

ABOUT RAY JOHNSON

Ray Johnson was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1927, and emerged as an influential figure in early Pop Art and the development of correspondence art as a form in itself. While in high school, Johnson took classes at the Detroit Art Institute and spent one summer in a drawing program at Ox-Bow School, in Saugatuck, Michigan. From 1945 to 1948, he spent three years at Black Mountain College, in North Carolina, studying under Joseph Albers and gaining exposure to the work of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning, and other important figures. As luck would have it, these were seminal years for the progressive art college as well. In the 1950s, Johnson was involved in the New York art scene, experimenting with early Pop, Happenings, and Performance. Johnson also produced small collages that incorporated references to popular culture, which he termed "moticos." His experiments with sending art through the mail eventually led to the initial meeting, in 1968, of the New York Correspondance School. Johnson had his first one-man show in New York at the Willard Gallery, in 1965. In Grace Glueck's review of the exhibition in the *New York Times*, she dubbed him, "New York's most famous unknown artist." In the late 1960s, Johnson left New York City for Long Island and began living in an increasingly reclusive way, maintaining connections through his mail-art activities. He died, in 1995, in Sag Harbor, Long Island, of an apparent suicide. He is the subject of the 2002 film biography *How to Draw a Bunny*, directed by John Walter.

ARTIST RESIDENCY

January 22 to February 11

Bob Ray will work with six area K-12 schools to introduce students to the concept of correspondence art. Ray will also spend time in the gallery working with visitors to create their own mail art. Contact the Halsey Institute at 843.953.4422 for details.

BOB RAY AT ARTIST & CRAFTSMAN SUPPLY, 143 CALHOUN ST

Saturday, January 30
10AM-12PM & 1:30-3PM

Free and open to the public
Ray will be in the shop to lead participants in creating their own correspondence art.

MEMBERS-ONLY CURATOR-LED TOUR

Thursday, March 3, 6PM

The Correspondence Art residency and exhibition are funded in part by the South Carolina Arts Commission, which receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

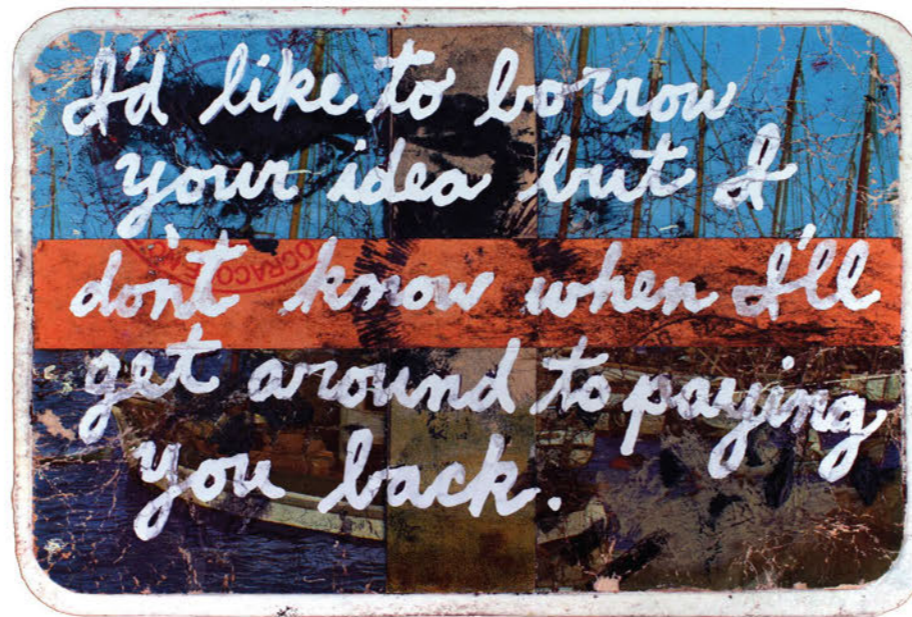


ABOUT RICHARD C.

Richard C. (a.k.a. Richard Craven or Richard Canard) is an artist and curator currently based in Carbondale, Illinois. He grew up in North Carolina and attended Western Carolina University, in Cullowhee, as an undergraduate in the 1960s. He attended graduate school at East Tennessee State University, in Johnson City, and served as associate curator at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, in Winston-Salem. Richard C. became interested in Ray Johnson's mail art, in 1965, after seeing an article in the *New York Times* about his work, and began a correspondence with Johnson. C. later organized an exhibition of Johnson's work, in 1976, for the North Carolina Museum of Art, in Raleigh: *Correspondence: An Exhibition of the Letters of Ray Johnson*. The artist continues to participate actively in the practice of correspondence art, sending work to artists and enthusiasts around the world through the mail.

ABOUT BOB RAY

Bob Ray, born just east of Kansas City, Missouri, works in a variety of media, from drawings, paintings, collage, and sculpture to correspondence and performance works. His aesthetic borrows heavily from the Dada and Fluxus movements, with a strong combination of word, gesture, and image. Since 1990, he has been very active in international correspondence art activities and projects in Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Egypt, Japan, United States, Bolivia, Spain, Hungary, Switzerland, and Latvia. He has had extended exchanges with some of the most significant correspondence artists in the world, including Ray Johnson, Richard C., Giorgio Cavallini, and Torma Cauli.



LOCATION: The Marion and Wayland H. Cato Jr. Center for the Arts
161 Calhoun Street, 1st Floor (on the corner of St. Philip & Calhoun Streets)
College of Charleston, School of the Arts, Charleston, SC 29401
HALSEY.COFC.EDU

PARKING: Available in the St. Philip and George Street Garages

GALLERY HOURS: Mon - Sat, 11am - 4pm, or by appointment
OPEN UNTIL 7PM ON THURSDAYS! Free and open to the public.

CONTACT: (843) 953-4422 or halsey@cofc.edu

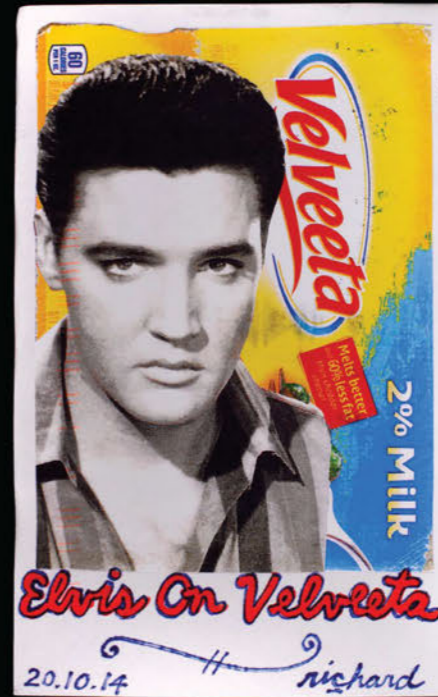
BLOG: Join the conversation! halsey.cofc.edu/EDU/blog

BOOK A GUIDED TOUR: Free tours are led by knowledgeable and experienced guides and can be adapted to different time lengths, group sizes, and ages. Contact our Education & Outreach Coordinator, Maya McGauley at mogauleym@cofc.edu or (843) 953-5957.

OUR MISSION: The Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art at the College of Charleston School of the Arts provides a multidisciplinary laboratory for the production, presentation, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas by innovative visual artists from around the world. As a non-collecting museum, we create meaningful interactions between adventurous artists and diverse communities within a context that emphasizes the historical, social, and cultural importance of the art of our time.

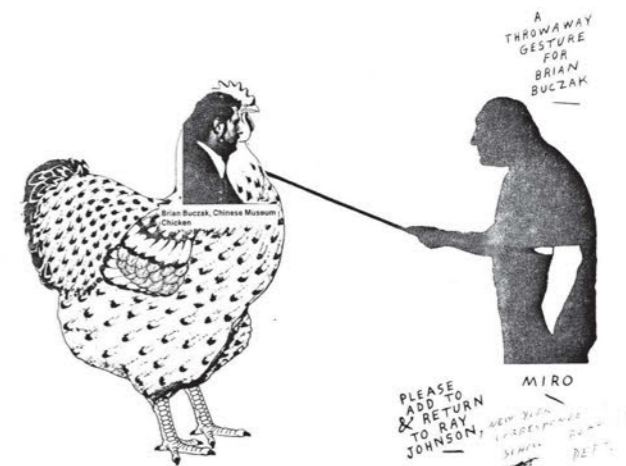
The Halsey Institute's exhibition and education program is supported in part by the Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, the Henry and Sylvia Yaschik Foundation and our Members.

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CORRESPONDENCE ART:

Words, Objects, and Images by Ray Johnson, Richard C., and Bob Ray
January 22 - March 5, 2016



Correspondence Art: A Completely Incomplete History

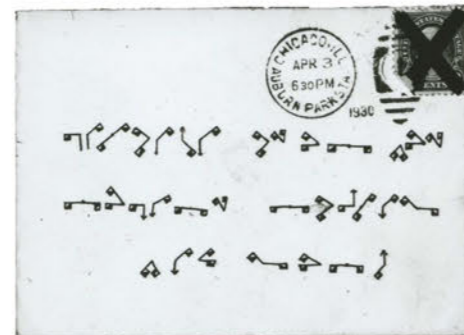
In 1900, British collector W. Reginald Bray (1879–1939) became the first human to be sent through the mail. Bray thoroughly read the British Postal Code Manual and tried his best to stump the post office by mailing shoes, hats, vegetables, a penny, seaweed, and an Irish Terrier, among other objects. Bray further tested the limits of the postal carriers' patience by addressing a postcard to *Any Citizen of London*, or to *That Man Who Lives on an Island*. In retrospect, these bafflements were among the first-known examples of what we now call "correspondence art."

From 1918 until his death in 1949, cartoonist Robert Ripley received more mail than any other individual in history—more than a million letters a year during the thirties and forties. People sent him all manner of things, attempting to gain his favor and end up in one of his *Believe It or Not!* syndicated cartoons. In fact, Ripleymania swept the country at that time, as many people believed (erroneously) that Ripley paid for the privilege of using their story. Many letters were sent to him with obscure addresses, including those addressed in Braille, wigwag, Morse Code, semaphore, and in backward, upside down English, to list a few examples. Once Ripley received a stamp from Japan with just his name written on the back of it, completely bypassing the need for a card or envelope.



While Ripley's odd mailbag was a pop culture phenomenon within the general population, artists from around the world were starting to awaken to the possibilities of sending art through the mail. Correspondence art might be defined as an aesthetic or conceptual transaction exchanged through the postal service. It is not an art movement per se, but it can be said to be a genre. In looking for its art-historical antecedents, we need look no further than artist Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp's use of what he called readymades (found or existing objects that he elevated to the status of art by proclamation) became the precursor to many forms of creative expression. This "anti-art" approach became popularized as Dada, with Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Man Ray as the ringleaders who, together, disrupted the comfortable assumptions about what art might be and how it may be circulated and interpreted.

In the 1960s, members of a group called the *Nouveaux Realists* emerged in Europe and began incorporating elements taken from the "real" world into their art—ticket stubs, napkins, bits of newspaper, fragments from advertising, and whatever detritus they could wring from everyday life and piece together into a collage. This kind of abstract representation of reality was at odds with the prevailing norm of presenting the world realistically, and, most often, pictorially. Pierre Restany, the artist who coined the name *Nouveaux*



Realists, said their aim was to create a "poetic recycling of urban, industrial and advertising reality." By the late 1960s, such artists as Ed Plunkett and Dick Higgins were actively practicing a version of this approach in the United States, and these experiments morphed into what came to be called Pop Art. Again, the goal was to incorporate advertising and media imagery into artwork as a form of social commentary and aesthetic exploration.

Fluxus, formed and named by George Maciunas, in 1961, was an offshoot of Dada. It became an international art movement, incorporating visual art, performance, literature, dance, and design, continuing in the sensibility of Dada by concentrating more on the creative process itself than the finished "product." Some of the most notable practitioners involved in the Fluxus movement, along with Maciunas, include John Cage, Yoko Ono, Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, Davi Det Hompson, and Dick Higgins. John Cage became fascinated with the tenets of Zen Buddhism and the importance of "chance operations," often incorporating found objects and sounds into his various visual and musical compositions. It is interesting to note that this impulse to challenge definitions of art was also happening in Japan in the 1950s, under the name Gutai. The Gutai group blurred the lines between art and life, celebrating the "art of matter as it is," as stated by Shiraga Kazuo, one of its principal proponents, in 1956. Their movement was anti-academic, and encompassed visual art, installations, and performances that focused on the relationship of the body to the cosmos.

Around the globe, artists of the '50s and '60s were engaged in a radical reconsideration of how art was produced, presented, transmitted, and received. The term *interarts* was often used to describe the multivalent methods and means employed by artists during this time. The first "Happening" occurred on the campus of Black Mountain College, in the spring of 1952, staged by John Cage, but involving scores of other artists in a variety of disciplines. Book art, installations, collaborations, interventions, performances, readings, and technology were all elements that were swirled together in differing portions to create a new kind of art, and a new way of apprehending the world.

All of this forms the backdrop for the exhibition *Correspondence Art: Words, Objects, and Images by Ray Johnson, Richard C., and Bob Ray*. Ray Johnson (1927–95) is often cited as among the first to activate the unusual practice of mail art in the mainstream art world. Johnson founded the New York Correspondance [(sic)] School, a network of mail artists. He was a student of Joseph Albers (and others) at Black Mountain College in the 1940s, and later became a fixture in the New York art world, from the late 1950s until his self-exile on Long Island in the 1980s. Peopling his circle of



friends were Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Cy Twombly, Ad Reinhardt, Geoff Hendricks, Ken Friedman, and Lucy Lippard. Although Johnson did not proclaim a formal alliance with Fluxus, his work was featured in many of the most important Fluxus exhibitions and publications. The Fluxus artists were among the first to recognize the potential of using the postal service as an economical method of communicating ideas on a global scale.

Beginning in New York in the late 1950s, Ray Johnson began mail exchanges with fellow artists, curators, and writers by sending enigmatic, elliptical collages and texts. By founding the New York Correspondance School, he had created an institution without walls or charter. There was no actual school, and no formal structure—just a conceptual conceit—a construct. Heavily influenced by the Dada and Fluxus movements, correspondence artists began reciprocal communication, an act that existed outside of the commercial sphere. That these works were not commodities to be bought, sold, and collected, made correspondence art an insider's game, with its own unwritten rules of engagement. One had to be an artist, a critic, or artworld gadfly to be on the receiving end of this esoteric new form of communication. Very often, one felt he had struck gold, although not in commercial terms.

The ephemeral and anti-institutional nature of this genre has rendered it virtually invisible to the general public. There is, however, an International Union of Mail Artists, founded in 1988, numbering more than forty-one hundred members today. Although it sounds like an organization, it is actually a loose confederation of artists (much as Fluxus was) who enjoy sharing ideas and artwork through this unique medium. They do have a website, but they emphasize there are no rules and no dues. Anyone can become a member. There are rules to hosting and participating in mail-art shows internationally. Everything is shown. There is the understanding that the host will provide some form

of documentation, usually in the form of a catalogue, which all participants receive. Now, in the age of the Internet, creating a webpage is common, but the printed catalogues continue to be the coin of the realm.

It is, indeed, ironic that because of its democratic, "anyone can play" attitude, mail art has yet to receive much critical attention from the mainstream art world. There have been notable exceptions, especially Marcia Tucker's landmark exhibition *Ray Johnson: New York Correspondance School* Exhibition, for the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1970. Tucker contacted all of Johnson's correspondents and asked them to send work to the exhibition, although, interestingly, the show contained none of Ray Johnson's work. Still, few museums or institutions collect correspondence art, but there continue to be shows at nonprofit and artist-space galleries.

Richard C. and Ray Johnson had a voluminous correspondence over the years, beginning in the late 1960s and terminating with Johnson's suicide, in 1995. C. organized a major exhibition of Johnson's correspondence art for the North Carolina Museum of Art, in Raleigh, in 1976 (involving more than eighty contributors), called *Correspondence: An Exhibition of the Letters of Ray Johnson*. This exhibition, which I had the pleasure of seeing, sought to take measure of Johnson's voluminous output, and to draw attention to his unorthodox methodology. Johnson's art is intentionally oblique and tangential, but since the exhibition only contained letters sent from Ray Johnson it prompted one of the participants, Davi Det Hompson, to write a letter to the museum's director included with his submissions:

"If some of Ray's art is seen by museum visitors as obscure, it may be because only half (or even a smaller fraction) of the reasoning, and none of the situation, is on view. This is not a plea to have my dalliances included in the exhibition, but an observation that much of Ray J's genius is his ability to make an inspired response to almost any mundane news, finding, or chance meeting."

These letters contain so many inside jokes, asides, and references to events and activities personal to the individual correspondents, it is sometimes difficult for an interloper to gain a foothold on the material. The letters, however, do offer evidence of a protean imagination, in that they portray Johnson as a playful trickster who creatively cajoles his fellow correspondents into more and more outlandish responses. He would often implore his correspondents to add something new to what he sent them and then provide them a list of people to whom the resulting collaboration should be forwarded. In one sense, Richard C.'s show at the North Carolina Museum of Art was the antidote to Marcia Tucker's show at the Whitney Museum of

American Art, from years before. Tucker included only letters received by the artist while C. only showed letters sent by the artist.

Bob Ray had a brief correspondence with Ray Johnson during the early 1990s, and has had an ongoing exchange with Richard C. since those very same days. This exhibition features a combination of works: some historical works from Ray Johnson to Richard C., some from Richard C. and Bob Ray to me, and some collaborative works, altered by both Richard C. and Bob Ray to me. The range of materials sent to me here at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art is, in itself, a testament to the variety and diversity of the genre of correspondence art. There are poems, found objects, collages on hotel stationery, poetry, riddles, cereal-box tops, and modified junk mail, among other wonders.

The main goal of this exhibition is to establish a baseline introduction to the genre of correspondence art, while introducing new audiences to this phenomenon through three of its most prolific practitioners. The three artists selected represent a continuum. I hesitate to call this a lineage because that implies logic and a traceable evolution. If nothing else, correspondence artists, in general—and these three, in particular—defy any neat categories in which we might place them, and they would eschew any attempts to do so. It is safe to say that through their quiet, yet persistent involvement in this little-known practice they have produced works that offer insight into the creative process itself. There is an aspect of this project that is like the children's game of leapfrog. Each artist responds to another's work in a call-and-response manner, with no beginning or end. There is a powerful current of Dada and Fluxus blowing through this series of works, and the spirit of Ray Johnson hovers above it all.



Mark Sloan
Director & Chief Curator
Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art

The curator would like to thank the following people for their contributions to the exhibition: Bob Ray, Richard C., Huston Paschal, Barbara Hardy, Ann Ehringhaus, Colin Johnson, Riki Matsuda and the staff of the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Art.