequent artists in the altered rendering of the self in their art—decentered, without depth, without the representation of internal struggles, "dissolved into a web of repetitions and appropriations." All of those qualities have repeatedly been attributed to the works of Ray Johnson.[139] Second, in this context, it is notable that Ray Johnson was friends with three of the four artists mentioned by Leja—Johns, Rauschenberg, and Warhol—already in the 1950s.[140] The new artistic scene of which Leja speaks is precisely Johnson's scene. A third interesting point is provided by Leja when he notes that "artists whose identification with Abstract Expressionist subjectivity is impeded by their sex, race, or sexual preference have played a leading part in developing the critique and effecting transition."[141] Robert Rauschenberg had love relationships with Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns. Andy Warhol made no secret of his sexuality throughout his life. John Cage and Merce Cunningham were life partners until Cage's death in 1992. Is it possible that the sexual preferences of these artists had anything to do with their revolutionary cultural achievements? There are those who would answer this question with a loud and clear yes. Two of the most famous studies dealing with this issue are those about John Cage written by Caroline A. Jones and Jonathan D. Katz, respectively.[142] Cage is a key figure in the transition from the New York School to the practices made emblematic by the likes of Rauschenberg. Not only was he very close to Rauschenberg since their meeting at Black Mountain College. He also frequented the circles of the Abstract Expressionists in the 1940s before he turned his back on some of their central paradigms. For Ray Johnson, too, Cage may have been an important role model, not least because of his sexuality, which was an open secret within the avant-garde.[143] Johnson himself had spent some time fighting to accept his own sexual desire, even before coming to Black Mountain.[144] Despite their artistic interest in the European avant-garde and in everything related to Marcel Duchamp, there is an almost uncanny resemblance between Cage and Johnson in the path they each took in order to deal with the "disturbance" their sexuality gave them in work and everyday life. Cage once said in retrospect in an interview:

[139] Cf. Martin 1972, pp. 22–24; Bourdon 1984; Wilson 1997, pp. 22, 30, 34, 46 et pass.; Klein 1999, pp. 51, 55–57; Steiner 1999, p. 76; Muñoz 2009, p. 121.
[140] According to the *Ray Johnson Chronology* at the Ray Johnson Estate, Johnson had known Warhol since 1956. Both worked as graphic designer and designed the book covers for New Directions, New York. See also http://www.rayjohnsonestate.com/timelines/1954-1964/ (accessed August 12, 2019).
[141] Leja 1993, p. 330.
[142] Jones 1993, and Katz 1999.
[143] Katz 1999, p. 231.
[144] Wilson 1997, pp. 48–49.

> Well, if you had a disturbance both about your work and about your daily life, what are you going to do? . . . None of the doctors can help you, our society can't help you, and education doesn't help us. It's singularly lacking in any such instruction. Furthermore, our religion doesn't help us . . . There isn't much help for someone who is in trouble in our society. I had eliminated psychiatry as a possibility. You have Oriental thought, you have mythology.[145]

Ray Johnson also spent some time looking for answers to his "problem," and even ways to overcome and cure his homosexuality through the teachings of *Christian Science* and later through Jungian psychotherapy.[146] His friend William S. Wilson remembers: "Somewhere between 1950 and 1955, because earlier Christian Science seems not to have worked as a cure for homosexuality, Ray experimented with a psychiatrist or psychoanalyst, but after that, he disdained attempts to interpret the mysterious interior of a person from surfaces."[147] Afterward, according to Wilson, Johnson turned away from transcendental and interpretive approaches and learned to accept his life and himself with the help of Buddhist teachings of immanence. It seems that Cage and Johnson had reached the same conclusion. Because it was not possible, either through medicine, education, or religion, to defeat one's self in the inner struggle, one had to learn to accept it. Thus, the question of the inner motivations of the self, of the true nature of phenomena, seemed to lose their meaning. According to Jonathan D. Katz, "zen detachment" is routinely cited in the literature as an original moment in the development of postmodernism in the arts, as an early indication of "the death of the author."[148] In the post-war United States, interest in Eastern thought was widespread, especially in the arts. For instance, in 1957, *The World of Abstract Art* published by the American Abstract Artists speaks of many artists, "devoting themselves to the study of the metaphysical schools of the east: Vedantism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc. Since our contact with Japan has been closest, Zen Buddhism has so far had the strongest influence."[149] In a footnote of the same publication, several visual artists are listed, "who have achieved a synthesis of Eastern thought in their work." Among them are the Abstract Expressionists Mark Tobey, Mark Rothko, and Sari Dienes; "and structural artists like Richard Lippold, Ad Reinhardt, Jean Miles, Ray Johnson."[150]

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[145] John Cage in an interview with Paul Cummings, New York City, 2 May 1974, quoted in Katz 1999, p. 234.
[146] Dempsey 2010, 24. Wilson 2008, p. 5.
[147] Wilson 2007, p. 2.
[148] Katz 1999, p. 235. Katz refers to Amelia Jones and her book *Postmodernism and the En-gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
[149] American Abstract Artists 1957, p. 62.
[150] American Abstract Artists 1957, p. 62, footnote.

In the case of John Cage, Jonathan D. Katz believes that Zen "provided a theoretically attractive, satisfying resolution to the problematics of communication enforced by the closet."[151] Cage's divorce and the beginning of his relationship with Merce Cunningham took place during "a dangerous time for gay men in America, a time of long prison sentences, McCarthyite witch-hunts, and cold-was hate mongering."[152] In the context of the general homophobia of the post-war US, it was practically impossible to express one's gay desire freely in daily life. The situation even worsened when the hunt for Communists led by Senator Joseph McCarthy took full momentum in 1950. In connection with the "Red Scare," McCarthy and others organized a veritable witch hunt, which was later called "Lavender Scare," against homosexuals. In the 1950s, this led among other things to mass dismissals of state employees who were suspected of homosexuality.[153] During this time, homosexuals were seen as potentially blackmailable by Communist agents and thus as subversive elements in American society. The prevailing medical model classified homosexuality as a perversion and characterized "queers" as mentally and morally unstable. Local hunts on gay men, such as those in Boise, Idaho, in the year 1955, were caused by a national hysteria over sex crimes.[154] It seems that for both men, Cage, and Johnson, engaging with Zen Buddhism presented a way to better deal with the fears and societal challenges that gay men had to face in the pre-Stonewall era.

Jonathan D. Katz also identifies that attitude of "detachment" in Cage's ironizing of any expression in art that later promoted his classification as a postmodernist. Above all, it is Cage's "embrace of silence," a "silence of the closet" or "silence-as-resistance," that has allowed the author to escape both complicity in the dominant culture and discovery as a homosexual.[155] In the context of Cage's social life, "dominant culture" refers not only to the general mainstream of the 1940s but, in particular, to the machismo and homophobia of the circle of the Abstract Expressionists that Cage frequented in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Katz cites Cage's friend, composer Morton Feldman, who in an interview speaks about a quarrel between Cage and Robert Motherwell: "I would say there was a homosexual bias . . . not only against him, but against the younger people who began to associate with him: Rauschenberg and Jasper [Johns], and Cy Twombly. I would say there was a homosexual bias."[156] In this social environment,

[151] Katz 1999, p. 235.
[152] Katz 1999, p. 243.
[153] Johnson 2004, p. 2.
[154] Eaklor 2008, pp. 87–88.
[155] Katz 1999, p. 243.
[156] Morton Feldman, interviewed by R. Wood Massi, San Francisco, 3 March 1987, quoted in Katz 1999, p. 238.

Cage delivered his famous *Lecture on Nothing* in 1949, a "veritable lesson in detachment" for Katz.[157] Caroline A. Jones notes that Cage's movement toward silence and indeterminacy had a profoundly alienating impact on the Abstract Expressionists. In her view, by burning down the individual ego, Cage opened a space for younger male artists and created some of the first tools for the critique of the Abstract Expressionists and the specific subjectivity that found expression in New York School painting. The list of names for this younger cohort of artists begins for Jones with Rauschenberg and Johns and continues with Kaprow, Smithson, Morris, De Maria, and countless others.[158] Ray Johnson, who devoted himself to the production of his moticos in the early 1950s, allegedly burned his paintings, and in the mid-fifties began to establish an art practice of postal correspondence, is certainly one of those who followed Cage's example earlier than others. And like Cage, Rauschenberg, Johns, and Twombly, Johnson was gay.

For Caroline A. Jones, the criticism that Cage exercised took place "within a specific homosexual aesthetic."[159] This claim may be a bit too ambitious. To speak of a homosexual or queer "aesthetic" sounds as if the artistic practice in question obeyed certain general rules that would make it a queer practice, regardless of the social and historical context. Also, such a categorization may obscure the view of other factors that play a role in the choice of artistic strategies as well as other productive qualities of the considered art practice. Therefore, I agree with Brandon W. Joseph when he is referring to Jones and Katz's theses: "Cage and Rauschenberg's antiexpressive, anti-subjective, and antiauthoritarian artistic production was clearly in no small part a product of them being positioned beyond the officially sanctioned norms of a heterosexist society. Nevertheless, it would seem difficult to equate their work with any, specifically homosexual aesthetic'."[160] In his book on Robert Rauschenberg titled *Random Order,* first published in 2003, Joseph refers to the critique of representation that the philosopher Gilles Deleuze has formulated in *Difference and Repetition*. Joseph attempts to demonstrate that Rauschenberg's (and John Cage's) art brought to light a positive concept of difference that can be related to Deleuze's own post-identitarian, "molecular" politics of "subjective transformation" and its positive conception of desire. Joseph's dismissal of Rauschenberg's and Cage's queerness as irrelevant epiphenomena to the "subjective transformations" in their artistic production thus seems to be grounded in his Deleuzian position

[157] Katz 1999, p. 238–239.
[158] Jones 1993, p. 638.
[159] Jones 1993, p. 639.
[160] Joseph 2007, p. 67.

of post-identity politics. However, there are valid reasons not to disregard the role of societal identifications or dis-identifications by the individual artists in the analysis of their works. Art historian Amelia Jones goes so far as to say that "acknowledging processes of identification is key to performing an honest, politically viable art history or criticism for the 21st century."[161] In the following chapter, the question of whether one should include in the analysis of artistic practice, the sexuality or other identity-creating peculiarities of the author of this practice, with a closer look at the work of Ray Johnson, will be discussed in more detail. In any case, I agree with Amelia Jones that the approaches of Deleuze and Guattari can be fundamentally productive for the theoretical work, but require some correction in their problematic historical and geographical unspecificity.[162] And if you include the concrete historical frameworks of the US-American, and more specifically, the New York art scene of the late 1940s and early 1950s in the analysis of the artistic practice of Cage, Rauschenberg, and Ray Johnson, you cannot avoid discussing their sexual identifications and relating them—as singularities—to the concrete descriptions of their works. Hence, if one does not close one's eyes to the fact that Cage and Rauschenberg were gay, then Joseph's Deleuzian observations on the affirmation of difference in their works also reveal a queer political potentiality.

The encounter of Cage and Rauschenberg at Black Mountain in the summer of 1952, as well as the ensuing collaborations, initiated, in the eyes of Brandon W. Joseph, "a new paradigm of avant-garde production, in which the idea of difference was conceived not in terms of negation but rather as a positive force." In the indeterminacy of presence and absence, which characterizes both the silence in Cage's *4'33* "and the emptiness/abundance of Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* of 1951, Joseph sees one of the most important manifestations of this positive concept of difference in the works of the two artists.[163] Another central aspect of the avant-garde strategies of Cage and Rauschenberg lies in their emphasis on the duration and processuality of the works of art. "We're no longer making objects but processes," Cage explains.[164] Thus the openness to the sounds of the surroundings, which comes about through the emptiness of *4'33",* emphasizes the immanent existence of the work in the concrete temporality of the actual world.[165]

[161] Jones 2012, p. 239.
[162] Jones 2012, pp. 233–235.
[163] Joseph 2007, p. 21–22.
[164] John Cage, "Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?" (1961), in *Silence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), pp. 236–237, quoted in Joseph 2007, p. 54.
[165] Joseph 2007, p. 56.

Among the intellectual sources that underpinned Cage's understanding of "perceptual immersion within duration" were, according to Joseph, the Zen teachings of Daisetz T. Suzuki.[166] Suzuki (1870–1966) was a Japanese theologian who visited the US a few times between the 1890s and the 1960s. During his third visit in the 1950s, Zen began to take root in the United States, mainly due to the public attention Suzuki received. The theologian is known for his influence on a large number of famous figures of American cultural life, including members of the Beat Generation of the 1940s and 1950s. With their nomadic and transitory lifestyle, their poetic ecstasies and their unrestrained sex, the Beat movement was characterized by a rebellious attitude towards bourgeois mainstream culture. Zen as a source of inspiration had become part of their resistance against the American establishment.[167] For John Cage, Zen represented a philosophy of immanence "a fundamental tenet of which was the rejection of any stable form of transcendence or separation from the actual world."[168]

Ray Johnson is also reported to have developed in the early 1950s a keen interest in Zen thinking and the concept of "*sunyata*," the ideal of emptiness, when he lived in the adjoining apartment of John Cage and Merce Cunningham.[169] Throughout his entire artistic career, this fascination for an idea of emptiness would be one of the constants in Johnson's works. Terms and themes like "nothing," "void," "space," "death—the great annihilator," etc., appear in countless of his collages, mailings and writings.[170] Sharla Shava describes the repeated thematic occurrence of "death (the value of nothingness)" as a characteristic feature of Johnson's oeuvre.[171] Both title and concept of his "Nothing" events are likely to stem from Johnson's reflections on Zen's ideas and his exchange with John Cage and Richard Lippold. Lippold also appears on the list of the American Abstract Artists whose work "achieved a synthesis with Eastern thought."[172] Lippold is also likely to have been a mediator between Johnson and Cage. The sculptor, like Cage, had taught at Black Mountain College during the summer of 1948 when he and Johnson met and started a love affair that lasted for decades. Johnson moved in 1949 with Lippold to New York City. In 1951 they moved together to an apartment in the so-called "Boza Mansion" in 326 Monroe Street. Opposite to them resided Cage, Cunningham, and composer Morton Feldman,

[166] Joseph 2007, p. 56.
[167] Iwamura 2011, positions 434, 440.
[168] Joseph 2007, p. 56.
[169] Zuba 2014, p. 11.
[170] On the connection between the theme of death in Ray Johnson's *A Book About Death* and Johnson's reflections on philosophies of immanence influenced by Zen-Buddhism and the Dao, see Wilson 2009, pp. 12–16 and 40–41.
[171] Shava 1999, p. 30.
[172] American Abstract Artists 1957, p. 62.

who were regularly visited by Rauschenberg, Johns, Twombly, and other Black Mountain alumni.[173] At Black Mountain, Lippold and Cage had also developed a fruitful exchange of ideas about "spaces in music and silences in sculpture."[174] Already in 1947, Lippold had made a sculptural work of thin wires that he titled *Five Variations Within a Sphere (for John Cage)*. Cage, on the other hand, saw in Lippold's sculptures "the same endless possibilities of form he saw in his silent *4'33"*."[175]

Johnson's keen interest in Zen teachings on detachment from things, immanence, and ideas of emptiness was far from being the only commonality that his artistic work of the early 1950s had with that of Lippold, Cage, and other proponents of the so-called Neo-avantgarde. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, more and more American artists began to incorporate strategies of the European avant-gardes of the first decades of the twentieth century into their work. Particularly Surrealism, Dada and the work of Marcel Duchamp, but also the Russian avant-garde after the October Revolution, Cubism, Futurism and other movements and artistic positions were being carefully studied. While Abstract Expressionism, as Benjamin Buchloh observes, appeared as an immediate extension, if not continuation of the "historical" avant-garde, "only beginning about 1951 did the process of rediscovering the post-Cubist legacies of Dada and Constructivism really establish the complicated relationships between the two avant-garde formations for the first time: that is, the dialectics of the persistence and the repetition of artistic paradigms and their qualitative transformation."[176] As far as Ray Johnson is concerned, several commentators have noted the presence of a variety of elements in his collages that indicate a deliberate (and often cheeky) appropriation of various avant-garde strategies. Art critic and Johnson correspondent David Bourdon states:

> Formally, Ray Johnson's work . . . is a rehash of almost all modern art from 1910 on: synthetic cubism, constructivism, purism, ad infinitum. Pictorially, there is practically nothing in his art that can't be traced back to Schwitters, Arp, Klee, Miró and Ben Nicholson. . . . No artist, no style of any period has escaped his cockeyed gaze.[177]

[173] Jones 1999a, p. 202.
[174] Brandstetter 2015, p. 305.
[175] From the exhibition notes of *There Will Never Be Silence* (2014) at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, quoted in Brandstetter 2015, p. 305.
[176] Buchloh 2003, p. xxiii.
[177] David Bourdon, "Notes on a Letterhead," *Art International* 8, No. 9 (November 1969): 78, quoted in Steiner 1999, p. 73–74.

At the beginning of this practice of "rehashing" stood Johnson's decision to abandon abstract painting and to establish the creation of collages as his primary artistic production. As Donna De Salvo notes, Johnson was not alone in this step towards collage at this historic moment. A large number of artists in Europe and North America began to work with collage and assemblage at that time. This can be seen as an implicit countermovement to abstract painting, the then dominant artistic practice, not only in the USA. As De Salvo rightly observes, the use of collage made it possible to introduce referential images into art, which could also serve as formal elements.[178]

In contrast to the high ideals of Abstract Expressionism, this also allowed for a stronger connection to the material and the activities of everyday life. Especially in North America, where the avant-garde activities of the 1910s and 1920s can at best be considered a marginal phenomenon, interest in the pre-war European avant-garde and their aesthetic strategies was very pronounced. Black Mountain College was one of the major US centers for the study of historical avant-garde in the late 1940s. Ray Johnson's friend Norman Solomon, who also studied at the North Carolina School, narrates:

> I think what came next were the collages, we all loved Merz and Schwitters!, made from societal garbage we's [sic!] gleaned from the media and the cans. We'd found much art in the streets, and Ray began mailing some of it to people he knew, but printing and publishing also caught his eye.[179]

Well known in art historical debates is Peter Bürger's view that the reactivation of the strategies of the European avant-gardes in post-war art makes no sense since the historical avant-gardes perished because of their basic mistakes and aporias.[180] As Dietrich Scheunemann points out, this assumption completely omits the historical events in Europe and the Western world, which began with the economic collapse of 1929 and led to disaster. Bürger's argument therefore ignores the crucial role of these external events in the development of aesthetic practices, for "a massive and severe clamp-down on all modernist and avant-gardist concepts and techniques occurred simultaneously from various sides."[181] According to Scheunemann, the reappropriation of artistic strategies and techniques of the historical avant-gardes by various neo-avant-garde movements of the post-war period presents a highly important historical

[178] De Salvo 1999, p. 18.
[179] Norman Solomon in Cernovitch et al. 1997, p. 81.
[180] Bürger 1984.
[181] Scheunemann 2005, pp. 35–36.

operation. The connection to the lost practice of the historical avant-gardes brought the neo-avant-garde a critical advantage over the conservative and conformist tendencies of the 1950s.[182] Also, as noted by Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, and most of the other critics of Bürger's theory, Bürger's premise of summarizing all the various avant-garde activities into a single theory is problematic.[183] For Bürger concentrates in his thesis solely on their attack against the institutionalized status of art. On the other hand, for Scheunemann, the most important topic at stake for the avant-gardes since the mid-nineteenth century was another one: the possibility of fine art in a time of rapid technological progress, especially in the field of image production. In a dialectical model, Scheunemann divides the development of avant-garde practices into two phases:

> While the liberation from mimetic functions with the advance of mechanical means of reproduction represents the core of the first phase of avant-gardist endeavours, the second phase marked by the readymade and the photomontage and their half-sister, the surrealist concept of automatic writing, represents a dialectical reversal of the initial trend. Industrially produced materials and the technical media of photography and film were incorporated into art production.[184]

In Ray Johnson's and other post-war artists' "rehashing" of avant-garde strategies, a reconnection to various strands of the historical avant-garde takes place, and not just for the sake of "stag[ing] for the second time the avant-gardiste break with tradition," contrary to Bürger's accusal of the neo-avant-garde.[185] *In a reversal of Bürger's thesis, it can be stated that the critical historical value of those reactivations can be found precisely in the fact that the most important themes of earlier avant-garde production did not lead to any conclusive answers and their questions were therefore of uninterrupted relevance.* Admittedly, the intensity with which earlier avant-garde actions, such as Duchamp's *Urinal,* had triggered institutional shocks, could barely be expected to be repeatable in the post-World War II era. However, the questions concerning the possibility and potential of art making in "times of mechanical reproduction" remained unanswered in the post-war period and much more so after a decade of supremacy of Abstract Expressionist painting. In effect, these questions must have

[182] Scheunemann 2005, p. 36.
[183] Buchloh 1984, pp. 19–21. Foster 1994, p. 11.
[184] Scheunemann 2005, p. 34.
[185] Bürger 1984, pp. 57–59, 61.

seemed all the more urgent at the time, considering that the pace of technological advances had been accelerating rapidly.

Scheunemann's dialectical model of the avant-garde is also suitable for looking at the relationship between Abstract Expressionism and the neo-avant-garde from another angle. For even if one agrees with Leja's analysis of the conformity of the subjectivity inherent in abstract expressionism with the hegemonic structures of contemporary society, one still must award the New York School with a certain avant-garde status. For, in an analogy to the first phase of the avant-garde proposed by Scheunemann, Abstract Expressionism would correspond to this by pursuing its most important concern, the "liberation of art from its mimetic function." Scheunemann also includes German Expressionism as well as Kandinsky and Malevich in his definition of this first phase of the avant-garde.[186] In the long historical moment from Rauschenberg's *Combines* to Warhol's serial prints to Donald Judd's objects made from industrially fabricated materials, the dialectical reversal mentioned by Scheunemann would be repeated on a larger scale. The mechanical reproduction, which had previously been regarded as the Other of artistic production, was now to be reintroduced into its innermost processes, and this time for good.

The invasion of the readymade—found material from mass media, industrial reproduction and garbage cans alike—in collages and assemblages of the 1950s soon coincided with an opening of the artwork to the real space and the real time of the processes of production and reception. This had severe consequences for some of the central paradigms of Expressionist painting. In collages, assemblages, Happenings, Fluxus events, improvisational theater and dance, and other artistic practices of the late 1950s, the role of the expressive auctorial subject was decisively weakened, in favor of that of material and chance. However, to prevent a return to the author's (albeit unconscious) intention and, with it, the return to traditional interpretive patterns, processes of signification on which such interpretations are based had to be subverted. Various artists found one way of achieving this goal in expanding and emphasizing the space, the "nothingness" between the elements of a composition. While Robert Rauschenberg originally conceived his *White Paintings* within the discursive frame of reference of Greenberg's *high modernism*, in collaboration with Cage, Joseph identified a transformation in the discursive framework of *White Paintings* from 1952 onwards.[187] In 1961, Cage formulated the famous

[186] Scheunemann 2005, p. 26.
[187] Joseph 2007, p. 33.

saying "The white paintings were airports for the lights, shadows, and particles."[188] In this quote, nothing less than a new understanding of the function of the work of art is expressed. This understanding is closely related to Cage's reception of the art of Marcel Duchamp, and especially his monumental work *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors*, *Even*, also known as *The Large Glass*, which has been owned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia since 1952. Cage once stated:

> Looking at the Large Glass, the thing that I like so much is that I can focus my attention wherever I wish. It helps me to blur the distinction between art and life and produces a kind of silence in the work itself. There is nothing in it that requires me to look in one place or another or, in fact, requires me to look at all. I can look through it to the world beyond.[189]

The idea of transparency, emptiness, or space that allows the work of art to open up to its surroundings played, according to Joseph, a central role in Cage's understanding of the difference between the historic Dada movement and what was called neo-dada.[190] Brandon W. Joseph sees Rauschenberg's *Combines* as another example of this expansion of the space between. Their composition seems to fall apart. In their reception, one is hardly able to put the formal elements into an intelligible whole.[191] The same applies, according to Joseph, also for the different types of codes and references used by Rauschenberg in the form of images and words:

> Rauschenberg's collage does traffic in signification. The multiplicities formed in his work are signifying ones, and his "random order" has never escaped the connotational chains that multiply about his materials. . . . The distinct but mutually influential realms of words and images in Rauschenberg's work form more unstable relationships: images incite the semantic equivalents of language, and words take on the multidimensionality of images. . . . A Combine is not a fixed or univocal arrangement or enchaining of signs, especially if we understand them as referencing a meaning that exists on another plane.

[188] John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work" (1961), in *Silence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), quoted in Joseph 2007, p. 33.
[189] John Cage, quoted in Moira Roth and William Roth, "John Cage on Marcel Duchamp," *Art in America* 61, no. 6 (November–December 1973): 78.
[190] Joseph 2007, p. 42.
[191] Joseph 2007, p. 152.

> Rather, a Combine is a multiplicity and each "reading" is an actualization, a unique, contingent, and changeable act of reception.[192]

If one replaced the name Rauschenberg with that of Ray Johnson, the cited statement would remain equally valid. Several authors have found surprisingly similar words for Johnson's art. Ina Blom thinks that the multiple inscriptions of each collaged piece in his works would liberate images from their iconic constraints and highlight the character of the simulacrum inherent in any representation.[193] Kate Erin Dempsey observes that Johnson's oeuvre contains images in different contexts, each time assuming a slightly different meaning: "Ray Johnson gave images a new lease on life—enhancing or altering their meaning entirely by arranging them in novel ways."[194] Johanna Gosse goes a step further and argues that Johnson's art work does not consist so much in autonomous objects, but rather in "ongoing experiential processes, activities, and encounters that require participation for their myriad meanings to catalyze and their full implications to be realized."[195] According to Gosse, this participation includes increased attention to the subtle analogies between forms, sounds, words, and images in Johnson's works.[196] Donna De Salvo summarizes these and other significant similarities between Rauschenberg's and Johnson's works as follows:

> Rauschenberg's "art of parts" was deeply antithetical to the Abstract Expressionist conception of the pictorial surface as a unified whole; the same could be said of Johnson's. Yet, in addition, the work of both artists reveals an essentially formalist concern with structure, as well as a simultaneous tendency to invest structure with elements of the personal and the autobiographical. Both artists also desired to work in what Rauschenberg described as the gap between art and life, evolving formal devices that engaged and acknowledged the spectator.[197]

While Rauschenberg, in his Combines, inserted collage and assemblage into the dominant artistic dispositive of painting, Ray Johnson took the opposite route. He kept both the small format of the collages as well as the found, cut or torn photographic reproductions as central elements of the works (Johnson was also referred to as "master of collage on a portable scale."[198]). He soon began to draw and paint over them. Sometimes, he would add complexity

[192] Joseph 2007, pp. 162–163.
[193] Blom 2003, p. 15.
[194] Dempsey 2010, p. 25.
[195] Gosse 2012.
[196] Gosse 2012.
[197] De Salvo 1999, p. 18–19.
[198] De Salvo 1999, p. 19.

to the texture of the moticos by sanding down their surfaces. The painterly and sculptural elements in Johnson's work have never been noticed as much as in Rauschenberg's *Combines* or the works of Jasper Johns or Cy Twombly. This fact, as well as the smaller format of the collages, may have contributed to Johnson's conceptually demanding works not having the same success on the art market as his contemporaries. For De Salvo, Rauschenberg created his Combines primarily for the gallery context. Johnson's "radical contribution" was, however, to extend the compositional network beyond the boundaries of the individual collage, and to carry it out into the world.[199]

In the broader art historical context, it seems crucial that Ray Johnson developed his correspondence practice out of a strategy of opening up the modes of producing collages. Therefore, it is worth taking a look at how both his collages and his correspondence could be related to the most influential narratives surrounding the art historical paradigm of collage in post-war American art criticism. The dominant narrative in the New York art scene of the 1950s and early 1960s was shaped by America's most influential art critic of the time—Clement Greenberg. In his text "Collage," originally published in 1958 under the title "The Pasted-Paper Revolution" and later revised for his book *Art in Culture* (1961), Greenberg claimed that collage had been "a major turning point in the evolution of Cubism, and therefore a major turning point in the whole evolution of modernist art in this century."[200] Greenberg thus inserted the use of collage in Picasso and Braque's paintings into his own master narrative of the purification of artistic media such as painting or sculpture in modern art, a narrative he would later articulate in greater depth in his famous essay "Modernist Painting" (1965).[201] In Greenberg's view, there had been little merit in any of the collage practices that were developed after Cubism:

> After classical Cubism the development of collage was largely oriented to shock value. Arp, Schwitters and Miró grasped the plastic meaning enough to make collages whose value transcends the piquant, but the genre otherwise declined into montage and stunts of illustration, or into decoration pure and simple.[202]

For the revised edition of the essay, Greenberg deleted this last part and its harsh critique of collage and added instead E. L. T. Mesens, Robert Motherwell, and Anne Ryan to the list of

[199] De Salvo 1999, p. 19.
[200] Greenberg 1989, p. 70.
[201] Greenberg 1965.
[202] Greenberg 1958.

artists that used collage for other purposes than its shock value.[203] However, these small concessions did not change the fact that Greenberg showed little apreciation for collage as part of a modernist artistic practice. Making the change from painting to collage as primary artistic medium in the mid-1950s must have been understood as an attack on the dominant paradigms of hegemonial art criticism. Developing an entire artistic practice out of the experimentation with the conditions of production and reception of collage seems in retrospect like an attempt to escape the governing power structures of the art establishment, altogether.

Like Rauschenberg, Cage, and other artists of the 1950s, Johnson began to explore the openness of the processes of production and reception of works of art. He did not, however, confine himself to the multiplicity of meanings within a work whose production was complete, as was the case with Rauschenberg's *Combines*. The partial destruction of moticos, including the programmatic reworking and reusing of cut-out parts, represented an even more radical attack on any form of final interpretation of the self-contained artwork. Johnson's strategies thus bring to light the processual dimension of artistic production beyond the individual work of art. This has consequences for the processes of signification inherent to both production and reception of art. Through ever new combinations of the elements of his compositions over the structurally open duration of their partial or complete reworking, a virtually unlimited potentiality of meanings opens up. The form of subjectivity on the authorial as well as the receptive side that accompanies these openings is no longer anchored in fixed, unchanging identifications. Instead, it is suspended in a network of references, of relationships—continuously shifting, always in the flow of ever-new actualizations. Johnson seems to have been aware of this processual logic when he started putting pieces of his collages in envelopes and sending them to friends like Robert Rauschenberg. In the correspondence network, which he was to operate until his death, it appears in an even more definite form, as is shown in the following chapter.

[203] Greenberg 1989, p. 80.

Chapter 3: The New York Correspondence School and its effects

Correspondance Art

There exists for me this lovely spring April day a problem of what to do with a Correspondance situation involving 62 composed letters addressed to people mostly who have received other such letters with similar contents. Each envelope contains eight articles consisting of worthless scraps also collages of encyclopedia fragments scotchtaped to backgrounds and parts of other letters. As the contents now exist they are carefully arranged in strict sequence of small upon larger upon larger pieces making a kind of filing system comfortable to the author. The arrangement can be easily altered by a careless viewing such as occurs during the opening of a letter and contents picked at according to a momentary whim. . . .

There is obviously very little art work of merit in these letters and their presentation which is deliberately crude and unappealing. Any aesthetic is gushed during the tender consideration period of letter composition. . . .

Their fate is always uncertain. There are mostly no instructions as to what to do or what was the author's intent. The "author's intent" we have heard has something to do with studies of poverty and quite primitive economics. The envelopes seem to have been begged from Time Ink or Judson Church and are made from found objects and big deal hard sell advertising like Green Gallery catalogues or old Dick Higgins manuscripts. . . .

Would sending the stuff to a Museum and a Curator assure these little baby seeds of an Art classification? Should Mr. Alloway get his first package of monstrous letters? Will he consider this gift satire, art activity or nonsense?

The act of composing and distributing my letters which has been my entire artistic expression the last year or so is a daily activity for me. At this moment I wish to be taken quite seriously.

Ray Johnston
April 1, 1964[204]

[204] Ray Johnson, "Correspondance Art," letter, dated April 1, 1964, Ray Johnson Estate archive, quoted from Zuba 2014, Plate 19.

In a 1964 mailing titled “Correspondance Art,” Ray Johnson seems to talk openly about his hopes and doubts concerning his “composed letters.” Of the topics covered in this letter, the following three are of primary importance for the purposes of this study: the description of the content of his correspondence; Johnson's remark about the uncertain fate of the mailings, which usually have no instructions about what to do with them; and Johnson's sometimes contradictory accounts about their status as art.

Each of the 62 envelopes contained in addition to “worthless scraps” also “collages of encyclopedia fragments scotchtaped to backgrounds and parts of other letters.” This description is broadly in line with the first part of the correspondence addressed to Henry Martin, which today forms part of the collection of the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok) in Vienna. This first part consists of the 55 envelopes that Martin received from Johnson between 1963 and 1965, before moving to Italy. For the most part, these envelopes also contain images and text fragments cut out of publications and advertising material. To many of those fragments, Johnson added entries from encyclopedias and dictionaries and the stamped text “COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON” (Plate 10 and Plate 21). A considerable part of the envelopes also contains letters or objects that Ray Johnson received from others and sent on to Henry Martin. These findings coincide with Ray Johnson's mailings to David Bourdon in the 1960s, which can be found in the archives of the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).[205] Also archived there are some of Johnson's mailings to Robert Rauschenberg.[206] While the earlier dated articles (1952-1960) consist mainly of individually sent collages, from 1962 on, the mailings are more similar to those of Bourdon and Martin from the same period. In addition, according to Johnson's account, the addressees of these “composed letters” are mostly people, “who have received other such letters with similar content.” The correspondence between these various findings suggests that Johnson's mailings to Henry Martin between 1963 and 1965 may to some extent be considered representative of Johnson's postal activities during those years.

The second point mentioned by Johnson which should be emphasized is the structural openness of the mailings on the receiving end—concerning their reception as art as well as their further use. Johnson's “filing system” within the individual envelopes is deliberately neutral in its sorting according to the size of the content and leaves the order of viewing of its individual

[205] David Bourdon Papers, Series III: Ray Johnson Material 1964–1995. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
[206] Ray Johnson Correspondence to Robert Rauschenberg. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

elements to chance. Johnson himself describes the way in which he wishes the recipients of his letters to deal with their contents as follows: “The arrangement can easily be altered by a careless viewing such as it occurs during the opening of the letter and contents picked at according to a momentary whim.” It is clear that the contents of the mailings should not follow a linear narrative logic. Concerning his collages, Johnson once made a comparison with a deck of playing cards. Anyone he shows his works will get a specific selection, “so every time they’re shown, they’re reshuffled and become a different story . . . . The next time the works are shuffled and shown, they’ll bring up other people and images and ideas. It’s constantly and kaleidoscopically different.”[207] The same applies to his letters, and, moreover, for every single time that one looks at the contents of a single envelope in different orders and constellations. Thus, no specific order, no system or hierarchy of the contained information is given, no privileged way of interpretation desired. In addition, there is “mostly no instructions as to what to do or what was the author's intent.” It is up to the addressees, whether they throw away the contents of the envelopes, store them, send them back or forward them with or without additions—or if they are processed in other collages or artworks. “Mostly,” Johnson must say because sometimes selected contents also contain instructions. In the 1960s, it's all about phrases like “send to [name]” or “please add to and send to [name],” which promote interactivity in dealing with the sent items and, quite simply, the interconnectivity of the participants of the NYCS. To a certain extent, Johnson also gives up authorship of individual mailings. For beyond the meanings or associations intended by him, new meanings are added to the forwarded contents. Each new pair of eyes— or, more precisely, each new pairing of sender and addressee—combines other ideas with the material seen. Thus, new levels of meaning are added to the existing ones, a palimpsest-like layering takes place. The older layers, intended by Johnson, although still present, have no priority over the following. The different uses overlap, fringe, proliferate and perhaps rejoin into new networks of meanings. Over time, Ray Johnson's role shifts from the author of spatial collages to the initiator of processually growing collages of references and relationships. The roles of author and recipient change over time, blur, coincide.

The third point concerns the status of Ray Johnson's correspondence as art. In the second paragraph of the letter, Johnson first diminishes his achievements: “There is obviously very

[207] Ray Johnson, quoted in Martin 1999, p. 185.

little art work of merit in these letters and their presentation which is deliberately crude and unappealing. Any aesthetic is gushed during the tender consideration period of letter composition." The paradoxical phrasing of this last sentence, "gushed" versus "tender consideration," destabilizes the seriousness of its tone and betrays the possibility of a surprise twist. Further below, Johnson continues to express his insecurity: "Such activity as junk mailing pieces necessarily go unnoticed and may be considered non-art." But this assessment turns out to be a rhetorical feint, when Johnson shyly asks in the next sentence, "Would sending the stuff to a Museum and a Curator assure these little baby seeds of an Art classification?" The curator in question is Lawrence Alloway; the museum is the Solomon R. Guggenheim in New York. Alloway worked there from 1961 to 1966. Before that, the Englishman had been Assistant Director of the London Institute of Contemporary Arts from 1955 to 1960. Since 1952, Alloway had been a member of the Independent Group around Alison and Peter Smithson, Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi. In 1956, he had organized the groundbreaking exhibition *This Is Tomorrow*. In 1958, Alloway described the exhibits of this show and other works he had seen in the US as "mass popular art."[208] In the 1963 pop art exhibition *Six Painters and the Object* at the Guggenheim, he showed the works of Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, Roy Liechtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol. As a critic, "Alloway [was] familiarising the neo-avant-garde view of taste as a mass-produced, democratic phenomenon and breaking down the barriers between it and the old conception of high art."[209] Johnson's choice of Alloway as the implicit addressee of his programmatic letter is certainly not a coincidence. Instead it appears to be a completely deliberate strategic decision. For at that time, among all the people in the New York art scene equipped with institutional power, the British curator might have seemed to be the one most likely to attribute artistic relevance to Johnson's production. Starting with the mailing mentioned in the letter of April 1, 1964, Alloway was to receive mail from Ray Johnson at least until 1977.[210] Johnson's hopes of getting credit from the curator and critic would also come true, though perhaps too little and too late: In 1973 Alloway published a review of Johnson's exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery and in 1977 he wrote a contribution to an article about the NYCS in *Art Journal* .[211] In this text, Alloway explains that he had started to write about Ray Johnson a few years before, but that he had regrettably given up on it due to the confusing amount of references in the NYCS correspondence. At the time of the article,

[208] Alloway 1958, p. 84.
[209] Parnell 2011, p. 250.
[210] Ray Johnson's mailings sent to Alloway from 1964 to 1977 can be found in the Lawrence Alloway papers, 1935-2003, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, accession no. 2003.M.46.
[211] Alloway 1973. Alloway 1977.

however, Alloway, who had famously proposed a concept of the art world as a network in 1972, had come to a clearer notion of Johnson's achievements. Like his collages, which Alloway deems "intricate and discursive, a nest of associations and clues," Johnson's art, in his opinion, "arises from the texture of the New York art world society."[212] What greater praise could Johnson have wished for, from the man who had literally written the book on "the art world described as a system"?[213]

At any rate, Johnson's strategic approach shows a strong awareness of the importance of networking in the art world. For the past 20 years, commentators have posthumously claimed that institutional critique formed an important part of Johnson's correspondence practice. Curator Donna De Salvo, for instance, points to the parodic use of fictitious promotional materials for non-existent exhibitions, to Johnson's meetings without content, and to the lists of names that Johnson kept circulating throughout the NYCS.[214] For Johanna Gosse, Johnson's correspondence practice is an extension of the "ritualistic modes of production and exhibition" that had already characterized the handling of his collages, the moticos. Thus, in the opinion of the art historian, Johnson's mature artistic practice has developed along a series of interrelated goals, including the following: "to renegotiate between the producer and consumer of art; to overturn market-based notions of artistic value and critically-prescribed standards of artistic merit; . . . to establish alternative venues for exhibition and exchange outside the gallery and museum settings."[215] All of these observations appear to be correct. Yet, Johnson's attempts to attract attention from well-established curators such as Lawrence Alloway show that the artist's relationship to the institutional and commercial art scene was not only critical but contradictory and ambivalent. Although a large part of Johnson's art practice deliberately contravened the logic of the art establishment, he nevertheless wanted to be taken seriously as an artist and accepted into the canon. Stephen Moonie comes to a similar conclusion in his 2016 article on Ray Johnson and Lawrence Alloway.[216] Pointing to Johnson's ambivalent relationship with the networked system of the art world, Moonie fittingly quotes an undated mailing that Johnson

[212] Alloway 1977, p. 236.
[213] The full title of Alloway's 1972 article in *Artforum* is: "Network: The Art World Described as a System" (Alloway 1972).
[214] De Salvo 1999, pp. 20–21.
[215] Gosse 2012.
[216] Moonie 2016, p. 174.

sent to the Whitney Museum. It reads: “Dear Whitney Museum. I hate you. Love, Ray Johnson.”[217]

The same ambiguity that characterizes Johnson's relationship to the art establishment can also be found in his statements about the status of his correspondence practice as art: “very little art work of merit,” “crude and unappealing,” “non-art.” He describes his correspondence as “monstrous letters” and asks with regard to Lawrence Alloway, “[w]ill he consider this gift satire, art activity or nonsense?” Yet in the end, it becomes clear that the insecurity is played. Johnson’s statements are not of a constative, but of a performative character. For Johnson ends the letter, written as an open letter to Alloway, asking for recognition for his artistic work: “The act of composing and distributing my letters which has been my entire artistic expression the last year or so is a daily activity for me. At this moment I wish to be taken quite seriously.” Everything that Johnson previously stated in his letter merely serves to rhetorically portray himself as an outsider. Yet, what he really wishes and expects is that his avant-garde work will ultimately receive the recognition it deserves. Johnson shows that he is serious about these things—or does he? The letter is signed “Ray Johnston,” dated “April 1, 1964”—April Fool’s Day.

“Ray Johnson—an outsider?”, one is inclined to ask. After all, Johnson had attended Black Mountain College where he came to know central figures of the New York avant-garde like John Cage and Merce Cunningham. Thanks to his intimate connection with another of his teachers, Richard Lippold, he found himself with “superb connections” to the young New York scene.[218] He was friends with successful artists like Rauschenberg, Johns, Twombly, and Warhol, and had already exhibited with many of them (In 1958, Rauschenberg and Johns signed with the influential Leo Castelli Gallery. In 1964, Rauschenberg would win the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale). He was even a bit of a celebrity as a kind of clown or freak in the New York scene because of his weird, enigmatic correspondences and strange events. For Muffet Jones, there is ample evidence to conclude that Ray Johnson's character was marked by an inner turmoil that made him unable to take advantage of his insider position in the New York scene—unlike Rauschenberg, Johns, and many others.[219] According to William S. Wilson, Johnson operated so much with lists of names as he did in the context of the correspondence and NYCS meetings along with their subsequently sent out documentation because the artist saw in it a

[217] Undated mailing by Ray Johnson, quoted in Moonie 2016, p. 174.
[218] Uchtrup 2011.
[219] Jones 1999, p. 32.

technique to question acts and social facts of classification. In Wilson's opinion, Johnson's absurd or unreadable lists— lists often containing the names of outcasts—were meant to subvert serious lists of art, categories such as "pop art" through satire. Wilson locates one of the reasons for these tactics of subversion in Johnson's view that categorization and classification would severely distort the experience of art.[220] Both Jones and Wilson, however, associate Johnson's ennui and his sensitivity to the experience of being classified also to his specific subject position that was based on his sexual orientation.[221] Wilson illustrates his point of view using a drawing sent out by Johnson as page 5 of his *A Book About Death*—a series of thirteen unbound pages, designated as a "book" only by their common title and their pagination, that Johnson sent out separately through the mail (Plate 11). The name ANDY WARHOL is written fifty times in fifty fields that look like pre-perforated postage stamps. While the name is identical every time, its position in each field and the setting of the letters in each field differ. Identity and difference thus manifest themselves as the theme of the paper, which Wilson also identifies as the general theme of the work of both Johnson and Warhol. Because, as Wilson states, "both Warhol and Johnson were men who did not register as standard government-issue American males. Neither got the hang of abrasive and harsh manliness. . . . Both worked with mis-registrations of images."[222] Wilson sees the differences between the stamps as a subversion of the attempt to suppress any change within things and to present them as an essence that is separable from their appearance.

While his longtime friend Wilson incorporates Johnson's sexual identity in several places in the analysis of his artistic production, Muffet Jones shows more restraint. She notes that, after all, some of Johnson's contemporaries in New York were part of the "muscular gay culture" of that era, but their works did not show the same qualities of "separateness and obfuscation that were hallmarks of Johnson's art."[223] Therefore, the obvious association to perceive the sexuality of the artist as the root of his self-perception as being internally divided is not quite convincing to Jones. Rather, it seems more important and interesting to her to trace this fact in Johnson's work.[224] Muffet Jones' dismissal to deal with the relationship between the sexual identity of the author and the work of art bears a certain similarity to a widespread attitude that the literary scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick summarizes as follows: "The author or the author's important

[220] Wilson 2009, p. 25.
[221] Jones 1999, p. 35. Wilson 2009, pp. 36–38.
[222] Wilson 2009, p. 36.
[223] Jones 1999, p. 35.
[224] Jones 1999, p. 35.

attachments may very well have been homosexual—but it would be provincial to let so insignificant a fact make any difference at all to our understanding of any serious project of life, writing, or thought."[225] There still seems to remain an element of insecurity about whether questions of identity, such as those about the sexuality of the artist, should play a central role in the analysis of a work of art, whenever the artist did not explicitly express such a connection in his work or elsewhere. For art historian Amelia Jones, however, "acknowledging processes of identification is key to performing an honest, politically viable art history or criticism for the 21st century."[226] Jones deliberately does not use the term "identity" as she believes it attaches the simplifying binary categories of the 1970s-cultural trench warfare. Instead, she prefers to speak of "processes of identification," "because it evokes process and durationality rather than fixed positions."[227] Jones' concept of identification "as a reciprocal, dynamic and ongoing process that occurs among vignettes, bodies, images" appears to be ideally suited to discuss Ray Johnson's diverse strategies of addressing, staging and referencing in the postal network.[228]

As the ultimate goal of her intellectual endeavor, Amelia Jones mentions, "to think against the grain of binary models of identity in favor of multiple, intersectional, and relational processes of identification."[229] She draws on the writings of some theoreticians who have been attacking the supremacy of binary thinking since the 1960s. Jones includes Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Stuart Hall, Gloria Anzalduá, as well as more recent feminist, queer and antiracist authors such as Sedgwick, Jennifer Doyle, Guillermo Gomez Peña, Rosi Braidotti, and José Esteban Muñoz. In his book *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz dedicated a whole chapter to the queer "conceptual artist" Ray Johnson, together with the likewise queer dance and cultural critic Jill Johnston.[230] (Does Johnson perhaps even refer to his contemporary when he signs his letter of April 1, 1964, as "Ray Johnston"?) Muñoz reads Ray Johnson's diverse artistic practice as a manifestation of a queer utopia and identifies this observation at several ends of his multifaceted production. In Johnson's *Nothings*, he locates a "performative insistence on 'the nothing' (the not here) over the presentness of the happening (what is there)," that is both queer and utopian. Muñoz's vision of a queer utopian cultural production consists in a recognition of the lack that accompanies every heteronormative representation of the world, and at the same time, in a "world-making"

[225] Sedgwick 2008, p. 53.
[226] Jones 2012, p. 239.
[227] Jones 2012, pp. 6–7, 236.
[228] Jones 2012, p. 1.
[229] Jones 2012, p. 6.
[230] Muñoz 2009, pp. 115–130.

in the face of this lack. A queer utopian practice, then, has to do with "building" and "doing" in response to the status as nothing that is assigned to queer people in the heteronormative world.[231] In the same way, Muñoz recognizes a queer world of potentiality in Johnson's letters with its sprawling system of associations and correspondences, "that made a world that was not quite here yet nonetheless on the horizon."[232] For the theorist, Johnson's entire practice is pervaded by this "world-making."

Muñoz also considers the NYCS a social formation that responds to previous social structures or relational orderings, with other ways of being in the world. He compares membership in the NYCS with a "queer kinship, an alternate chain of belonging."[233] The radical utopian conception of Johnson's practice, as described by Muñoz, also corresponds to an early vision of the Internet. Already the media philosopher Vilém Flusser, who had not experienced the full development of the World Wide Web due to his death in 1991, dreamed of a huge disruption in the "telematic information society." Through the networking of reversible cables, every recipient of images and information would no longer be irresponsible. Instead, everyone would be jointly responsible, because, being also the sender, they would actively participate in the production of the images. The new synthetic images produced in the course of a creative dialogue would be novel in aesthetic, ontological, and epistemological terms. Flusser, however, acknowledges that this type of networking has already been functioning since the establishment of the postal service, at the latest.[234] In fact, the NYCS's handling of images and texts should remind anyone familiar with the Internet of the so-called web 2.0 and social media. There is one crucial difference, though, between a small interactive network operating within the big postal regime of the post-war period and today's social media that are fully integrated in the globalized hypercapitalist traffic of goods and services. The difference lies in the undeniable fact that their presently most powerful platforms have already become the dominant reality-forming entities themselves through their omnipresence and complete penetration of public and private life, along with the progressive integration of offline reality into the logistics of the Internet.[235] Today, these mechanisms must be distrusted and avoided at least to the same extent that they should be credited with opening spaces for emancipation.

[231] Muñoz 2009, p. 118.
[232] Muñoz 2009, p. 119.
[233] Muñoz 2009, p. 123.
[234] Flusser 2008, pp. 74–75.
[235] Cf. the writings of the media theorist and media activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi and the network critic Geert Lovink, e. g. Berardi, Franco "Bifo." 2012. "The Paradox of Media Activism. The Internet is Not a Tool, It's an

The curator and theorist Ina Blom observes that the artistic alternatives to a formalistic understanding of collage that emerged in the early 1960s are often presented as a social or communitarian approach. In most so-called "mail art," from which she seeks to distinguish Johnson's correspondence activities, Blom sees a kind of social contract under which to organize a utopia in the real social space. The main idea of this utopia is that of the gift. Among its top principles, Blom ranks the following: that every object is received "guilt-free," "no reply expected;" that exhibitions take place without fees, without a jury, and without rejection; and that the senders also become recipients.[236] However, Blom goes on to state that "the notion of a seamless continuity between Johnson's early postal practice and the social contract of the mail art system in its most evolved phase should not be accepted at face value."[237] According to the curator, because of the chronic overdetermination of the mailed items, their enigmatic coding and multiple referencing, Johnson prevents regular communication rather than promoting it. "Johnson does not reciprocate, he interrupts."[238] His NYCS does not just mark a social space characterized by free creative communication. The social in his practice is not a "figure for unity without antagonism," as it has been dealt with in some art practices since the 1960s. Johnson's correspondence is peppered with ambiguity, missing or inappropriate answers. It is precisely through these miscommunications that Johnson exposes the pathologies of the concept of communication. Thus, he creates a community of senders and recipients, but at the same time disturbs the exchange logic, which forms their greatest common denominator. Although the artistic practice of the "Correspondance" attacks the formalism of the dominant art scene, it simultaneously rejects its radical adversary—"the totalization of art in terms of 'the social,' a system of pure exchange."[239] Blom concludes that Johnson's postal system is not simply an art utopia, as it manifests itself in the subsequent mail art movement.

Nonetheless, Muñoz's approach of extracting a utopian moment from Johnson's practice seems useful. For Muñoz interprets the concept of utopia in a specific sense. He refers to Ernst Bloch's remark to Theodor W. Adorno that the secret of utopia lies in understanding it in such a way that it must have multiple goals. A utopia does not merely aim at happiness or freedom. A utopia in the sense of Bloch is "in fact a casting of a picture of potentiality and possibility. This casting

Environment." *IBRAAZ*, Platform 004, November 2, 2012. URL: https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/49 (accessed August 12, 2019); see also Geert Lovink, *Networks Without a Cause: A critique of Social Media (* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).

[236] Blom 2003, 12, p. 19.

[237] Blom 2003, p. 13.

[238] Blom 2003, p. 13.

[239] Blom 2003, pp. 22–24.

is also an act of negation. What is negated is the present in lieu of another time or place."[240] Such concept of utopia is clearly to be separated from naive communitarian social utopias, as identified by Blom in the mail art movement. The communication-critical qualities with which Blom credits Johnson's practice constitute such an act of negation. As a result of the inclusion of a negative side to the concept of utopia, one no longer needs to downplay the positive aspect of community that undoubtedly exists in Johnson's use of the postal network, as Blom does in her analysis. The "but," the "although," in Blom's understanding of Johnson's practice can be replaced by a "both. . . and. . . ."

In Muñoz's opinion, the negation of Johnson's utopian design stands in dialectical tension with a rearrangement of epistemology ("what things mean") and relationality ("how the other is perceived"). As a result, a utopian transformation takes place in the course of which a new temporality arises. Muñoz calls it "queer futurity, where the future is a site of infinite and immutable potentiality." The "world-making performativity" that Muñoz locates in Johnson's work consists of a performance of a "queering" of temporality, relationality, and epistemology.[241] In addition, according to Muñoz, the open-ended collaboration breaks with every attempt at disciplining the work of art in terms of when it is completed, unfinished or revised.[242] In the concept of "everything corresponds with everything," upon which both Johnson's collages and his *Correspondance* are based, Muñoz views a "move to denaturalize aesthetic value . . . that thematically and affectively binds the emergent queer postmodernism of that period."[243]

Both Muñoz's queer-theoretical interpretation of Johnson's artistic practice and its classification within a broader art historical context are grounded in the unique approach of the theorist. The queer author Muñoz meets the artist Ray Johnson as a queer artist. One might, therefore, ask how he would see his work if he knew nothing of Johnson's sexuality, or if he did not position himself as queer. This problem brings us back to the more general question of whether to include in the analysis of a given artistic practice the sexuality or other identity-creating peculiarities of its author. With regard to the practice of Ray Johnson, the author of this thesis follows Amelia Jones and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and answers this question with a clear yes.

[240] Muñoz 2009, p. 125.
[241] Muñoz 2009, pp. 126–127.
[242] Muñoz 2009, p. 127.
[243] Muñoz 2009, p. 121.

In doing so, *nota bene*, no essentializing categorization of the artist should be made. The focus should be, as Jones puts it, on "processes of identification."

Additionally, attention should not be confined to the queerness in Johnson's work in terms of hints of his gay desire. Instead, *queer* should serve as a methodological starting point and term for other and more general, relational processes of identification and disidentification in Johnson's artistic practice. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's understanding, *queer* can relate to the following: "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."[244] On a structural level, this understanding of *queer* is surprisingly congruent with the various strategies that Ray Johnson uses to manipulate language and meaning in his artistic practice. In the following chapter, some examples from the correspondence with Henry Martin shall illustrate this. Naturally, such a broad application of the concept of *queer* is subject to the possible reproach of risking a weakening of the political *agency* of the LGBTQ movement. Therefore, Amelia Jones is to be followed when she says that "queer does attach reiteratively and insistently to bodies, individuals identified with particular sexual practices. Rising out of the particularities of the US-style identity politics . . . and out of brutal oppressions and exclusions experienced by people with nonnormative sexual identifications, queer can never be a fully abstract concept."[245] Also, Sedgwick points out that "given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against every same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term's definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself."[246] But Sedgwick also points to uses of the term *queer* going far beyond the field of sexuality, as seen in the work of other theoreticians such as Isaac Julien, Gloria Anzaldúa or Richard Fung: "race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses. . . . Thereby, the gravity . . . of the term 'queer' itself deepens and shifts."[247] Such crossovers and shifts will also appear in Johnson's correspondence with Henry Martin, as his entire work is characterized by them. The same queer artistic means find their applications on diverse binary axes of identity and

[244] Sedgwick 1994, p. 8.
[245] Jones 2012, p. 175.
[246] Sedgwick 1994, p. 8.
[247] Sedgwick 1994, pp. 8–9.

identification, creating “possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning.”

Still, the artistic strategies used by Ray Johnson cannot and should not generally be termed queer in an abstract manner and independently of the historical and social environment. In Johnson's case, however, because of his specific position as a gay man in the post-war USA, it seems legitimate—and even necessary, following the arguments of Jones, Sedgwick, and Muñoz— to attribute to his art a queer logic, a queer energy. It should not be ignored that the personal experience of an individual in a prohibitionist and discriminatory social environment manifests itself in his artistic work and contributes to structuring it. Closer examination of the contents of his letters to Henry Martin will show that, in some cases, Johnson's subversive playing with the referentiality of language and images coincides with explicit references to gay sexuality. In some of the mailed items, the identity-splitting and identity-creating function of Johnson's strategies is most clearly and explicitly visible. In other cases, the same operations are applied to different binary axes of identification, where they also have destabilizing and de-territorializing effects. These axes include those of male and female, art and non-art, self-contained artwork and art as a process, precious object and garbage, successful and unsuccessful artist, and—not least—the axis of “race” on which the identification of the African American Henry Martin inscribes itself. The latter axis is particularly noteworthy. While in all other cases, the author and sender Johnson reperforms the categories attributed to him, it is here the African American identity of the recipient Martin, to which the artist’s references seem to point.

The examples in which Johnson applies his operations to motifs that clearly indicate positions of minoritarian identifications should not, of course, be presented as representative of Johnson's entire work. However, it is in those examples that some of his artistic strategies are more apparent than in many other cases. Moreover, they are among those motifs in the correspondence with Henry Martin that occur with the most significant regularity and frequency. If one takes a greater distance and tries to give a more general description of Johnson's primary modus operandi, one comes to conclusions similar to those drawn by Henry Martin in his 1972 review of Johnson's collages on the occasion of his exhibition at Arturo Schwarz's Milan gallery:

> He is a creative master of set theory and deals with things not in terms of what they “are” or what they “mean,” but rather in terms of the information content of their

> individual characteristics. His work makes a game of all this information, playing with it, arranging it, disarranging it, permutating it, giving it first one shape and then another. He concerns himself not with significance, but with significant relationship. A sufficiently well-developed theory of similarities, moreover, eliminates the necessity for a theory of identity.[248]

In Martin's view of Johnson's art, it uses processes that produce similarities and relationships, in order to undermine rigid assignments of meaning and identity. For Martin, these functions of Johnson's collage also explain the reasons for which the principles of chance and repetition enter into his work: "not because he likes them or thinks them amusing or modern or fertile, but, essentially, because the universe he works in understands variation not as deviation, but as independently significant information."[249] Martin does not address Johnson's sexual identity in any way in the description of his art, either explicitly or in the form of a hint. However, the words he chooses to describe its functioning may come from a gender or queer theory essay: "similarities" instead of "identity," "significant relationship" instead of "significance," "not in terms of what they 'are' or what they 'mean'," "variation not as deviation." From the perspective of today's discourses around gender, sexuality and postcolonial identity, it is certainly not a great and daring leap to establish a connection between Johnson's artistic strategies described above and his self-identification as a gay man in a homophobic social environment. Amelia Jones even considers it necessary to include identifications as the context of a work of art in the interpretation, since they form and penetrate meaning and value from the ground up. Such interpretive frameworks are "part of the picture" for her. Jones highlights the example of parody: it can lead to the dislocation and rethinking of existing cultural codes. However, it can also strengthen them. The effects of the parody depend on which codes are referenced and in what way—and above all *who* is performing the parodic gesture and *in what context*.[250] This is precisely why the identities of the sender, or the senders, as well as the recipients of the mailings, belong to the determining factors of Johnson's correspondence art.

For Muñoz, the material that Johnson sends consists of "performative art objects." The artist sends the selected fragments, his letters and collages via mail as dancers on the stage of the world and lets them "perform" there.[251] According to this understanding, Johnson acts as the

[248] Martin 1972, p. 22.
[249] Martin 1972, p. 22.
[250] Jones 2012, p. 225.
[251] Muñoz 2009, p. 117–118.

choreographer. The concept of performance, upon which Muñoz bases his observations, is that of the theatrical representation, the staging. But the logic that this staging follows is that of "drag" performance. Johnson staged his contents, images, words in a way that amounts to infiltrating their monolithic conventional meaning—the meaning that emerged from a practice of repetition. Hence, the performance of Johnson's objects is closely linked to the notion of performativity, as used by Judith Butler following J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts: "Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."[252] For Butler, one of the possibilities of transforming gender lies in rendering visible the arbitrary relationship between the repetitive acts that produce the gendered self. In the final chapter of *Gender Trouble*, she demonstrates how drag performance reveals "the radical contingency in the relationship between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary.[253] Johnson's strategy of breaking the conventional meanings of images, words, names and other signs by bringing out dormant, alternate meanings in the interrelation with other objects follows a similar logic and yields similar effects. The "performance" of the objects shows the contingency of their attributed meanings and categorizations, as well as their dependence on the particular context. It reveals the principle of performativity that underlies the seemingly fixed identities of things and persons. The assault on the hegemonic definition of the category "man" by identifying with female icons of pop culture, as it occasionally occurs in Johnson's collages as well as in his mailings, does not only affect the identification of men of "sexually deviant behavior."[254] Such a strategy also makes *any* attribution of a "true" identity based on sexuality or gender appear as a social construct, as Judith Butler points out with regard to travesty in *Gender Trouble*.[255]

Theoretical reflections, such as those of the philosopher Rosi Braidotti, to think of subjectivity as "flows of inter-relationality" help, according to Jones, to realize that identities can never be fixed in a visible form but are always in negotiation. They intersect across different modes of subjectivation that are "interrelated," that is, in mutual relation to each other, such as "gender, sexuality, class, race, nation, ethnic and religious identifications."[256] Jones cites Braidotti, who views the ethical core of the subject in a "process of engendering empowering modes of

[252] Butler 2014, pos. 159.
[253] Butler 2010, p. 198.
[254] On the subject of manipulation of gender in Johnson's collages, cf. Joseph Lowery 2009.
[255] Butler 2010, pp. 186, 191 et pass.
[256] Jones 2012, p. 178.

becoming," in which "the ethical good is equated with radical relationality aiming at affirmative empowerment, the ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others."[257] According to Braidotti as well as Jones, approaches that promote such a radical relationality constitute a necessary alternative to the prevailing Western systems organized in the tradition of Hegel and Freud along a binary dialectical axis of master and servant. For these approaches allow us to understand ourselves and each other, beyond the binary logic of negative criticism, in creative and affirmative acts that produce "empowering modes of becoming."[258]

Ray Johnson's entire artistic practice, but above all the correspondence system he feeds and orchestrates, is permeated by that radical relationality. Not only at the level of the networked relationships between the individual senders and recipients, but also at the level of the interconnected relationships between images and words that proliferate in space and time, ever new connections are created in lush growth. The same objects are not only split and reused by Johnson himself, but they wander through the hands of different participants and are encoded, decoded and recoded each time in new variations. Throughout this process, the diversity of meanings grows, identifications are mobilized and made more dynamic. Rigid categorizations and classifications are counteracted, new cross-connections open up and lead to new systematics. The two most important aspects of the correspondence machine about questions of identity are those of durationality and interrelationality. Together, they create those dynamic, ongoing and decentralized processes of "world-making" whose queer energies break open the conventionally given and fixed identities, harnessing the potentiality of "everything corresponds to everything."

These ongoing identification processes do not result in new, rigid identities that correspond to any "true" core or essence. They are always dependent on the situation, the interlocutors, the environment, and always represent only a momentary actualization out of an infinite number of possibilities. By deliberately feeding in ambivalences, ambiguities, and illegibilities, the system is kept in motion. Such and other disturbances regularly prevent the illusion that, in any given case, there is perfect communication of a true essence inherent in things. In this way, any

[257] Rosi Braidotti, "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism." *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 67 (2008): 15–16, as quoted in Jones 2012, p. 228. Jones explains on page 241, footnote 32, that with "empowering modes of becoming," Braidotti is referring to Gilles Deleuze's 1968 book on Spinoza, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, tr. M. Joghin (New York: Zone Books, 1990).
[258] Jones 2012, p. 229.

interpretation is left with a remainder of doubt. The tension created by this doubt provides the interpretive engine with potential energy. Along with the kinetic energy the objects receive from their movement in the network of senders and recipients, it prevents the correspondence machine from stopping at any single interpretation. Without the critical energy Ray Johnson added to the system of the NYCS in the form of ambiguity and doubt, the moving parts went into an idle state. They lost their power and relevance and slowed down until the machine came to a standstill.[259]

[259] On the occasion of the exhibition entitled *Ray Johnson New York Correspondence School* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York (September 2–October 6, 1970), the critic Kasha Linville remarked that "it seems a shame to catch a living thing in flight, to pin it down and make a museum display out of it" (Kasha Linville, "New York," Artforum 9, no. 3 (November 1970): 86). The same problem seems to persist with regard to the display of items of the correspondence in museum exhibitions. All there is left to see are the historical traces of a past participatory practice.

Chapter 4: Dear Henry. Ray Johnson's correspondence with Henry Martin

Henry Martin was introduced to Ray Johnson in 1961 or 1962 by William S. Wilson. Wilson was then a professor of English literature at Bowdoin College in Maine, where Martin studied from 1959 to 1963 and attended Wilson's course on Chaucer. A native of Philadelphia, Martin was fascinated by the Walter C. Arensberg Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art as a teenager, and later, after moving to Italy in 1965, was to assist Arturo Schwarz in Milan to create his monumental monograph, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp* (Abrams, 1969). In the years between college and moving to Italy, Martin lived in New York to earn his master's degree in English literature. It was Wilson who introduced Martin to a number of artists, among them some members of Fluxus as well as Ray Johnson. At Wilson's suggestion, Martin began to write about art regularly.[260] In Italy, where he held a position as a professor of English literature, Martin became a foreign correspondent for the magazines *Art International*, *Art and Artists*, *Studio International* and *Art News*. He wrote the first English-language monograph on Nouveau Réalisme artist Arman (Abrams, 1973) and several books on George Brecht. Martin also curated several important Fluxus exhibitions. In 1972, he organized a Ray Johnson exhibition at Arturo Schwarz in Milan titled *Potato Mashers*, for which he also contributed the catalog text.

In an e-mail to Elizabeth Zuba, the editor of a book on Ray Johnson's writings published in 2014, Henry Martin describes his relationship with Ray Johnson as follows: “When I met him I was only twenty and somewhat rudderless. Moreover, I think that Ray somehow decided to take care of me, to help me navigate the waters of the modern sensibility, as encountered in the turbulence of mid-1960s New York.”[261] The friendship between the two would endure beyond the barrier of the Atlantic Ocean until Johnson's death in 1995. The collected correspondence between Johnson and Martin, which runs from 1963 to 1990, bears a moving testimony to it.

After Martin’s permanent move to Italy in 1965, Johnson sent almost exclusively typewritten letters, complete with addressing and salutation, as well as personal anecdotes from his life in

[260] Held 2015, pp. 108–113.
[261] Copy of an e-mail from Henry Martin to Elizabeth Zuba, January 2014, sent to me by Martin in November 2016 on the occasion of our interview.

New York and gossip about people whom Martin personally knew (or did not). From this point on, only a few other materials are found in the envelopes, such as excerpts from magazines, advertising material or forwarded letters and objects from other NYCS participants. Repeatedly, Johnson's typical creative and deconstructive use of language and conventions of personal letters can easily be recognized in these letters. Nevertheless, they differ significantly from the characteristics of the NYCS correspondence. For this reason, the focus in this study is on the 55 letters received by Henry Martin from Ray Johnson in the period from January 1963 to July 1965. Letters that were sent later than that are treated by way of exception if they consist of mixed, loose material or mailings regarding the NYCS. The many letters from 1965 onwards are considered in this work, not in their capacity as an artistic production, but only as historical material that provides information on Ray Johnson's living conditions, his artistic intentions and his relationship with Henry Martin.

Judging from the first impression, the many objects that form part of the correspondence have hardly anything to do with each other. However, a closer look reveals that there are a few mailings whose different contents seem to be linked together in an associative way, such as similar motifs, or similar wordplay. Some materials also appear repeatedly in different variations, distributed over several envelopes, similar to serial novels or comic strips over several editions of a newspaper. Over the following pages, an attempt will be made to define some of the recurring themes or connections more accurately. For this purpose, I will group individual fragments from various mailings under different subheadings. These are not to be understood as mutually exclusive categories, but rather in the sense of *hashtags*, as commonly used in social media. Some elements would fit in with several of the headings I have defined, and there are probably many connections that I was unable to identify. Hence, this is not about creating a rigorous, conclusive typology, but rather about trying to pinpoint some of the possible links between the individual items that Johnson sent in his envelopes. These connections might also reach across various parts of his correspondence with Henry Martin and, beyond that, to the extensive network of the New York Correspondence School and Ray Johnson’s artistic practice.

Many of the commentaries on Johnson's art mention the frequent use of names, references, puns, wordplays, anagrams, acronyms, homonyms, letter jumbles, etc., as typical features of his mailings. In recent years, attention has shifted to direct or indirect references to the institutions of the art world and the art market. Both will be found sufficiently in the mailings

to Henry Martin. In the following, however, the main focus will be on those contents in which seemingly rigid meanings and identities are subverted, transformed or made dynamic in different forms and ways. I would like to present these examples as supporting data for the thesis that one of the most important effects of Ray Johnson's correspondence machine is the mobilization of processes of identification and subjectivation. It is these processes in the course of which Johnson's practice contributes to transforming the rigid models of subjectivity and identity dominant in the New York art scene as well as in the US-American society of the post-war years.

An important starting point for this thesis in the material of the correspondence is the frequency of allusions and jokes connected to gay sexuality. Some of them consist in subtle deviations from heterosexual norms, others in wordplays that implicitly connote gay desire, still others in clear examples of gay erotic iconography. The commentaries on Johnson's art often stated that the ubiquitous multiplicity of meanings destabilizes any form of identity.[262] Contrary to this view, the above examples suggest an affirmative identification with a minoritarian social position. The two things are of course not in opposition to each other. Rather, they should be seen in their juxtaposition as two sides of the same coin. For the queer identifications in the correspondence usually result from alternative readings, ambiguities, subtle divisions from the conventional meanings of things. Only the frequent repetition of similar operations affirms the speculations, which one cautiously attempts in the decoding of Johnson's campy references. My usage of "camp" in this context is based on Esther Newton's understanding of the term in her anthropological study *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, first published in 1972. According to her, in the mid-1960s, "camp" was "an in-group word which denoted specifically homosexual humor."[263] Newton distinguishes between "drag" and "camp," although she deems the two terms to be deeply related. In her understanding, a drag queen was concerned with the masculine-feminine transformation, while a camp performance was "concerned with what might be called a philosophy of transformations and incongruity". [264] Newton explains this as follows:

> While camp is in the eye of the homosexual beholder, it is assumed that there is an underlying unity of perspective among homosexuals that gives any particular campy thing its special flavor. It is possible to discern strong themes in any particular campy

[262] Cf. Martin 1972, p. 24; Bourdon 1984; Klein 1999, p. 58; Dempsey 2010, pp. 25–26.
[263] Newton 1979, p. xx.
[264] Newton 1979, p. 105.

> thing or event. The three that seemed most recurrent and characteristic to me were incongruity, theatricality, and humor. All three are intimately related to the homosexual situation and strategy. Incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humor its strategy.[265]

Newton argues that, even if masculine-feminine juxtapositions were the most characteristic kind of camp, "any very incongruous contrast can be campy." This characterization of "camp" as a widespread phenomenon in American gay culture of the mid-1960s does not only apply to the content of some of the materials that Johnson sent out via the NYCS. In fact, it has a great deal in common with the artistic strategies that I have identified in this thesis. These include the incongruity of different meanings or identities associated with the same word, picture, name or person; the theatricality of what Muñoz called "performative art objects" in the NYCS; [266] and the humor that accompanied Johnson's operations in the form of his ephemeral puns; These are all properties of what Esther Newton defines as "camp," and they abound in Ray Johnson's correspondence practice. According to Newton, camp "inheres not in the person or thing itself but in the tension between that person or thing and the context or association."[267] The same anti-essentialist, ephemeral, and relational approach to identification that is inherent in this mid-1960s concept of "camp" permeates Johnson's entire artistic practice.

The playful and subversive approach to identity is not limited to Johnson's simultaneous social positions as a gay man, as an artist of a particular New York art scene, as an opponent of the hegemonic school of painting and as a critic of institutional and commercial gallery art. It also extends to empathic identifications with other minority positions. Widespread in the gay scene of the 50s and 60s is the identification with women in exaggerated, campy stagings. In Johnson's art, such identification is expressed above all through the use of images of iconic female celebrities from the media and show business, mostly "divas" from the 1930s and -40s, the golden age of Hollywood. In the case of the correspondence with the African American Henry Martin, it is also striking how often Johnson gifts Martin with items that address him as African American and with which Johnson solidarizes empathically with his younger protégé Martin. This is particularly evident in those instances in which being gay and being African American coincide in the mailed material. At any rate, the specific ways in which Johnson uses the medium of correspondence contribute to the respective identifications of sender and receiver

[265] Newton 1979, p. 106.
[266] Muñoz 2009, pp. 117–118.
[267] Newton 1979, p. 107.

touching and permeating each other. One reason for this are the personal connections that Johnson seeks to establish between the participants of his correspondence network, another lies in the empathy Johnson shows toward the recipients of his mailings. The considerate and thoughtful communion that Johnson and Martin had with one another constitutes the best example for this.

Friendships and shared experiences

On the day Henry Martin was introduced to Ray Johnson, sometime in late 1961 or early 1962, Johnson had brought some lobster from Maine. Shortly afterwards, Johnson sent him pictures of lobsters in the mail. At first, Martin did not know what to answer but he eventually joined the game.[268] As late as 1964, Johnson sent an object showing the emblem of a restaurant, the New England Oyster House, with a silhouette of a lobster in its center (Plate 12).

One of the envelopes sent by Johnson in June 1964 contains, among other things, a photo cut out of a magazine, perhaps from an advertisement depicting a group of hip college-aged youngsters who are taking a relaxed pose in a tasteful interior (Plate 13). On the reverse is typewritten: “another party at Bowdoin School for Boys.” With this note, Johnson made an apparent reference to Henry Martin's personal history. Bowdoin, after all, was Martin’s college alma mater. It seems that Johnson wanted to tease Martin a little bit with the photo of a group of young bourgeois kids posing as cool bohemians.

A postcard included in the letter of July 25, 1964, shows that Johnson seemed to search the mail he received for possible connections to other participants of the NYCS. In such an instance, he used it to fuel the correspondence machine. Johnson originally received the postcard from his friend Karl Wirsum. Wirsum, a member of the artist group *The Hairy Who* and later counted among the *Chicago Imagists*, signed the material as he did his works with Karl W. His collaborations with Ray Johnson will be discussed later. However, regarding Henry Martin, the front of the postcard, which shows a photograph of the Hialeah racetrack in Miami, Florida, is of particular interest (Plate 14). According to Henry Martin, his father ran a laundry company. He had concessions for, among others, nightclubs, parking attendants, toilets and racetracks,

[268] Held 2015, p. 109.

including Hialeah. So, it looks like Johnson sent the postcard to Martin simply because its motif was linked to Martin's personal life, in this case with his father.

Such explicit references, which can even be understood by an outside third party like myself, are exceptions in Ray Johnson's letters. In the conversation I had with Henry Martin in November 2016, he confirmed an impression that I had had while looking through the correspondence. He said—and his wife Berty Skuber, who had also corresponded with Ray Johnson, agreed with him—that Johnson had often sent pictures that had something to do with the person of the addressee. However, now years and decades later, it is impossible to remember everything, "because it's all about little things, passing references, ephemerae you would not remember."[269]

Fortunately, though, there are some events that are referenced to in the correspondence, that Martin does still remember. A letter dated May 25, 1964, contains an excerpt from a used-books catalog that Johnson used here as stationery for a message to Martin. Typewritten across the page that is turned by 90 degrees, it reads: "Dear Henry Martin, The second bottle of eye drops I got at the clinic says No. 111 eye drops 1 drop every 2 hours whereas the first eye drop bottle I got when you went to the clinic with me says eye drops 1 every 3 hours keep in refrigerator so now the new ones are not as cold as the first ones."[270] In the course of my conversation with Henry Martin, he told about the experience that provided the background for Johnson's strange message. An interview with John Held Jr. from 2015 contains a detailed account of the anecdote:

> An extremely impressive visit one day—he took me to an eye hospital. He had conjunctivitis. He phoned me up and said, "Henry, let's go to the eye hospital." I said, "Sure, Ray." We took the bus, because the eye hospital was on First Avenue and 14th Street. We took the bus, and Ray was sort of standing erect, his hands in front of him, a cap on his head. There was something strange about him, and I couldn't tell what it was. Then I realized there was something that Ray was not looking at. It was as though he wasn't looking at something because he wanted me to look at it. He didn't want to tell me to look at it. I looked around and there was an advertisement for a bank with a picture of a very distinguished gentleman with grey hair and a grey suit, who had a silver dollar

[269] Henry Martin, interview, November 12, 2016.
[270] Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin, May 25, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Stiftung, inventory number ÖL-Stg 434/0.

> in his eye, like a monocle. I saw that, and for the rest of the day the whole world was all about eye imagery.[271]

Two days later Johnson brought a collage Martin still possesses. "And what is the collage? It is not an eye—e y e—it is a black paper cut out in the form of an I—I' as in 'me.' That's the way it was with Ray."[272] The black form, which was glued to the allover texture of the collage, not only had the shape of the letter "I," it also resembled the silhouette of a concave lens—a double reference to the eye clinic.[273] In the mailing of May 25, 1964, Johnson continues to play the game. The "eye" became the "I," and now Johnson sees the "I" in the number 1 again. The number 1 stands thus—via a detour of the letter "I"—for the "eye." Johnson uses the witty, but nonsensical anecdote about cold eye drops as a yarn, with which he spins the real story of the multiple identities of the characters, against the grain of their ordinary meaning in the official register. Through the use of onomatopoeic ("I" and "eye") as well as iconic ("1" and "I") similarities, the artist forges new alliances between the characters, which liberate them from their rigid meanings. However, all of this still connects to the joint visit to the ophthalmology, the day when everything revolved around the eye.

According to Martin, this experience was typical of the little journeys he undertook with Johnson in the early 1960s. Johnson behaved like a mentor who took other people by the hand to "open my eyes for the ways of seeing the world," for whatever random findings the everyday urban environment had in store for them.[274] This practice of the modern *flâneur* was also closely connected with his artistic production in the form of collages from fragments of modern mass media and subsequently with his postal distribution of such fragments within the NYCS.[275] As noted in chapter two, Johanna Gosse identifies in Johnson's practice a fundamental continuity between the experience of art and everyday experience, which she attributes to the influence of John Dewey's writings on the education at Black Mountain College. For Gosse, Johnson's artistic work is constituted by "ongoing experiential processes, activities, and encounters."[276]

[271] Held 2015, p. 109.
[272] Held 2015, p. 109.
[273] Henry Martin, interview, November 12, 2016.
[274] Henry Martin, interview, November 12, 2016.
[275] Mason Klein situates Johnson in a lineage of *flâneurs* such as Charles Baudelaire, André Breton, and Guy Debord (Klein 1999, pp. 44–45).
[276] Gosse 2012.

Only through active participation one realizes the many meanings and implications of these processes.[277]

Gosse's accurate observations regarding Johnson's moticos also apply to the fragments that constitute the content of Johnson's correspondence. Just like the moticos, they, too, seem to hinder communication and understanding at first or even convey something like impermeability. However, their "difficulty," as Gosse describes, should rather be seen as an invitation to interpretation than as resistance to signification in general.[278] The concept of communication that Gosse is working with is taken from the writings of John Dewey, whom she quotes as follows: "Communication is the process of creating participation, of making common what had been isolated and singular . . . the expressions that constitute art are communication in its pure and undefiled form. Art breaks through barriers that divide human beings, which are impermeable in an ordinary association."[279] Ray Johnson, in his practice, seems to be trying to break those barriers between people by creating shared experiences. William S. Wilson gets to the heart of it: "For Ray, the way to define an abstract concept is to provide experiences of it."[280] The day of the "eye hospital" and Johnson's continued sharing of their common experience, which, in its core, consists in a unique way of seeing, exemplifies Johnson's entire practice.

Names and relationships between members of the NYCS

In an envelope dated May 1965, there are, among other things, a few objects that testify to the subtle operations with which Johnson used to make participants feel they were part of an exclusive community. First, there are two names on the envelope: "bourdon" and "h martin" (Plate 15). According to Henry Martin, many of the things in the envelopes would have been interesting for up to 12, or even 15, different people. In such a case, Johnson would have written several names on an envelope. Then he would have chosen one of the possible recipients. "Ray then picked one and decided to send the envelope to only this person – and you would wonder what you have in common with these other people, some of which you did not even know. The

[277] Gosse 2012.
[278] Gosse 2012.
[279] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin 1934; Perigee edition 2005, p. 253–54), as quoted in Gosse 2012.
[280] Wilson 2009, p. 37.

first question was: What puts me in a community with all these people? What is this community? What association have you with this?"[281]

The Ray Johnson Estate Archive, formerly at the Richard L. Feigen Gallery, now at Adler Beatty, New York, has an alphabetically organized filing system left by Johnson. In it, some such envelopes on which several names are written as possible addressees can be found. For Henry Martin, it is clear that an object, an image, a word can mean different things to different addressees, "so it would be like a virtual meeting."[282] He was always encouraged to think about this circumstance when he saw the various names on envelopes, or when he came upon one of the mostly handwritten notes frequently found in Johnson's correspondence system: "Please send to . . . ." This call soon became emblematic for the whole network (up to the title of the exhibition in Barcelona 2009 "Ray Johnson. Please add to & return")[283]. The envelope of May 1965 alone contains two items with the comment "Send to Ann Wilson" as well as one with "Send to David Bourdon." This is probably the same David Bourdon, whose name appears next to that of Henry Martin on the envelope. When asked if he would normally have followed these forwarding requests, Martin replied, "I would have sent on most of the time. Ray was particular about that. He would be upset if you did not follow his orders, and other times it would be okay. He would have been sensitive about the poetry of that, too, of things not being sent on."[284] One way to express his disappointment with one of the NYCS participants was, according to Henry Martin, short remarks such as "This is a putdown" or "This is not funny." Johnson wrote these on the sent objects or used specially made rubber stamps. According to Martin, it was about acts of empathy; the stamps served "as a kind of reprimand for something they did that was not empathetic. Ray would react with irony, disdain, because of his own approach which was entirely empathetic."[285]

By using specially made rubber stamps as tools for reprimanding unwanted behavior, Johnson appears to have referred to the disciplinary aspects of his correspondence *school*. In fact, the NYCS had some of the characteristics that are commonly associated with actual schools. First, there was the aspect of pedagogy. After all, it was also a school of seeing, as in Henry Martin's anecdote of the visit to the eye clinic. Then, there was the aspect of community and initiation

[281] Henry Martin, interview, November 12, 2016.
[282] Henry Martin, interview, November 12, 2016.
[283] Cf. the exhibition catalog: Martinez 2009.
[284] Henry Martin, interview, November 12, 2016.
[285] Henry Martin, interview, November 12, 2016.

into certain social conventions. If a participant did not adhere to these conventions, he was reprimanded by Johnson, the teacher and headmaster. However, despite these disciplinary aspects of the NYCS, it hardly qualifies as a clear manifestation of the disciplinary societies that, according to Michel Foucault, reached their climax at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Gilles Deleuze demonstrates in his essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control" (1990), Foucault's disciplinary societies are characterized by environments of enclosure.[286] Foucault's ideal example was the prison, while other environments of enclosure included the family, the school, the barracks, and the factory. Deleuze points out that, during the twentieth century,

> the disciplines underwent a crisis to the benefit of new forces that were gradually instituted and which accelerated after World War II: a disciplinary society was what we already no longer were, what we had ceased to be.[287]

Ray Johnson's NYCS activities began to take their definitive shape during the acceleration of these "new forces" in Western society. Since then, according to Deleuze, the disciplinary societies have been in the process of being replaced by the "societies of control," in which the model of the corporation replaces that of the factory, "*perpetual training* tends to replace the *school*, and continuous control to replace the examination."[288] The philosopher explains that this change also affects our relations with others, as the "man of control" is no longer "a discontinuous producer of energy," but "undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network."[289] Ray Johnson's networked correspondence practice perfectly mirrors these changed societal conditions. The postal system, which he chose as the open arena of his artistic practice, appears in hindsight as one of the first technologies that facilitated these changes. During the post-World War II era, obscenity laws regulated the United States Postal Service. In the 1950s, the U.S. Post Office Department had launched a campaign against pro-gay mail-order magazines, which they had declared obscene and filthy and therefore unmailable by law. In reprimanding the participants of the NYCS for not following the rules, Johnson appears to mock the role of the United States Postmaster General.

The relationships that Johnson created between different persons were sometimes wholly random in nature, solely based on a meaningless resemblance, such as that of the same name.

[286] Deleuze 1992, p. 3.
[287] Deleuze 1992, p. 3.
[288] Deleuze 1992, p. 4, italics in the original.
[289] Deleuze 1992, pp. 5–6.

Hence, in 1964 he sent an orange-red napkin on which he wrote the words: "I thought A. Martin might like the lines in this napkin. You should bring her by." (Plate 16) In this case, the obvious target of Johnson's reference was the artist Agnes Martin whose last name was the only thing that Henry Martin shared with her. Another envelope, dated May 1965, contains an invitation to an exhibition by artist Anthony Martin at the Batman Gallery in San Francisco.[290] In both cases, Johnson seems to have placed a focus on how surnames serve as empty shells, which arbitrarily and randomly designate completely different individuals. For the artist, there is an opportunity to create a category of "Martins" whose relative purposelessness proves to be a parodic means. It is operations like these, with which Johnson questions the significance of other conventional categories in everyday life, in the art world as well as in dealing with sexually determined identity.

Queer puns: gay sexuality and humor

The envelope stamped 18 April 1964 contains, among other things, five pages from a magazine depicting a series of nude photos of a young man named Bill Wilson (Plate 17). The homonymy with Johnson and Martin's mutual friend William S. Wilson, the professor of literature, was probably Johnson's intended pun and the reason why he gifted Martin with those pictures. Photographic shots of scantily clad, or even nude muscular men were allowed in the early 60s. In so-called "physique magazines," also called "beefcake magazines," they were tolerated under the official pretext of promoting physical culture since the 1940s. The Supreme Postal Authority of the United States, the U.S. postmaster general, though, launched a cleanup campaign against literature in public circulation that was categorized as obscene. Especially during the McCarthy era, congressional, local and federal courts and newspaper editorial offices mobilized against magazines attributed to the promotion of homosexuality.[291] Nonetheless, countless men who grew up in Cold War America report their first encounter with physique magazines as part of their path to self-identification as a homosexual man.[292] According to historian David K. Johnson, physique magazines and mail order houses of the 1950s and 1960s made a fortune within a then-booming national gay market.[293] For the teacher of film studies,

[290] Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin, May 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Stiftung, inventory number ÖL-Stg 434/0.
[291] Johnson 2010, pp. 869–870
[292] Johnson 2010, p. 870.
[293] Johnson 2010, p. 869.

critic and activist Thomas Waugh, "our most important political activity of the postwar decades" was "not meeting or organizing or publicly demonstrating but consuming."[294] Johnson's sending of such footage as part of his NYCS constitutes a performative act. It sends a clear signal of identification with the members of the gay community and their way of being connected indirectly and latently through their consumer behavior—often only possible via mail.

As part of the mailing to Martin of July 25, 1965, Johnson sent him an edition of page 9 of *A Book About Death*, on which two more emblems of gay culture of the 1950s and 1960s appear (Plate 18.). The right half of the sheet features a drawing of the Portuguese-born Brazilian singer, dancer and actress Carmen Miranda, along with her iconic platform shoes. With her hugely exaggerated self-stylization, Miranda was perfectly suited as a model for drag performances, for example, in the context of those comedic representations, with which US troops consisting entirely of men entertained themselves during the Second World War. To this day, Carmen Miranda is still seen as a gay icon, especially among older generations.[295] The fact that Miranda's appearance on page 9 of *A Book About Death* is related to gay culture is made clear by the juxtaposition with the words "Turkish Baths" on the pedestal of a barber's pole. As David K. Johnson reports, bathhouses from the early twentieth century were among the most important commercial environments for gay men.[296] Originally established for immigrant communities, they soon became the "safest, most durable and affirmative" (according to historian George Chauncey) of such spaces.[297] The campy interpretations of the images and words on the page reinforce one another and merge into a visual cocktail of joyous extravagance.

Another set of sent objects includes puns that do not necessarily have to be understood as queer connotations. In the context of more explicit gay references such as those already discussed, however, there is some evidence suggesting that those puns contain sexual or gay connotations. In the envelope of February 1, 1965, for example, there is a torn off part of an envelope on which, next to a drawn bunny's head and some ink stains, the rhyme "Stick out your can here

[294] Waugh 1996, p. 217.
[295] Figueiredo 2017, pp. 284–287.
[296] Johnson 2016, pp. 17–21.
[297] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p. 207–225, quoted in Johnson 2016, p. 17.

comes the garbage man"[298] is written with a pen (Plate 19). In US and Canadian slang, according to the Collins Dictionary, the word "can" can also mean "buttocks."[299] The same rhyme is written with pen on another object of the same mailing next to a photo that may come from a magazine or a newspaper. In the picture, one can see the lower bodies of two men lying on a table or counter. (Plate 20). In any case, the sight of the naked, bent legs of the men lying on their backs helps to evoke a reading of the phrase "Stick out your can . . . ," which is aimed at certain sexual practices.

In the case of an object from a May 1965 envelope, Johnson again appears to be playing with the diverging meanings of standard language and slang words: to a piece of paper with the logo and address of the Willard Gallery in New York, a cut-out from a dictionary is attached with adhesive tape. Below it, the typical stamp says, "COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON" (Plate 21). One of the two entries reads: "fallow . . . *adj*. Plowed and harrowed but not seeded—vt. To plough and leave unsown." In American English slang, "to plow" can also mean "to have sex."[300] The dictionary entry could thus—with a pinch of Johnson's usual mischief—be understood as a playful definition of a *coitus interruptus*.

Another example of such sexually charged ambiguities can be found in the envelope of July 25, 1965. It contains a photo that was cut out of a black and white publication, showing two jockeys sitting *in tandem* on a horse. On the left-hand side, a cut-out newspaper article titled "Backseat driving can help" is pasted onto the picture (Plate 22). In it, the motorist association AAA is quoted as saying "Safe driving should be a team effort." Next to the horse, the following words were typed in red ink: "An old-fashioned ride, too?????!!!!!!" The frivolous innuendos that can be associated with the connection of these phrases and the image of the two jockeys should not require any detailed explanation.

What might have been of particular interest to Johnson in the cut-out part from a world map sent by Johnson in the envelope of July 30, 1964, cannot be discerned at first sight (Plate 23). One can see the coastlines of South America and West Africa on both sides of the South Atlantic Ocean, the names of the countries and their borders. Only when looking for puns that are

[298] The lines may have been taken from the lyrics of the song "Garbage Man" by the band "The Four Aces," published in 1946 on a 12" EP with the record label Trilon.
[299] Definition of "can" in the Collins online English dictionary, URL: https://www.collinsdictionary.com /dictionary/english/can (accessed August 12, 2019).
[300] See the entry for "plow" in Dalzell, Tom, and Victor Terry, eds, *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 1735.

characteristic for Johnson is there a suspicion: Has Johnson possibly cut out the map so that at the bottom left URU-GUAY and, slightly above, the fragment RA-GUAY (from Paraguay) can be read? Could it really be the same verbal pun that is known to the audience of the TV series *The Simpsons* from the episode "Bart vs. Australia?" In one scene, the family is gathered around their center of life, the couch, and the *pater familias* reaches for the globe. After Homer finds Australia, he turns the globe and laughs. Then he points to Uruguay and says "Look at this country—you are gay."[301] The fact that "Uruguay" reappears in another envelope soon after, in October 1964, as an encyclopedia entry in a small collage, makes it likely that Johnson really wanted to draw attention to the name of the South American country.[302]

While the Simpsons joke tends to focus on the stupidity of the protagonist and confirms his heteronormativity, Johnson's story is different. Whether it is the use of slang words such as "can" or "plow," visualizations as in the "backseat driver" and the two jockeys or the conscious reading of something into another thing as in "Uruguay—You are gay," Johnson always doubles the meanings of the characters. He extracts a new meaning and pulls the images or characters with a jolt from their original "normal" context. The comedy of this operation lies in the simultaneity of old and new identities. That "Bill Wilson" refers to the mutual friend William S. Wilson *and* to the nude model with the crew cut simultaneously, has certainly produced a smile in the face of anyone who knew the literature professor personally. In his essay "*Über das Lachen*" (English: "About Laughter," first published in 1940), Joachim Ritter assumes that the prerequisite of any comedy is a generally accepted order of life that excludes its absolute opposite, which is the socially "null," (*das Nichtige*). However, the latter remains present and becomes a latent part of this marginalizing order. Ritter posits that

> [w]hat is grasped and played out in the case of laughter is the fact that nullity [*das Nichtige*] secretly belongs to existence; it is grasped and played out not in the manner of the exclusionary seriousness which can only ever keep it at distance and treat it as null, but in such a way that it becomes visible and audible within the exclusionary order itself, as it were part of the order.[303]

[301] *The Simpsons*, Episode 119 "Bart vs. Australia", written by Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein, directed by Wes Archer, first broadcast February 19, 1995.
[302] Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin, October 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Stiftung, inventory number ÖL-Stg 434/0.
[303] Joachim Ritter, "Über das Lachen," in *Joachim Ritter: Subjektivität. Sechs Aufsätze*. (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 62–92, quoted in Glasgow 1995, p. 188 (English translation by Rupert D. V. Glasgow).

Thus, according to Ritter, laughter is caused by making the socially marginalized visible (and audible) as an always present part of the normative order.[304] If visual sexuality is to be considered something marginalized for the US society of the early 1960s, then this is all the truer for gay sexuality. If Ray Johnson was ever interested in anything particular pertaining to existence, it was in the marginalized and the socially null, the garbage. Ray Johnson is the "garbage man."

African American Identity and the Civil Rights Movement

Among the contents of Johnson's envelope of November 9, 1964, we encounter another critical medium for the sale and distribution of products for an LGBTQ audience in the post-war era. *Bulletin no. 3* of the Guild Book Service, a mail order book service, advertises the book *The Messenger* by Charles Wright.[305] The Guild Book Service had only begun its activity in 1964, so it was new at the time of Johnson's mailing activity. After the Cory Book Service, the Dorian Book Service and the DOB Book Service, which began in 1953, 1957 and 1960, respectively, it was still one of the first LGBTQ Book Services in the US.[306] Consider that LGBTQ content has only been legal to be sent by post just recently. US Supreme Court Decision *One, Inc. v. Olesen* of 1958 was the first judgment of the Supreme Court dealing with homosexuality and the first that adjudged LGBTQ contents the fundamental right to free speech.[307]

The author of the advertised book is described in the Bulletin as follows: "The author is a young negro from Missouri who is a writer and member of the human race rather than a special

[304] In his 1984 critique of "postmodernism," Fredric Jameson would regard this relation to societal norms as the main difference between parody and pastiche. For Jameson, parody can be found in the styles of modern authors, "insofar as they ostentatiously deviate from a norm which then reasserts itself, in a not necessarily unfriendly way, by a systematic mimicry of their willful eccentricities. . . . Pastiche," on the other hand, "is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction." (Jameson 1997, pp. 16–17).
[305] Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin, November 9, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Stiftung, inventory number ÖL-Stg 434/0.
[306] Johnson 2016, p. 23.
[307] *One, Incorporated, v. Otto K. Olesen, Postmaster of the City of Los Angeles*, 355 U. S. 371 (1958). In the judgment, the assessment of the publication *ONE: The Homosexual Magazine* by the Los Angeles Postmaster Otto Olesen as "obscene, lewd, lascivious and filthy," and thus as undeliverable by the post office, was rejected. *One, Inc. v. Olesen* was preceded by the decision *Roth v. United States* (1957), in which Samuel Roth was acquitted of a first-instance conviction for sending obscene material by mail. Roth had advertised and sold a publication titled *American Aphrodite* containing literary erotica and nude photography by mail. *Roth v. United States* had redefined what was considered obscene material that did not enjoy the protection of the first amendment to the United States Constitution.

pleader." The protagonist of the novel, the eponymous "messenger" Charles, who "is introduced to heterosexuality and homosexuality at the age of 14, continues to be active on both sides of the fence, but never shakes the third major experience of his fourteenth year; the realization that no matter whose bed he is in, what city he visits, what bar he cruises, life is a lonesome road that we essentially travel alone." In order to testify to the literary quality of the book, the bulletin cites the writer and journalist Kay Boyle: "It is not just one more book about perversion, and about the Negro's place in the society of outcasts." Author and protagonist of the book unite two minority identities in themselves, they are double outcasts in the American society of the post-war period: as a "perverted" gay man and as a "negro." It is no coincidence that openly gay Johnson sent this Guild Book Service bulletin to African American Henry Martin. To some extent, within the person of the "messenger," an identification of the two minority positions takes place.

In the early 1960s (and to date), in the United States, the minority identities of the gay man and the African American man are by no means organized in an unproblematic way as part of a common struggle against discrimination. Especially in the years before the "Stonewall Riots" of 1969, the relationship was quite filled with tension. Recent research has shown that a significant number of LGBTQ people were involved in the African American Civil Rights Movement. However, most of them did not come out during this time, and those who were publicly gay were exposed to the repressive reactionary forces and were also treated with hostility within their own ranks.[308] In the envelope of June 20, 1964, Johnson sent Henry Martin a photo of the African American writer James Baldwin (Plate 24) that was cut out of a publication. At that time already a well-known public figure, Baldwin was also involved in the Civil Rights Movement.[309] In the 1960s, Baldwin was "generally believed to be gay because of his writing on the subject but rarely spoke of his own sexual orientation."[310] Especially his second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, with its portrayal of a tragic gay love, had presented a literary venture not to be underestimated for the year 1956. In the person of James Baldwin, the two topics of race and sexuality coincide like in hardly any other public figure in the post-war US. Through items like these, is Johnson trying to create a kind of community with his friend Henry Martin that defines itself through similar forms of social discrimination?

[308] Leighton 2013, pp. 18, 21–23, and 104–105.
[309] Leighton 2013, pp. 5, 70, and 100–102.
[310] Leighton 2013, p. 140.

Other mails by Johnson to Martin in 1964 and 1965 contain additional content related to the discrimination of African Americans and their political struggle for equality. On June 1, 1964, Johnson sent Martin, among other things, a page from a magazine with a large-format photograph that, according to the caption, shows a gathering of 10- to 12-year-old African American children attending a demonstration for fundamental rights in Selma, Alabama. In the foreground, one can see a boy looking skeptically at the camera. The text from the magazine is problematic. Negligently interested in the rights of African Americans, it is hypocritically asked whether the children are exploited, whether they are taught to hate whites, and what the psychological consequences of such an experience would be (Plate 25).

An envelope from May 1965 contains, among other things, a photo of an African American boy standing outside the window of a house, looking insecurely at the camera. He is just biting off a piece of bread or cake which he might have received from the people inside the house, seen through the closed window (Plate 26). The boy is wearing a winter coat and a lined hat. On the windowsill are branches of a conifer, the scene is likely to take place at Christmas time. The children and the adult inside the house seem to be a mix of lighter and darker skin tones. The child who is out in the cold, however, is definitely recognizable in complexion and facial features as African American. Even if the picture does not allow a single, unequivocal interpretation, the differences in terms of the color of the skin and the associated subject of social injustice resonate thematically.

In February, 1965, in an envelope containing 28 other items, Martin also received a cut-out advertisement for the book *The Negro Cowboys* by Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones (Plate 27). It contains a historical photograph of an African American man in cowboy clothes including a wide-brimmed hat, a scarf and a lasso. According to the cited reviews of *The New York Times*, the *Chicago Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and other newspapers, the book is a historical review of the then mostly unknown role African Americans played in expanding and building the American West. Of course, the political importance of supplementing and re-writing official historical narratives in times of struggle against segregation and discrimination against the African American population is enormous.

Ray Johnson's empathy with the minority position of his Afro-American addressee is expressed in the items he sent to Henry Martin. However, Johnson’s references to Martin’s African American identity do not consist exclusively in material that “speaks” in a serious tone. In at least one case, Johnson makes a pun that addresses certain alleged differences between Afro-

American people and the mainstream white population. In an envelope stamped on July 25, 1965, there is a color photograph cut out of a magazine showing eight boxers (Plate 28). Seven of them have relatively fair skin and European features; only the one on the far right has a dark complexion and shows African facial features. The heads of all eight are encircled with black pencil, rabbit ears drawn to all eight heads. At the top of the cut-out, Johnson wrote the word "Rabbits" with a pen. Both the word "Rabbits" and the drawn rabbit ears appear to refer to the famous "Playboy Bunnies," the scantily clad waitresses that had been working at Hugh Hefner's Playboy Clubs since 1960. Whereas Hefner's catering to male heterosexual desire (with the female "bunnies" reduced to willing objects) was within the scope of the socially sanctioned, similar spaces for gay desire belonged on the margins of society. Within the realm of mass culture, however, displays of male athleticism—like those of half-naked boxers physically engaged in fighting each other in the ring—could offer a projection surface for gay male desire. Therefore, Johnson's humorous intervention in the picture could be seen as hinting at the asymmetry between these different regimes of desire. While the ears of all European-looking men are drawn in approximately the same length, the African-looking boxer was given much longer ears. The genital humor, which Johnson's frivolous graphic intervention seems to target, is not unproblematic, at least by today's standards. It carries with it a widespread prejudice that strongly generalizes the anatomical differences of a heterogeneous ethnic group and therefore would be considered racist and potentially hurtful.

When asked if Johnson's correspondence of the 1960s suggested to him any kind of alliance between the minority identities of the gay man and the African American man, Martin replied that Johnson had taken these issues very seriously, and then again not so seriously. Martin recollects, for instance, a letter from Ray Johnson to someone else, he could not remember to whom, about Johnson's experiences during his time at Black Mountain College, North Carolina—in the segregated south. In any case, it is clear for Martin that, in his artistic work, Johnson operated with apparent similarities, as well as with identities.[311] In one of his mini-collages from the envelope of June 1, 1964—the same envelope that also contained the photo of the children in Selma, Alabama—Johnson's way of working with analogies shows itself in a very simple form. Parts of two different photo booth strips are joined together with adhesive tape. The stamp "COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON" is printed over both halves (Plate 29). The

[311] Henry Martin, interview, November 12, 2016.

strip on the left consists of two pictures of the same African American man, the strip on the right of two pictures of the same Caucasian man. Passport photos like the ones used in this collage are most commonly used in some sort of photo identification issued by government authorities, such as driver's licenses, identity cards, or passports. They are instrumental in the registration and control of a person's official identity within the dominant social order. At first glance, what distinguishes the two men in the pictures the most, is the color of their skin. However, the longer one looks, the more the similarities between the two sets of photos become apparent. Both men occupy the same amount of space in the picture. Both are looking straight at the camera, in the same serious way. Both are wearing a shirt, a suit and a tie. Except for their skin color and the man on the right's hat, nothing distinguishes the two individuals from each other. The similarities between the two outweigh their differences, and they appear entirely equal. Moreover, both halves of the collage show two versions of the same man. This doubling of the portraits might be a variation on what William Wilson considers one of Johnson's favorite themes, namely, the split or double identity.[312] In his own subtle way, Johnson might have also been referring to Andy Warhol's controversial work *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* (1964), in which there is also a doubling of portraits. Another apparent connection between the passport photos and Warhol's silkscreened mug shots of "celebrity" felons is that both types of photos are manifestations of the state's power and control over the individual. In the social context of the continued oppression of African Americans in the mid-1960s, the most superficial difference between the two sets of passport pictures in Johnson's collage, namely the skin color of the two men portrayed, returns to the foregound.

Alliterations, anagrams and other references: the pun as a principle

All previous examples of Johnson's puns and ambiguous use of images or image-and-word combinations may be understood as they have been in the preceding interpretations. However, decoding them in a certain way is by no means compulsory, as William S. Wilson says: "Words as Ray wrote or drew them were difficult to read in the sense that it was impossible to know with certainty in which direction they were pointing. A word was the more a material word for its illegibility, or for its freight of more references than it could be relieved of."[313] Wilson, as a

[312] Cf. Wilson 1997, p. 36; Wilson 2009, pp. 42–43 and 49.
[313] Wilson 1997, p. 14.

longtime friend, correspondent, and fan of Ray Johnson's, is certainly the best source of information on Johnson's complex strategies involving the use of "homonyms, synonyms, coincidences, analogies, and identities." Wilson identifies the function of the reference as their common denominator.[314] One cannot avoid the pun of referring to these references as *correspondences* based on the underlying principle of similarity. However, they always seem to be similarities to anything but the plain, conventional meaning of words or images in the context out of which Johnson takes them. Wilson observes, "He looked for a seam where he could split the one into two, . . . dividing associations or references or levels," adding, "sometimes he seemed to sense in one thing a self-activating self-divisiveness, which he then encouraged by splitting it, or by placing it in a context where it would be engaged in at least two different modes."[315]

What this looks like in detail can be traced using the example of Johnson's letter to Henry Martin of June 15, 1965. Johnson sent back a letter written by Martin to him, and included a handwritten answer (Plate 30). Martin's typed text reads as follows: "Dear Ray Johnson, I remember that two friends of mine at Bowdoin College once submitted the following forgery under my name to the campus literary magazine. It is a poem." Then in the middle of a new line in capital letters follows: "SELF ASSERTION," below it "i," below it again "I," both centered. After the usual salutation "Dear Henry Martin," Johnson wrote "black i," next to it he drew a circle with a thick black line. In the next line, Johnson wrote "black I" and again drew a thick black circle. Martin had apparently responded to Johnson's play with "eye" and "I" from the collage Johnson gifted him with and responded with an anecdote that operates on the level of pure concrete poetry—small ego, big ego. The pun in Johnson's answer is obvious. Each of the black circles refers to a "black eye." Again, Johnson equates "I" and "eye" as they sound the same when they are pronounced. The difference between the small "I" and the big "I" is leveled, both coincide in the "black eye" of the black circle. It is unclear whether "black I" or "black I" alludes to Martin's African American identity. One cannot rule it out. With a simple operation, Johnson cuts the seemingly unique identities of the characters into fragments and rearranges them differently, opening connections that do not end in conclusive interpretations.

There are two other types of Johnson's plays upon words and letters on page 7 of *A Book About Death*. Martin received it in the envelope of November 9, 1964, the same one that included the

[314] Wilson 1970.
[315] Wilson 1997, p. 36.

Guild Book Service advertisement for *The Messenger*. On the left half of the page dedicated to Bill Wilson and his wife Anne, the hand-drawn letters of the words "THE BAD ARA" stand out. According to Wilson, this phrase contains a palindrome, a double anagram, and a reference to a proper name, namely Wilson's daughter Ara, who is one half of a pair of identical twins. "THE BAD ARA" is an anagram of the name of the actress Theda Bara, whose name had also been advertised using the anagram "ARAB DEATH."[316] The largest space of the paper is occupied by a drawing, once again by Karl Wirsum, of the monument which was erected in Tompkins Square Park in New York in honor of Samuel S. Cox. During his services as a congressman for the state of Ohio from 1857 to 1889, Cox had successfully worked for the improvement of the working conditions of post office employees. For that, Cox got the nickname "the letter carrier's friend."[317] For Ray Johnson, the mail artist, this nickname alone would have presented sufficient reason to appropriate Cox for his artistic production. But for Johnson, the name Samuel S. Cox offered an opportunity to make an ambiguous pun, according to Wilson, "a blank check that can be filled in with any amount of mischief, as Ray did in raw conversation when he inserted the word 'sucks' as the middle name of Samuel Sucks Cox."[318] However, for the artist, wordplays like these are not just jokes with naughty content, says Wilson, as they represent an excess of meaning, above all. By constructing something new with a linguistic coincidence, with the combination of several meanings in one word, Johnson structures himself as a person in which a crossing and overlapping of multiple identities manifest.[319] This operation of seeing in a word, a picture, or a sign something different from what one accepts at first as its identity or meaning, and sharing that other way of seeing with as many like-minded people as possible, form the very core of Johnson's artistic production. This activity, conceived as an ongoing and open, never-ending process, manifests itself in Johnson's collage practice, in which he extracts parts of collages and creates new meanings in ever-new contexts. It can be found in his strolls with friends like Henry Martin or William Wilson, where he strives to experience the visual environment of everyday life with ever-fresh eyes. However, it may perhaps most clearly pervade Johnson's subversive interventions in found words, names, texts and images, which he distributes through his correspondence network. He had his little artworks circulate in the postal network, in the hope that some of the recipients will get the

[316] Wilson 2009, p. 42.
[317] For the monument to Samuel Sullivan Cox at Tompkins Square Park, view the NYC Parks website. URL: https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/tompkins-square-park/monuments/341 (accessed August 12, 2019) For the attribution of the drawing to Karl Wirsum see Wilson 2009, p. 43.
[318] Wilson 2009, p. 42.
[319] Wilson 2009, p. 42.

joke, or will even find something new, which they might feed back into the machine. Connected with this is nothing less than a specific kind of subjectivity, a way of being in the world as a subject that perceives and reflects its surroundings as well as itself in specific ways. Wilson draws a parallel between this game with the different identities of things and Johnson's questions of identity. "A parallel is that Ray could enter an event as a probable heterosexual, but then change in the midst of action, and exit as necessary homosexual."[320] In similar fashion, Wilson compares his use of language to the way of life of the people in Andy Warhol's and Ray Johnson's common circle of friends: "[T] hey had a different relation to being double. Most of them had two or three identities, with one personality for 'normal' society, one other persona for their erotic lives, and a theatricalized character for performing on a stage or in a movie."[321] For Wilson, it is Johnson's experiences of his adolescent sexuality in the repressive climate of the 1940s that have shaped his view of the world. Be it due to the suppression and concealment of signs of his desire behind a facade of normality, be it in charging and recoding conventional characters to subtly communicate his identity, it seems to Wilson that Johnson was sensitized at an early age to the experience of the "split of one into two."[322]

The art of fake self-promotion. Ray Johnson's ambiguous appropriation of the art world's means of communication

With an envelope that Henry Martin can no longer date more accurately than the year 1964, Johnson sent him page 4 of *A Book About Death* (Plate 31). A critical component of the composition is the capitalized text that appears on the left side of the picture. It appears to be an advertisement for an exhibition titled "8 TON SHOW" at the "ROBIN GALLERY," "an unreal show in an imaginary gallery," as William S. Wilson puts it. [323] Another envelope, dated November 7, 1964, contains the invitation card for the fictitious "8 MAN SHOW" in its original version (Plate 32). In five lines, the title of the show, the names "GEORGE BRECHT," "GEORGE HERMS" and "RAY JOHNSTON" (sic!), as well as the name of the "ROBIN GALLERY," are written in the same font size one below the other. The date and address of the gallery cannot be found on the card. Enclosed with to the same envelope is another variation of

[320] Wilson 2009, p. 42.
[321] Wilson 2009, p. 49.
[322] Wilson 1997, p. 48.
[323] Wilson 2009, p. 32.

the invitation card, this time titled "8 MAN SHOW 2," this time with "RAY CHARLES," "RAY JOHNSTON" and "CHARLES STANLEY." The location of the fictional exhibition is again the "ROBIN GALLERY." According to Wilson, this is a "phantom gallery made by distorting Reuben Gallery into Robin Gallery, then to be paired with the Batman Gallery in San Francisco."[324] The Reuben Gallery had been a gallery running from 1959 to 1962 on Fourth Avenue in downtown New York, pioneering Happenings, events and media art. Kaprow's *18 Happenings in six parts* (1959) had taken place there, as well as Happenings, performances and events by Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, George Brecht and many others. In 1959, Ray Johnson was invited to exhibit in the Reuben Gallery, together with George Brecht, Jim Dine, Martha Edelheit, Jean Follett, Al Hansen, Allan Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Whitman and others. The show that was titled *Below Zero* ran from December 18, 1959, to January 5, 1960, but for reasons unknown today, Johnson had previously renounced his participation.[325] The fact that Johnson's name nevertheless appeared on the invitation card for *Below Zero*, although none of his works was exhibited on the show, could have been a trigger for the idea of the mailings that advertised non-existent exhibitions.[326] At the Batman Gallery in San Francisco, Ray Johnson had exhibited in 1961, in a group exhibition titled *Gangbang*. Other artists represented included Bruce Conner, Jay De Feo, George Herms, Mike McClure, and the gallery's founder, William Jahrmarkt, whose nickname was "Billy Batman."

As reported by Clive Phillpot, director of the MoMA library from 1977 to 1994, Ray Johnson created a total of five cards "in diminishing print size," for a series of "invisible shows," all of which were called "8 Man Show." In addition to the two fictitious exhibits in the fictitious "Robin Gallery" preserved in Henry Martin's correspondence, there were issues 3 and 4 in the likewise invented "Woodpecker Gallery" as well as issue 5 in the "Willenpecker Gallery." The latter gallery name, according to Phillpot, alluded to the artist and friend John Willenbecher, with whom Johnson collaborated on various occasions.[327] The "8 Man Show" cards are among the materials Johnson sent over the longest period. Phillpot, for example, received it in an

[324] Wilson 2009, p. 48.
[325] De Salvo 1999, p. 20.
[326] Cf. the flyer for the exhibition *Below Zero*, New York, Reuben Gallery, 1960, in the collection of the MoMA Library, showcased at the exhibition entitled *Please Come to the Show* in 2013, URL: https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/please_come_show/ (accessed August 12, 2019).
[327] Clive Phillpot, "Postal Works," text for the publication *Please Come to the Show: Invitations and Event Flyers from the MoMA Library*, published by David Senior on the occasion of the exhibition with the same title, Part I (*1960–1980*) from May 8 to July 22, 2013, Part II (*1980 – Now*) from July 24 to September 23, 2013, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. URL: https://walkerart.org/magazine/postal-works-by-clive-phillpot-from-please-come-to-the-show (accessed August 12, 2019).

envelope with a postmark dated June 5, 1992, close to 28 years after Johnson printed an advertisement for the first "8 Man Show" in the *Village Voice* on July 30, 1964, and sent the cards mentioned above to Henry Martin in the same year.[328]

In addition to the "8 Man Show" cards, Johnson was to develop several other types of fictitious mailings on galleries and museums and distribute them through the NYCS in the following years. Donna De Salvo, for example, mentions the mailing that Johnson produced and sent out for his retrospective at the Willard Gallery in 1966. He took the checklist for his Willard exhibition as a basis, but used the headline "The Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo," referring to an institution in which he had never exhibited (Plate 33).[329] A look at the Ray Johnson Estate's archive in New York shows that these "invisible shows" were, to the very end, one of the most common recurring material in Johnson's correspondence. At first, it may just have been a joke that Johnson allowed himself to use on the promotional flyer for the exhibition *Below Zero*. However, with the repeated persiflage of the means of communication commonly used in the commercial and institutional art exhibition system, Johnson created something of a trademark that contributed to his image as the subversive, institution-critical mail artist he is still regarded as today. For example, Donna De Salvo says, "Indeed, throughout his career, Johnson created his system of distribution, promotion, and commentary, thus subverting the conventional channels of the gallery and the museum."[330] In 1964, Johnson was not the only artist in the Euro-American art world who began to critically engage with the institutional and commercial mechanisms of the art establishment. Others, such as Hans Haacke, formulated their critique of the institutions by means of an ecological approach to the spaces of art production and reception. While most early institutional critique emerged from the artistic paradigms connected with minimalism and conceptual art[331]—paradigms related to questions of production and reception within the traditional spaces of art (and later, beyond these spaces, as in Robert Smithson's "non-sites"), Ray Johnson extended his subversive practice to the realms of distribution and self-promotion. Meanwhile, Marcel Broodthaers in Belgium approached the problems of art's institutional and commercial entanglements from another direction. In contrast to Ray Johnson, Broodthaers did not shy away from working from within the

[328] Dave Dyment, "Ray Johnson. 8 Man Show 5 at Willenpecker Gallery," *Artists' Books and Multiples* (Blog), February 21, 2017. URL: http://artistsbooksandmultiples.blogspot.com/2017/02/ray-johnson-8-man-show-5-at.html (accessed August 12, 2019).
[329] De Salvo 1999, p. 21.
[330] De Salvo 1999, p. 20.
[331] Cf. Buchloh 1990.

institutions. Entering the art world as an outsider, a poet who started exhibiting in art venues at the age of 40, he would eventually exhibit variations of his *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968) at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in 1970, and even at documenta 5 in Kassel in 1972. Interestingly, at Broodthaers's first exhibition, at the Galerie Saint-Laurent in Brussels in 1964, the now famous invitation cards that began with the words: "I, too, I asked myself if I could not sell something and succeed in life," played the central role.[332] According to Rachel Haidu, the invitations

> satirize the publishing arm of the art market as a component of artistic production that is clearly dedicated to commercial advertisement. . . . Barely an artist, he has already begun to critique the art market, and by framing his critique as advertisement, he is essentially putting scare quotes around that term.[333]

Invitations to art exhibitions and events usually end up in the archives under the rubric "ephemera", that is, if they are collected at all. By using worthless marketing tools such as invitation cards as central materials in their artistic production, both Broodthaers and Johnson drew attention to art's commercial and institutional frameworks. In doing so, they made visible some of the changes in the social matrix of the art world that formed part of the greater social developments that Gilles Deleuze attributed to the rise of the "societies of control." In his 1990 essay, Deleuze remarks that "[e]ven art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank." According to the philosopher, the central paradigm of the factory has been replaced by that of the corporation, and "marketing has become the center, or the 'soul' of the corporation."[334]

With *A Book About Death* itself, on whose page 4, as mentioned above, elements of the "8 Man Show" were used, Johnson realized an artistic strategy which mocked several characteristics of the art business of his time at once. Firstly, there is the title *"Book" of Death*. It stands in an ambiguous relationship to their publication in thirteen individual pages in the period from 1963 to 1965. Despite their numbering and their thematic as well as motivic entanglements, each of those pages could certainly stand as works of their own. A hardcover containing all the pages has never been published during Johnson's lifetime. Embedded in the artist's postal practice, *A*

[332] Marcel Broodthaers, invitation to the exhibition *Moi aussi, je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et reussir dans la vie. . .,* Brussels, Galerie Saint-Laurent, April 10–25, 1964, quoted in Haidu 2013, p. 1.
[333] Haidu 2013, p. 3.
[334] Deleuze 1992, p. 6.

Book About Death also addresses the NYCS-related issues surrounding the distribution of art, the problems of where the artwork begins and where it ends, as well as the artist's dependence on the actors of the art business for the promotion and canonization of his works. If the artist's book itself is an attempt to expand the fields of production, distribution and reception of art in a transgressive manner, Johnson goes one step further. With *A Book About Death*, he dismantles the artist's book and feeds its components into his correspondence machine, which short-circuits the domains of production, distribution, reception and self-promotion.

As in other cases, Johnson's attitude towards the thing he had taken apart, here the format of the artist's book, was by no means entirely negative. As Wilson reports, during the months in which the pages of *A Book About Death* appeared, Johnson worked on the hardcover book *The Paper Snake*, which was published in 1965 by Dick Higgins' Something Else Press.[335] Working on a bound artist's book, edited and distributed by a publisher, and his distribution of the pages of *A Book About Death* were not mutually exclusive activities for Johnson. The same applies to the relationship between Johnson's "Correspondance" and his work on collages, paintings, drawings and sculptures. These were also exhibited and sold in galleries and institutions. Evidence for Johnson showing a very active interest in the commercial success of his art can be found in the letters he wrote to Henry Martin after the latter had moved to Italy. On December 17, 1966, he wrote, "[M]y Chicago show was a great success with 5-6 paintings sold at last count. The Art Institute bought one called 'Gate' . . . ." In a letter dated February 24, 1967, Johnson recounts his planned third solo exhibition at the Willard Gallery and another exhibition at Finch College, both in the spring of 1967 and states, "I am working hard on my publicity hoping to suffer from overexposure and am exhibiting a new painting." Over the period from 1966 to 1972 alone, Johnson shares his joys and sorrows with exhibitions, galleries, newspaper reviews and magazine articles, and not least sales of works with Henry Martin in at least 20 letters.[336] The image of Johnson that emerges from these letters contradicts that of the cool artist who creates his own system of distribution, promotion, and commentary, "thus subverting the conventional channels of the gallery."[337] It seems that his goal was not only "to renegotiate the relation between the producer and consumer of art; to overturn both market-based notions of

[335] Wilson 2009, p. 10. Cf. Johnson 2014.
[336] See Johnson's letters to Henry Martin from October 3,1967; April 4, 1967; April 26, 1967; May 2, 1967; June 17, 1967; September 21, 1967; October 3, 1967; November 5, 1967; November 18, 1967; December 6, 1967; February 7, 1968; April 5, 1968; April 23, 1968; October 28, 1968; June 23, 1971; August 3, 1971; October 12, 1971; January 25, 1972; February 17, 1972 and April 26, 1972, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, inventory number ÖL-Stg 434/0.
[337] De Salvo 1999, p. 20.

artistic value and critically-prescribed standards of artistic merit; . . . [and] to establish alternative venues for exhibition and exchange outside the gallery and museum settings."[338] Ray Johnson also wanted to be taken seriously as a creator of collages, paintings, assemblages and drawings He wished to get approval from the critics, sell works to museums and well-known collectors, and make a living in the process.[339]

His longtime gallerist Richard L. Feigen is credited with the phrase that Ray Johnson was "the architect of his own obscurity."[340] Nevertheless, Johnson suffered from the fact that many of his peers and friends from Black Mountain College and the New York scene became successful and wealthy with their art while he remained an artist's artist who was condemned to lead a hand-to-mouth existence. He asks his friend Henry Martin in a letter in 1968 to write something about him somewhere and adds: "I'm not as rich and famous as I'd like to be" (1968/10/28). In 1971, Johnson temporarily leaves his gallery and tells Martin: "I have no gallery. I have no income. I am on the street. Put that in your pipe and smoke it and I'm not kidding, Henry. I am destilute [sic!]. Destitute. And poor. And piss elegant." (1971/06/23). In January of the following year, still without a gallery, Johnson writes: "Theproblem [sic!] of not having a gallery, no money coming in whatsoever and the economy is insane every time you go to the super market it costs a fortune for turnips, cabbage and oleo. Really." (1972/01/25). The image of the cheeky rebel who defies the mechanisms of the art world and the tantalizing nature of commercial success does not reflect the day-to-day existence of artist Ray Johnson. However, in his mailings within the NYCS Johnson staged himself as a deliberate outsider of the art world who transmits his message outside the usual communication channels and even makes fun of them. He performed the identity of the dropout, the freak, the clown. Even the open letter, in which Johnson openly shares his aspirations and doubts about whether his "Correspondance Art" is taken seriously as art, is signed "Ray Johnston" and dated "April 1, 1964."

[338] Gosse 2012.
[339] Cf. in addition to the above-mentioned letters to Henry Martin, Johnson's statement in an interview with Henry Martin on the technical complexity of his work: "and technically they're collages since they're glued surfaces, but they're also assemblage and they're sculptural too, in the sense that they're bas-reliefs that cast subtle shadows, like Ben Nicholson reliefs. . . . My collages are also very painterly, and drawing is probably an even more important aspect of my work." (Ray Johnson, quoted in Martin 1999, p. 191.)
[340] Schuyff 1999, p. 27. Peter Marks, "Friends of an Enigmatic Artist See a Riddle in His Death," *New York Times*, February 12, 1995. URL: https://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/12/nyregion/friends-of-an-enigmatic-artist-see-a-riddle-in-his-death.html (accessed August 12, 2019).

Conclusion

Enigmatic, randomly compiled, without any connection between the various enclosed items—that is the impression that the contents of most of Ray Johnson's envelopes may convey at first glance. This is undoubtedly also true for those 55 “composed letters” that Johnson sent to his friend Henry Martin in the period from 1963 to 1965, and which are now part of the collection of the Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien (mumok) in Vienna, Austria. The comparison with other material from archives in New York and with Johnson’s own description showed that the correspondence that Henry Martin received deserves to be considered representative of Johnson's correspondence activities of the 1960s. However, only the thorough review of the “worthless scraps,” the collages of encyclopedia entries and tape, the scribbled drawings, the magazine fragments and the forwarded letters and objects reveals the connections between them and Ray Johnson's extensive and diverse artistic practice.

The experimentation with the items that Johnson mailed to Martin, which I undertook in this thesis, was in part entirely subjective, based only upon what I personally associated with some of the items. In some cases, I drew on Henry Martin’s own memories of the past experiences he had had with Johnson. In other cases, it was Johnson’s friend William Wilson’ writings on the artist’s operations and strategies in his correspondence practice that informed my reading. These different historical interpretations served both as source material for my own reading and as intersubjective correctives that prevent my contextualizations from becoming too subjective and speculative. Because the letters formed part of a “lived” participatory practice, they cannot be treated as self-contained artworks and interpreted in isolation. Historical accounts and memories of past experiences can help to breathe life into artifacts that serve as evidence of a practice that was once lived and shared. However, it is clear that any of these perspectives can only shed light on some aspects of Johnson’s complex practice. It is also clear that any self-contained interpretation of the contents circulating within the NYCS network would contradict the radical openness and multiplicity, in terms of meaning and interpretation, that belonged to the structural cornerstones of the correspondence. However, even if an artist subverts conventional modes of signification and interpretation in his works, this strategy paradoxically becomes its signification or meaning on another level. It could even be read as something similar to a symbolic form, which allows for an analogical interpretation due to its likeness to

social forms or forms of life outside the work of art. These properties of the correspondence also resonate with certain other aspects of Johnson's practice that emerged during a close reading—or a close examination—of the mailed items. Some of these aspects appear to be both interdetermined and connected to the artist's personal self-identification and his various minoritarian positions: as a gay man in America in the early 1960s, as a failure compared to other artists, and as an outsider in the networked art world. These aspects do not only appear in the pictorial or verbal content of the correspondence, but they also become visible in some of the structural and functional aspects of the NYCS, which can be experienced in Johnson's correspondence with Henry Martin. It is only by examining both the content of the correspondence and its structural conditions that one begins to see the interrelations and interdeterminations of the various levels more clearly.

As previously mentioned, Henry Martin, the recipient of the envelopes, recollects that Johnson often sent pictures, articles, texts, and objects that had something to do with the addressee. Often, they would have referred to shared experiences in the manner of inside jokes. But after all this time it is impossible to remember everything. For it was little things, "passing references, ephemerae," things that had to do with a particular way of seeing.[341] However, individual items can be found that testify to how Johnson transformed random, casual objects and experiences to be the material of his puns, how he spun them on and on until it became clear that the story he was telling actually dealt with the mutability and the arbitrariness of signs and their meanings. Johnson exploited this versatility of images, words and objects in his artistic practice on several levels. On the one hand, one and the same artifact could serve him to establish relationships between persons and things. If nothing else, the New York Correspondence School was a network of people who shared a common way of dealing with information. This consisted in the creation of new meanings along the lines of analogical seeing and thinking, rather than deciphering a—hidden—message. This means that participation in the NYCS was not only about looking for what was present in the correspondence, but also about finding out what else could be there. What mattered more was not how it was meant to be looked at and understood, but rather how else it could be used.

On the other hand, there are indications that the splitting and multiplying of meanings, which is omnipresent in Johnson's handling of his materials, was also used by the artist to point to

[341] Henry Martin, interview, November 12, 2016.

something else. Ray Johnson's longtime friend, and Henry Martin's fatherly mentor, William S. Wilson calls this a "split of one into two," and associates it with the challenges that the gay artist Johnson had to face due to the homophobic social climate in the post-war United States.[342] Johnson's correspondence with Martin also contains certain items that express such a connection in a witty and emphatic way. In these instances of the correspondence, more or less straightforward references to gay desire and gay culture coincide with Johnson's typical wordplays and puns. Whether he was referring to the different meanings of standard language and slang words, sexually charged ambiguities, or frivolous allusions to sexual practices, the principle was always the same. Johnson played his subversive game creating a multiplicity of meanings. He either removed the context from unambiguous content in order to make it ambivalent, or he ignited new associations by combining things. The humor of his manipulations originated in the simultaneity of old and new identities—and in the presence of the socially null within the manifestations of the excluding social order. Johnson's campy puns transformed those who were marginalized in the greater social order of the United States of the early 1960s into the insiders of an alternative society formed by his correspondence network. Against this background, and from a queer perspective, all of his other manipulations of the dominant meanings of words and images appear as the analogical reiterations of this central operation.

Historically, Johnson's artistic practice is to be situated as part of a scene of gay artists who were seeking to transform the macho self-image of the Abstract Expressionists' authorial subject through artistic means. This historical positioning affirms the focus of this investigation on processes of identification and subjectivation in Johnson's artistic practice. When including identifications such as those based on sexual desire as "part of the picture" in the analysis, the experimentation with Johnson's work reveals a striking similarity between some of his central artistic strategies and recent queer-theoretical concepts of identification and subjectivation. Looking at his correspondence with Henry Martin from that perspective, it becomes apparent that various strategies are at work that undermine conventional models of rigid identities and one-dimensional attributions of meaning. The attentive reception of his operations reveals an understanding of signification and identification as dynamic, open-ended processes that take place in changing, interrelated networks of images and words, people and things. However, it

[342] Wilson 1997, p. 48.

would be wrong to assume that Ray Johnson's queer "world-making" consisted only in the division and destabilization of identifying orders. Nor did it exhaust itself in opening up old registers to an unrestricted potentiality of meanings. As queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz observes, membership in the NYCS consisted in a "queer kinship, an alternate chain of belonging."[343] The same applies to the level of the objects circulating in the mail and the language and reference games they contain. Here too, the effect of Johnson's manipulations was not confined to revealing conventional identities of words, images, objects and persons as arbitrary social constructions, or to opening them up to a random potentiality. Johnson's alternative meanings were linked by similarities and resonances to new, meaningful networks of things and people. Henry Martin's African American identity experienced the same treatment through references, allusions and insinuations as does Johnson's own identity as a gay man. The similarity of the manner, in which minority positions such as "queer" and "negro" were registered in contemporary society, and the way in which Johnson referred to these respective registers in similar operations, created a coalitional axis of empathy between the two positions "queer" and "negro" in the context of the correspondence.

Another effect of Johnson's correspondence machine was the unavoidable performance of Ray Johnson's own subject position as an artist. Already in the 1950s, he had been looking for alternatives to commercial and institutional exhibitions. Sending off fragmentary material that itself seems like parts of collages, Johnson had found an extension of his practice that was often referred to as an early form of institutional critique. In the later correspondence, examples of Johnson's recurring persiflage of the means of communication of the commercial and institutional art system abound. In his mailings, Johnson repeatedly short-circuited the domains of production, distribution, reception and self-promotion, all of which he identified as integral parts of the art world. In the context of the New York Correspondance School, the artist repeatedly portrayed himself as a clown, freak and outsider before the recipients of his letters, the recipients of his art, the art institutions and the representatives of the art establishment. At the same time, he made it clear that he participated in insider circles, possessed insider knowledge and wanted to be taken seriously as an artist with his entire work.

In Johnson's letters to Henry Martin, examples could be found for all of the abovementioned aspects of his correspondence practice. Each of these aspects—the campy humor; the allusions

[343] Muñoz 2009, pp. 118–119, 123.

to queer culture; the split and multiplicity of identity and meaning; the negation of the dominant social orders; the interrelationality of signs, objects, and people; the sense of an alternative community; the performative character of the correspondence; etc.—is connected with all the others. The perception of these aspects, in their mutual interdetermination, informs the experimentation with the material remnants of Johnson's practice that was carried out in this thesis. In this experimentation, a specific functional logic to Johnson's operations could be traced on different levels of his correspondence. The objects circulating within the machine were staged by choreographer Johnson in such a way that they showcased their own performativity. In this performance of the objects, the contingency of any categorization revealed itself. The contents that were sent to travel the New York Correspondence School network changed their meaning each time, and affected the relationships between the people that were sending, receiving, returning and forwarding mail. New cross-connections were constantly created, leading up to new, dynamic systems of signification. As an effect of these processes, the constructed character of any seemingly fixed identity and its fundamental dependence on context came to light with each new connection. At the same time, new identifications and subject positions, based on affirmative and empathic actions, came into being. In this way, the creative acts of Ray Johnson's correspondence machine were infused with a radical relationality that regularly produced "empowering modes of becoming" (Rosi Braidotti) by opening new possibilities for transcending the dominant oppressive mechanisms of identity-construction.

Acknowledging Ray Johnson's practice as a queer minoritarian practice has implications for issues of art historical canonicity. On the one hand, it makes a powerful case for the continuing re-evaluation of a certain heterosexist segment of the art historical master canon. On the other hand, it strengthens an alternative queer mini-canon and the—still desperately needed—challenges it presents to both the dominant art historical narratives, and to certain historico-political narratives regarding questions of (post-)identity. This thesis has made visible the processual and interrelational concepts of identification and subjectivation that permeated Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School. Even for the present-day beholder of Johnson's correspondence, it continues to provide a brilliant example of how artistic strategies of "queering" can contribute to a rethinking of sexual (and other) identity politics.

Ray Johnson took everything worthless and marginalized, any garbage that coincidence played into his hands, and transformed it. The true core of Johnson's operations, however, did never

lie in the result, in the ephemeral pun, but in the experience of those processes of transformation, the experience of seeing differently, in the experience of a "queering" of all available information. Facilitating and sharing this experience with others was the real gift that Ray Johnson sent to Henry Martin and all recipients of his correspondence art.

Abstract

The objective of this thesis was to analyze the collection of the letters that the artist Ray Johnson (1927-1995) sent to his friend Henry Martin between 1963 and 1990. Johnson was known for his correspondence network that he ran for over thirty years, and in which over 200 people participated. This thesis presents the first study of a cohesive body of correspondence that the American artist sent to a single recipient.

The material in this correspondence abounds with different artistic operations and strategies, which the artist appears to have used in order to counteract a one-dimensional attribution of fixed meanings and interpretations. The question arose as to whether these artistic strategies in Johnson's practice were somehow connected to the subversion of the rigid identity categories found in heteronormative models of identity. In answering this question, the artist's minoritarian position as a gay man in the homophobic context of the US-American society in the post-World War II era had to be taken into consideration. This resulted in the hypothesis that a queer minoritarian practice can be recognized in some interconnected aspects of Ray Johnson's correspondence activities, and that this practice manifests a transformation of the dominant models of subjectivity and identity. The methods for the investigation and confirmation of this claim include an experimental "close reading" of a selection from the materials of the correspondence. For the purposes of this study, an interview with Henry Martin, the recipient of the correspondence, was conducted in November 2016. In addition, this thesis compares Johnson's artistic strategies to theoretical concepts of identity that are informed by queer theory. In doing so, it makes visible the processual and interrelational models of identification and subjectivation that permeated Ray Johnson's correspondence practice.

Zusammenfassung (deutsch)

Ziel dieser Masterarbeit war die Analyse der mit losen Fragmenten aus Magazinen, Werbungen und anderen Materialien gefüllten Kuverts, die der Künstler Ray Johnson (1927–1995) zwischen 1963 und 1990 an seinen Freund Henry Martin sandte. Ray Johnson war und ist für sein Korrespondenznetzwerk bekannt, das er über 30 Jahre lang am Laufen hielt, und an dem zeitweise über 200 Personen teilnahmen. Diese Arbeit stellt die erste Studie eines zusammenhängenden Korpus von Postsendungen des amerikanischen Künstlers an eine einzige Person dar.

Aus der Sichtung des Materials ergab sich die Frage, ob die verschiedenen künstlerischen Strategien, mit denen der Künstler in seiner Korrespondenzpraxis der frühen 1960er Jahre der eindimensionalen Zuordnung von fixen Bedeutungen und Interpretationen entgegenwirkte, etwas mit der Subversion von rigiden Identitätskategorien zu tun haben, wie sie heteronormativen Modellen von Identität entsprechen. Bei der Beantwortung dieser Frage wurde die minoritäre Position Johnsons als schwuler Mann im homophoben Umfeld der US-amerikanischen Gesellschaft der Zeit nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg sowie in der New Yorker Kunstszene der Zeit berücksichtigt. Daraus ergab sich die These, dass in einigen zusammenhängenden Aspekten von Ray Johnsons Korrespondenzaktivitäten eine queere minoritäre Praxis erkennbar ist, in der sich eine Transformation von dominanten Modellen von Subjektivität und Identität manifestierte. Die Methoden zur Untersuchung und Bestätigung dieser These bestanden, neben dem „*close reading*“ einer Auswahl aus den Materialien der Korrespondenz, in einem Interview mit dem Empfänger, Henry Martin, sowie in der Heranziehung anderer wichtiger historischer Interpretationen von Johnsons Werk. Der Vergleich von Johnsons künstlerischen Strategien mit queertheoretisch informierten Identitätskonzepten bringt darüber hinaus die prozessualen und interrelationalen Modelle von Identifizierung und Subjektivierung zur Anschauung, die Ray Johnsons Korrespondenzpraxis auf verschiedenste Weisen durchzogen.

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Plate 33: © Estate of Ray Johnson 2019. De Salvo and Gudis 1999, p. 21.

Plates

Plate 1. Ray Johnson, *Calm Center*, ca. 1951, oil on wood, 28 × 28 inches, Richard Lippold.

Plate 2. Postcards from Ray Johnson to Isabelle Fisher, 1953–1955, Isabelle Fisher.

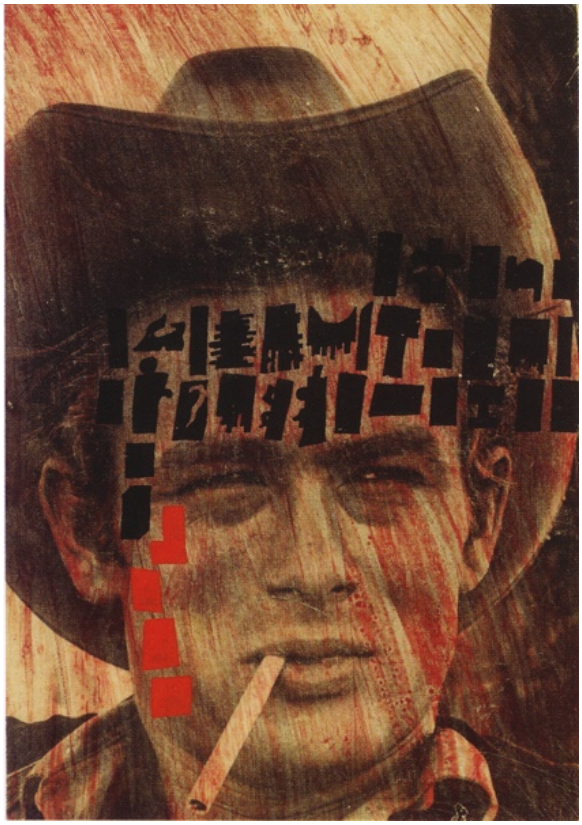

Plate 3. Ray Johnson, *James Dean*, 1958, collage, 10½ × 7½ inches, Henry Martin and Berty Skuber, Fiè allo Sciliar, Italy.

Plate 4. Ray Johnson, Elvis Presley #1, ca. 1956–57, collage, 10¾ × 7½ inches, Estate of William S. Wilson.

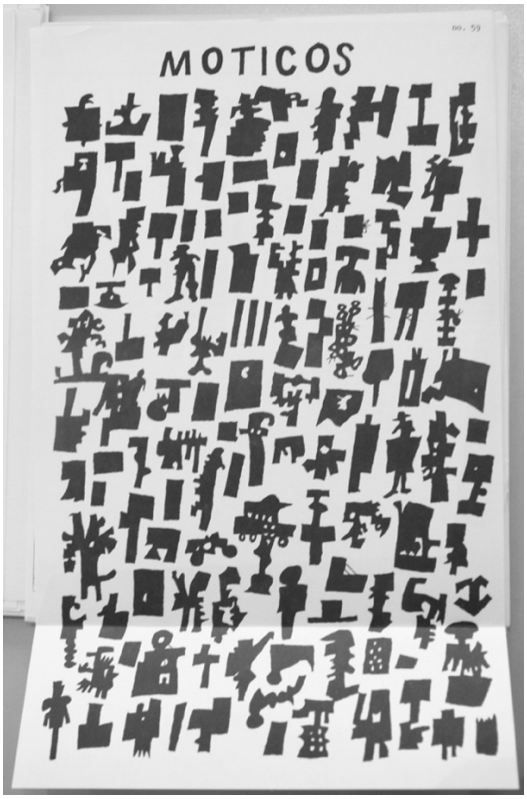

Plate 5. Mailing from Ray Johnson to Edward M. Plunkett, reproduced for the catalogue of the 1976 exhibition entitled *Correspondence. An exhibition of the letters of Ray Johnson* at the North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina, organized by Richard Craven.

Plate 6. Ray Johnson, *Untitled (Eudora Welty),* ca. 1955–56, collage, 9 × 7 inches, Denver Art Museum, Gift of the Stanton Kreider Collection.

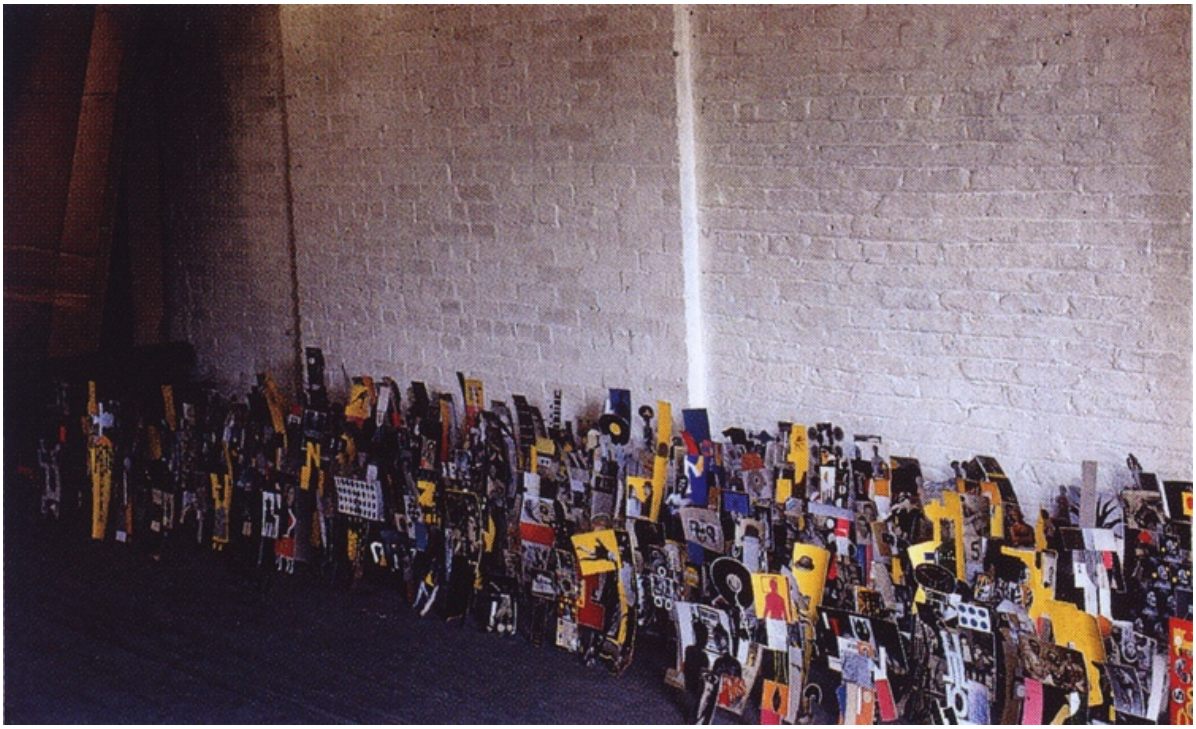

Plate 7. Ray Johnson, installation of moticos on the studio floor, 1955.

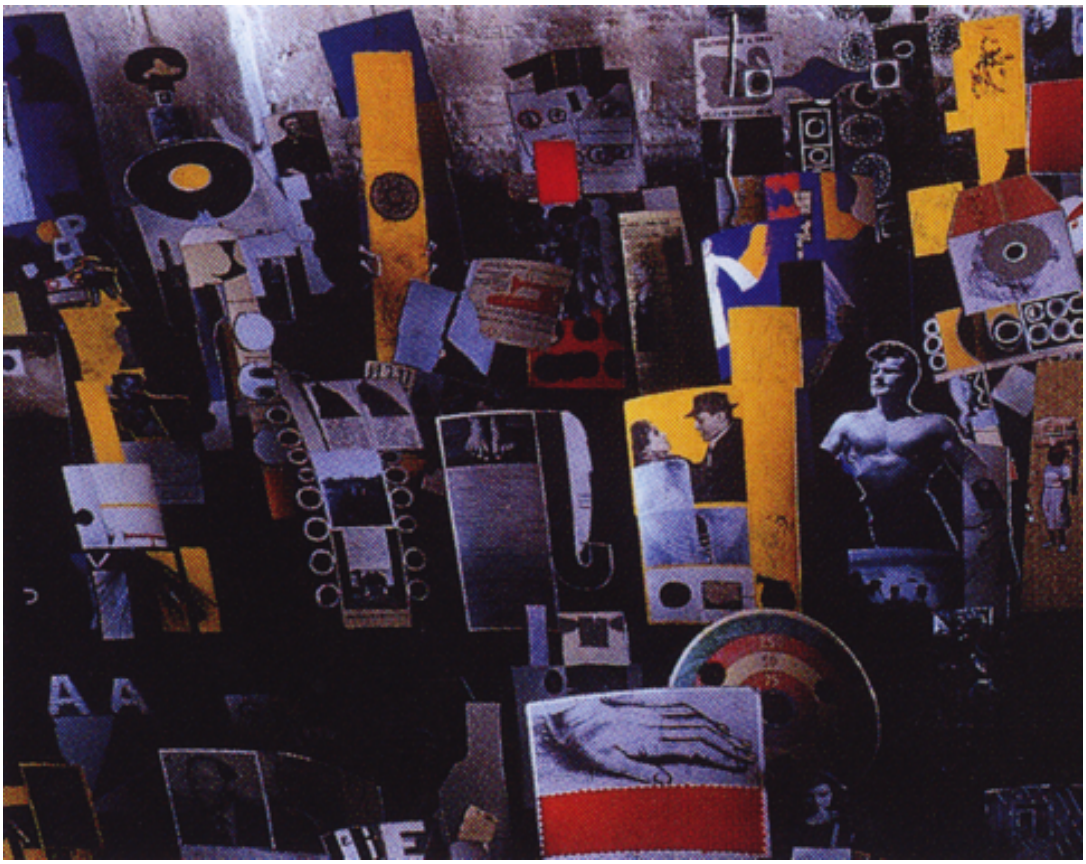

Plate 8. Ray Johnson, installation of moticos on the studio floor, 1955.

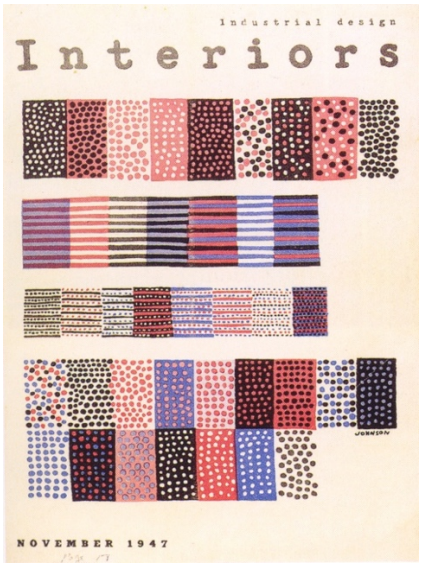

Plate 9. Ray Johnson, cover design for *Interiors*, 1947.

Plate 10: Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on June 16, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

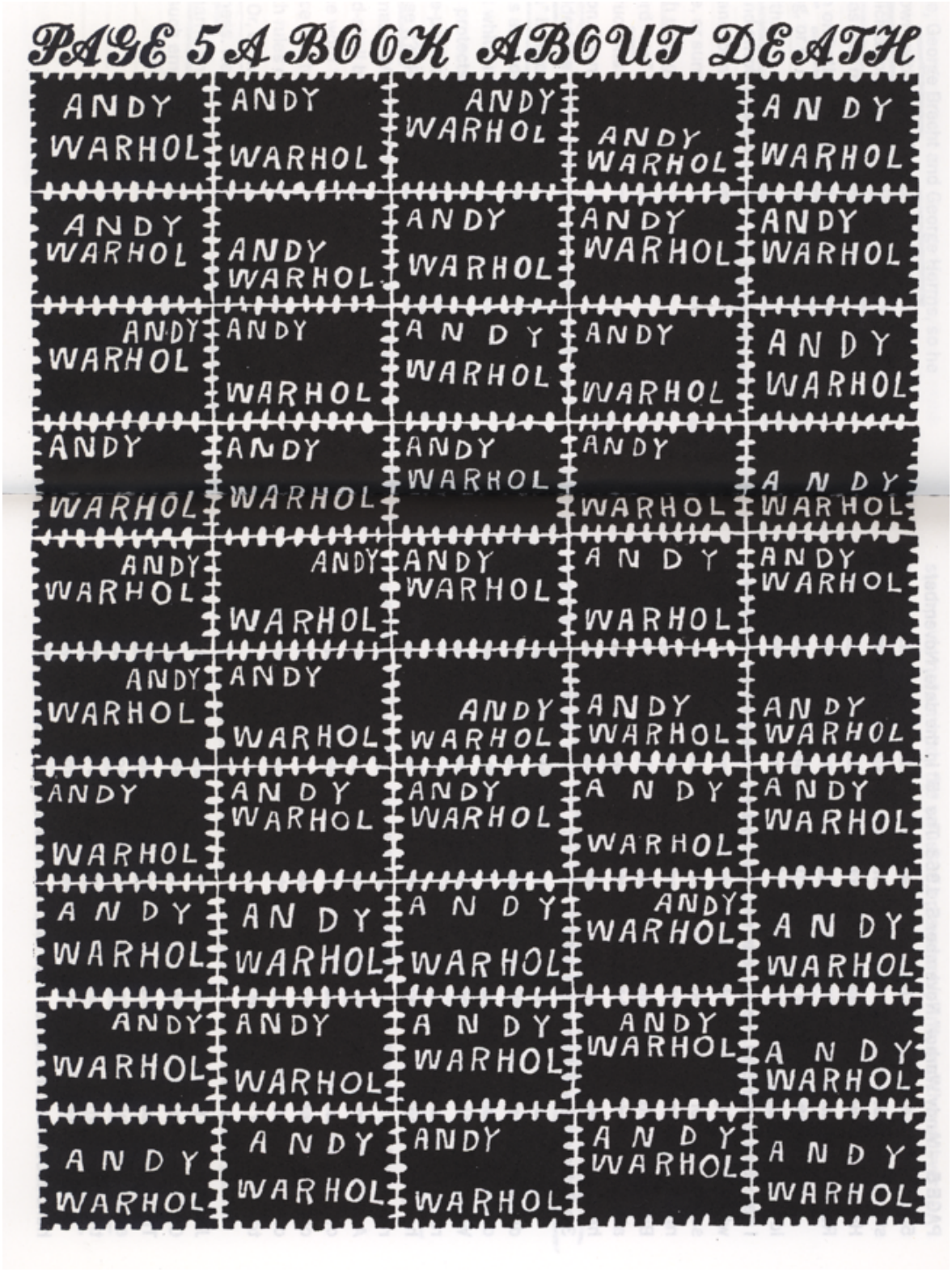

Plate 11. Ray Johnson, mailing, 1963, reproduction for the book *A Book About A Book About Death* accompanying the exhibition *Ray Johnson, A Book About Death*, held at Kunstverein, Amsterdam from December 2009 through January 2010.

Plate 12. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin in 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

Plate 13. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on June 1, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

Plate 14. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on July 25, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

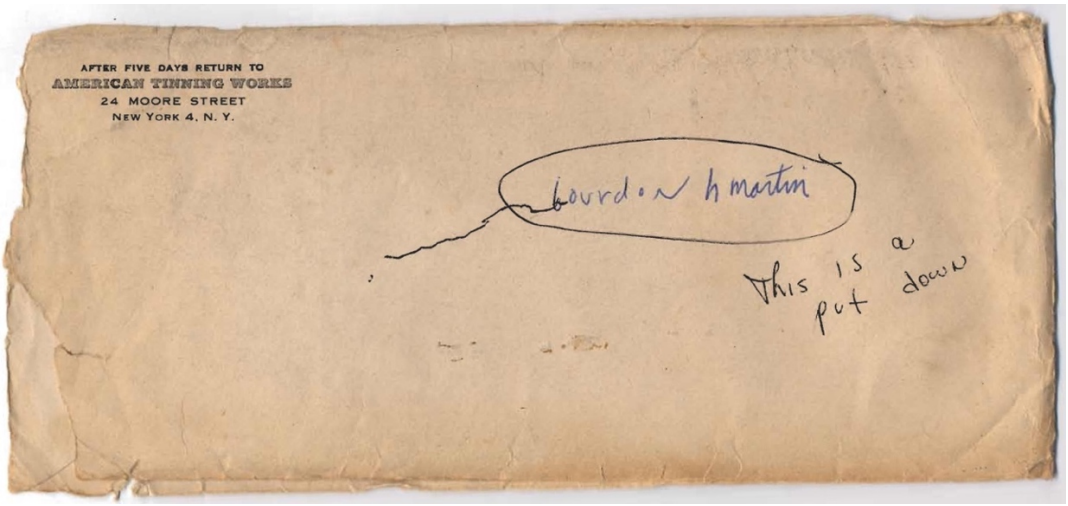

Plate 15. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin in May 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

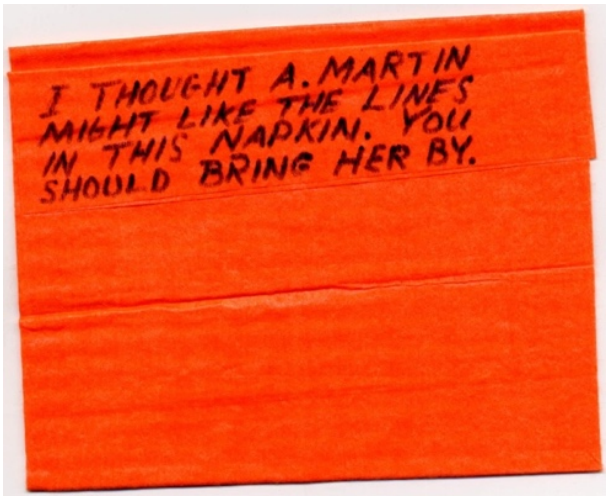

Plate 16. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin in 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

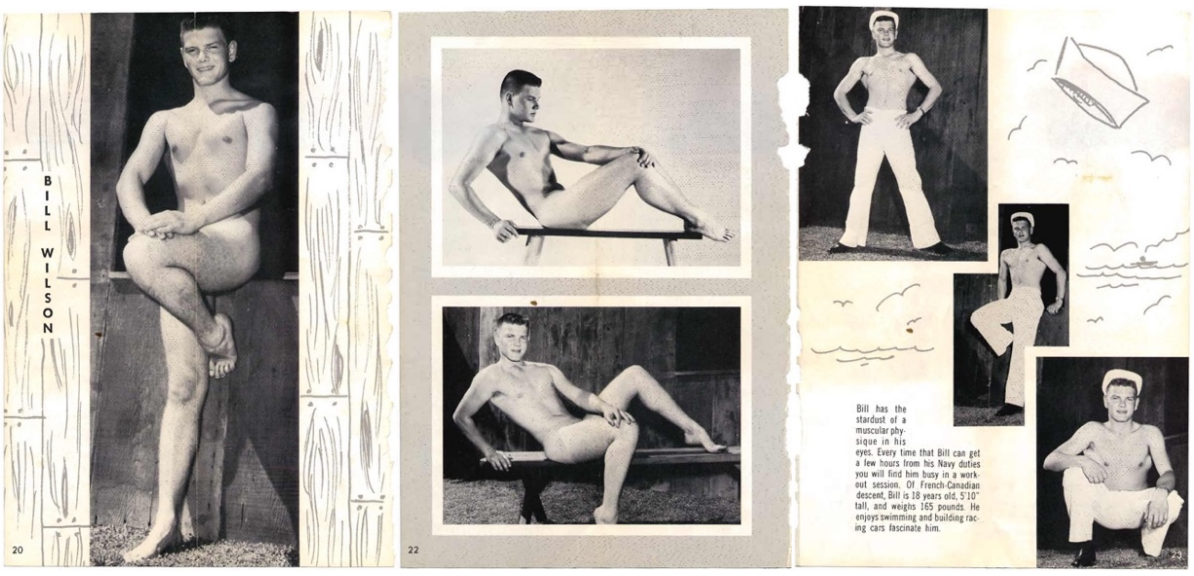

Plate 17. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on April 18, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

Plate 18. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on July 25, 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

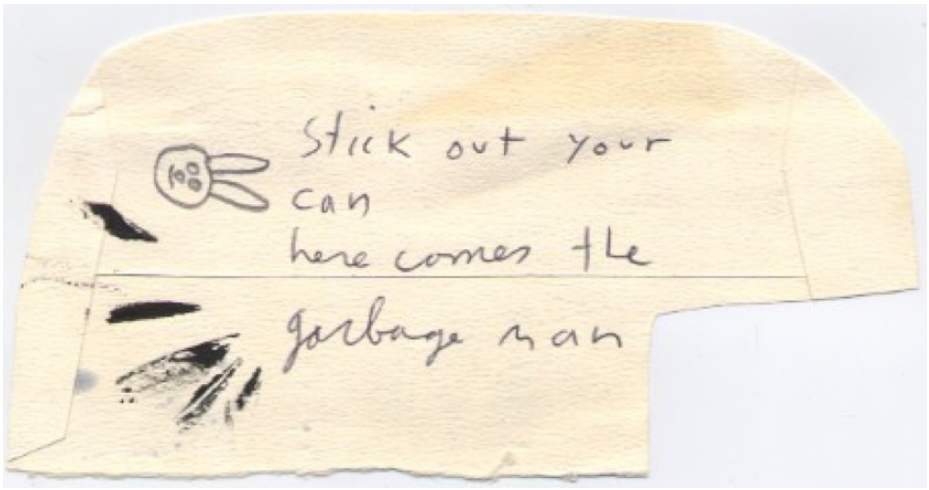

Plate 19. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on February 1, 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

Plate 20. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on February 1, 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

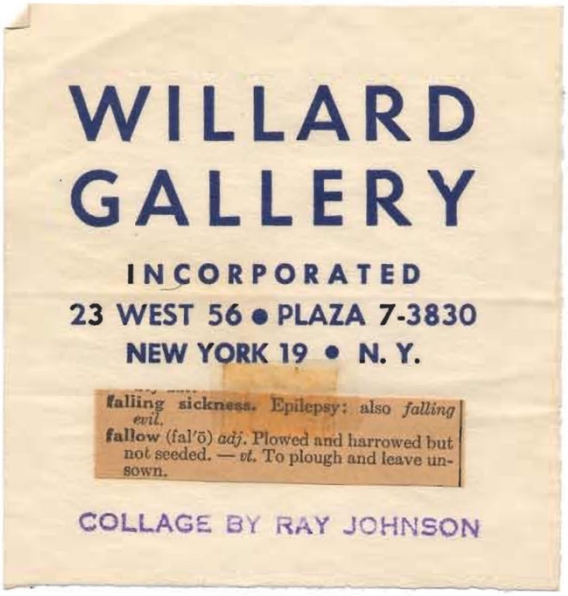

Plate 21. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin in May 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

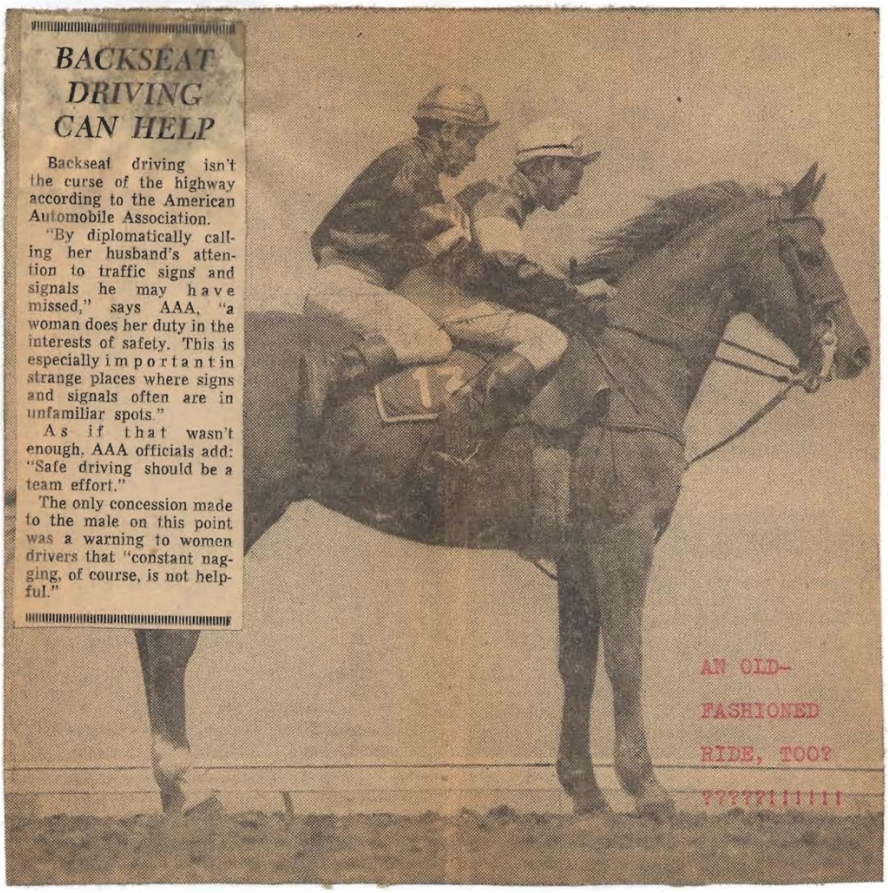

Plate 22. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on July 25, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

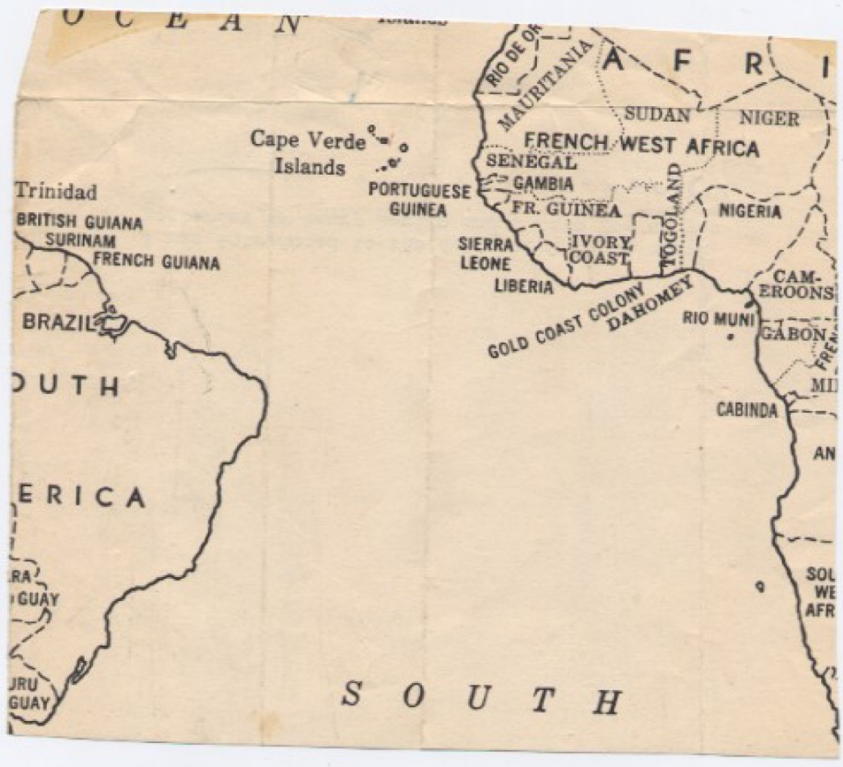

Plate 23. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on July 30, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

Plate 24. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on June 20, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

Plate 25. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on June 1, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

Plate 26. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin in May 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

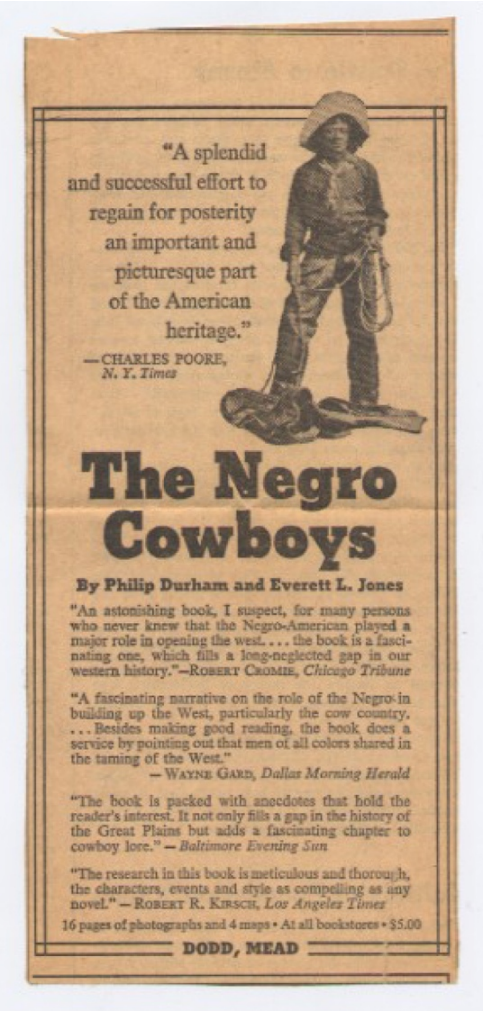

Plate 27. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on February 1, 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

Plate 28. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on July 25, 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

Plate 29. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on June 1, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

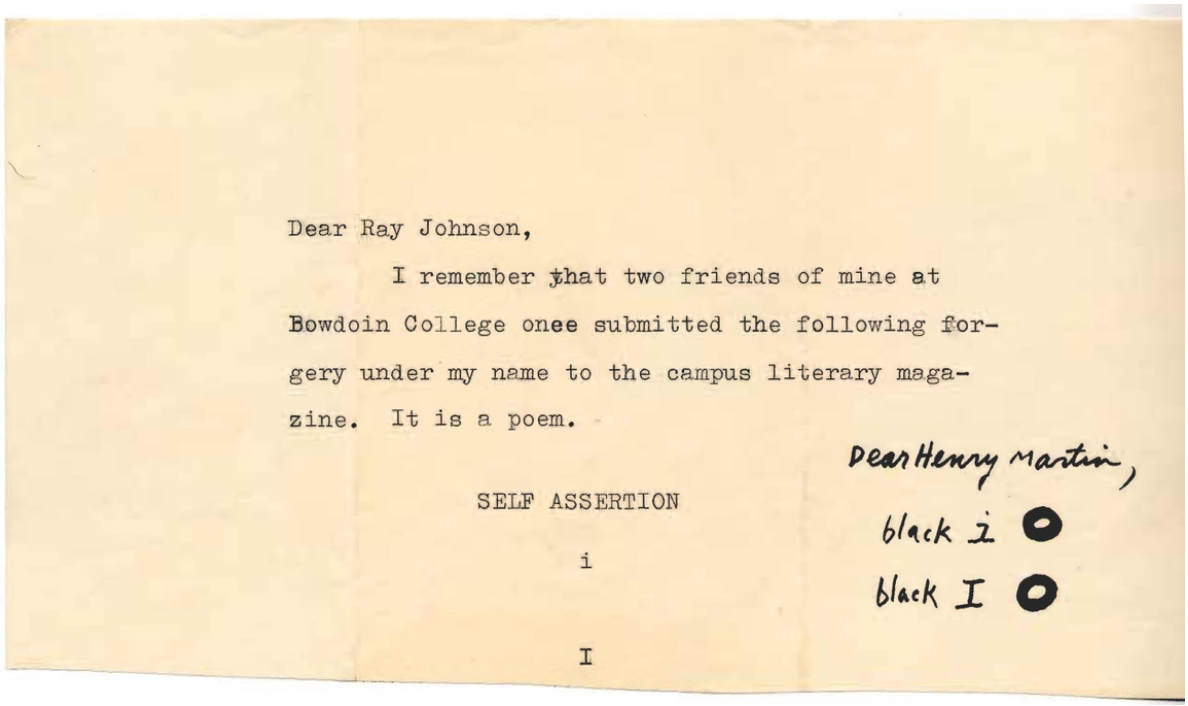

Plate 30. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on June 15, 1965, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

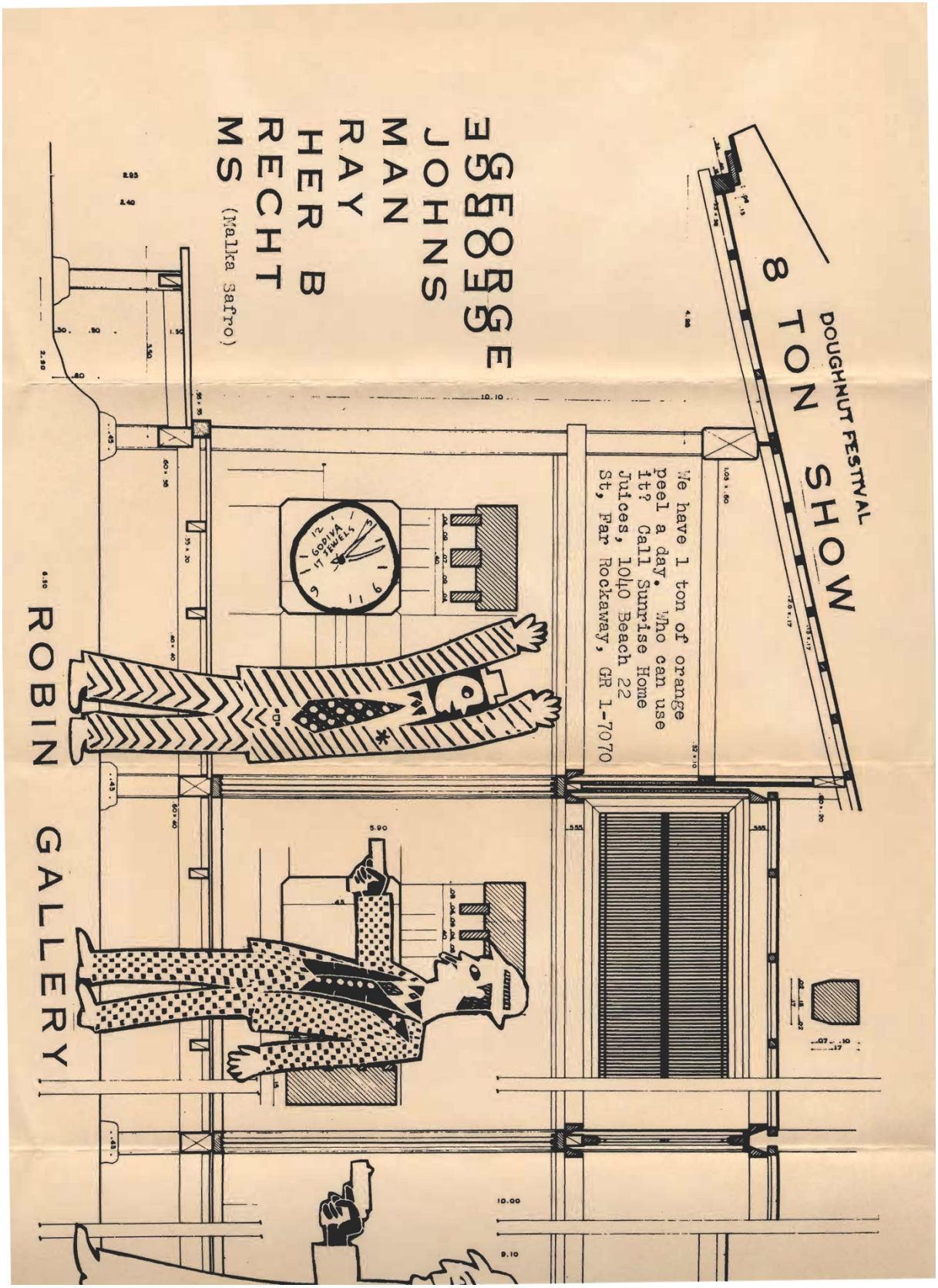

Plate 31. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin in 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

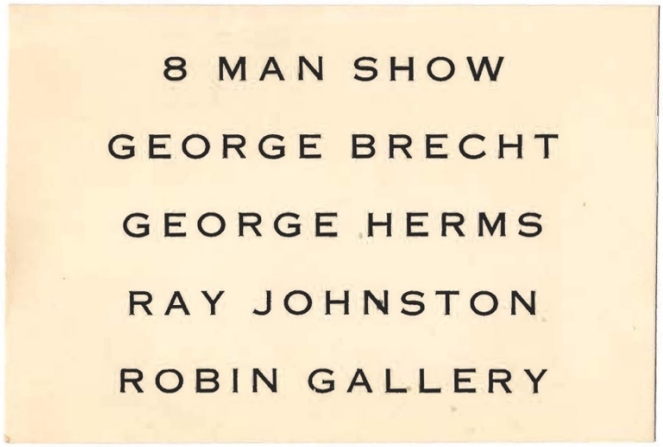

Plate 32. Correspondence sent by Ray Johnson to Henry Martin on November 7, 1964, mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, on loan from the Austrian Ludwig Foundation since 2010, inventory no.: ÖL-Stg 434/0.

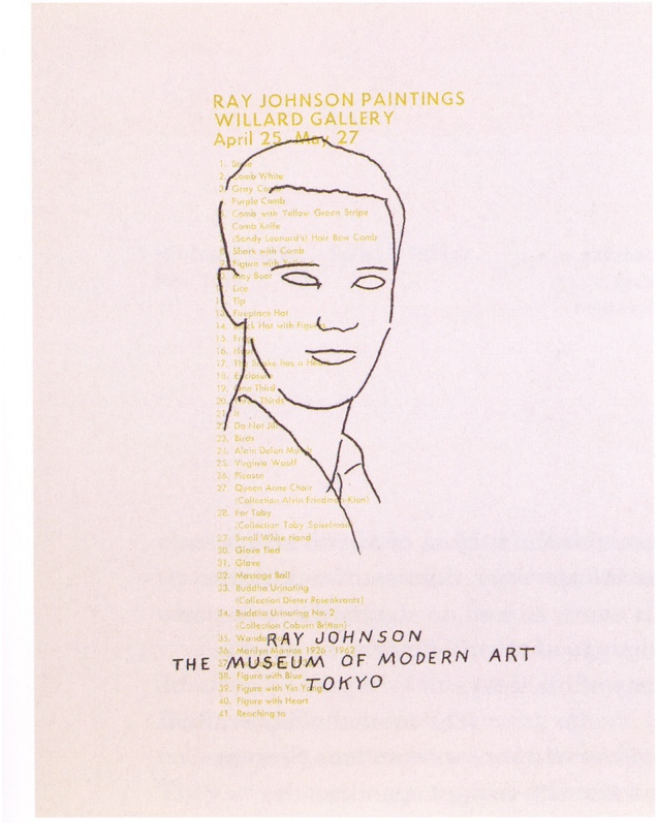

Plate 33. Ray Johnson, mailing, ca. 1970s.