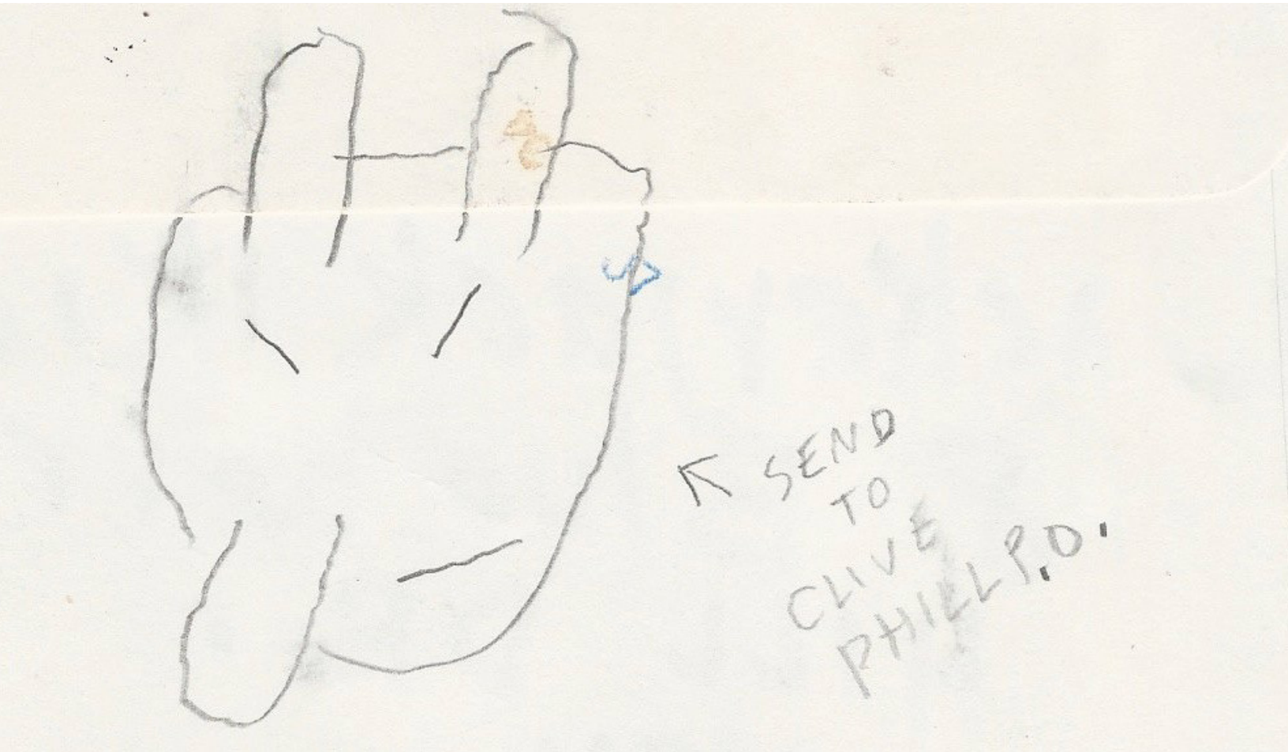
Ray Johnson Biography

Ray Johnson (1927-1995) was a seminal Pop Art figure in the 1950s, an early conceptualist, and a pioneer of mail art. His preferred medium was collage, that quintessentially twentieth-century art form that reflects the increased (as the century wore on) collision of disparate visual and verbal information that bombards modern man. Integrating texts and images drawn from a multiplicity of sources from mass media to telephone conversations Johnson's innovativeness spread beyond the confines of the purely visual. He staged what Suzi Gablik described in Pop Art Redefined as perhaps the "first informal happening" and moved into mail art, artist books, graphic design, and sculpture, working in all modes simultaneously.

Johnson not only operated in what Rauschenberg famously called "the gap between art and life," but he also erased the distinction between them. His entire being – a reflection of his obsessively creative mind – was actually one continuous "work of art." His works reflect his encyclopedic erudition, his promiscuous range of interests, and an uncanny proto-Google ability to discover connections between a myriad of images, facts and people.



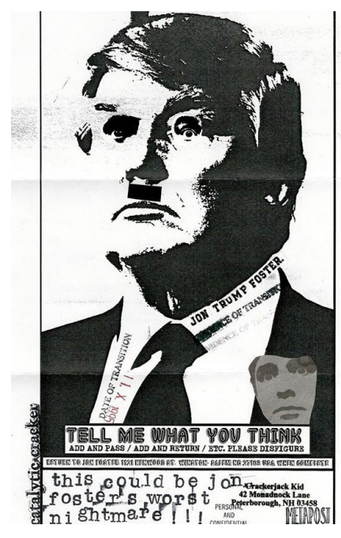
Born in Detroit, Michigan on October 16, 1927, Johnson grew up in a working class neighborhood and attended an occupational high school where he enrolled in an advertising art program. He studied at the Detroit Art Institute and spent a summer in a drawing program at Ox-Bow School in Saugatuck, Michigan, an affiliate of the Art Institute of Chicago.
Leaving Detroit in the summer of 1945, he matriculated at the progressive Black Mountain College, where he spent the next three years with the exception of the spring of 1946. He studied painting with former Bauhaus faculty Josef Albers and Lyonel Feininger, as well as Robert Motherwell. By the summer of 1948, Johnson had befriended summer visiting lecturers John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning, Buckminster Fuller, and Richard Lippold and fellow student Ruth Asawa.

The Mail Art

Chuck Welch

"Tele" is a Greek word for "far off," "at a distance." Netlink is terminology meaning "to interconnected networks," especially communication networks that are perceived to be distant. Artists impart attitudes, values, and sensibilities in their shared communication with others. Aesthetic sensibilities, when coupled with social hierarchy and economic inequality, create media boundaries, "netclubs." Mail art networking attempts to soar above these distances, to fly beyond all media boundaries-to telenetlink!

Mail art is communication that travels a physical/spiritual distance between senders and recipients. For nearly forty years mail artists have been enjoying interactive mail characterized by free, open, often spirited visual/textual correspondances. Mail artists have worked hard to abolish copyrights through dispersed authorship. In the distant, parallel world of high technology, telecommunication artists often work in the same collaborative fabric interwoven with mail art. But emailartists network online in a simulated, textual, paperless world. No wonder there are mail artists who prefer the tangible, tactile, handcrafted encounter of pen, pencil, collage, paint, and handmade paper.



Crackerjack Kid 022295

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1927 Ray Johnson 1995

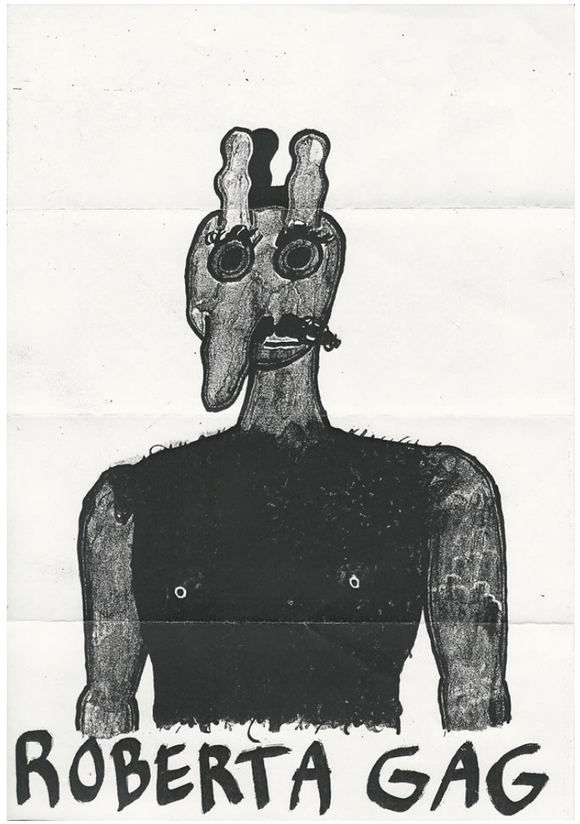
Last Self-Portrait

A self-portrait presented to Crackerjack Kid by Ray Johnson for the April-May 1994 exhibition of "Artists' Stamps InternationalMail Art Exhibition," AVA Gallery, Lebanon, NH

A Post Mortem For Ray Johnson

I first met Ray Johnson when he invited me to rendezvous at his 1984 retrospective exhibition at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art in Roslyn Harbor, New York. Since 1980 Ray and I exchanged numerous items, but one of my favorites was Ray's webbed underwear sent to be pulverized for my material metamorphosis mail art project. His last phone calls to me were about my kids, his "nothings," dead frogs on his lawn, a happy birthday wish, a notification of the death of Jean Brown, support for my edition *Eternal Network*, stories about A.M. Fine, and answers to my questions about Ray and Fluxus; Ray claimed to have "nothing to do with it — I'm the New York Correspondence School, Cracker," My last piece of correspondence from Ray was a letter addressed to my four year old daughter Lauryn, "To Lyndy c/o Crackerjack Pop." I'll miss Ray's friendship, his quirky mail, his quick wit, and his corresponDANCE calls, but as I see it, mail artists never die, they return to senders. Goodbye Ray, and thanks for sending your last self-portrait!

—Chuck Welch a.k.a. Crackerjack Kid



The Artist As Networker

Distance between mail art and electronic art is sometimes more imagined than real. The notion that mail artists are hostile to high technology is one common misconception. Experimentation with mass-media technology hastened the evolution of mail art long before the advent of telecommunications technology. Mail artists experimented with electrostatic (copier art) technology in the 1960s, and in the late 1980s embraced the technology of telefacsimile.

Throughout the 1980s mail artists matured into networkers who reached for an inter-cultural transformation of information.

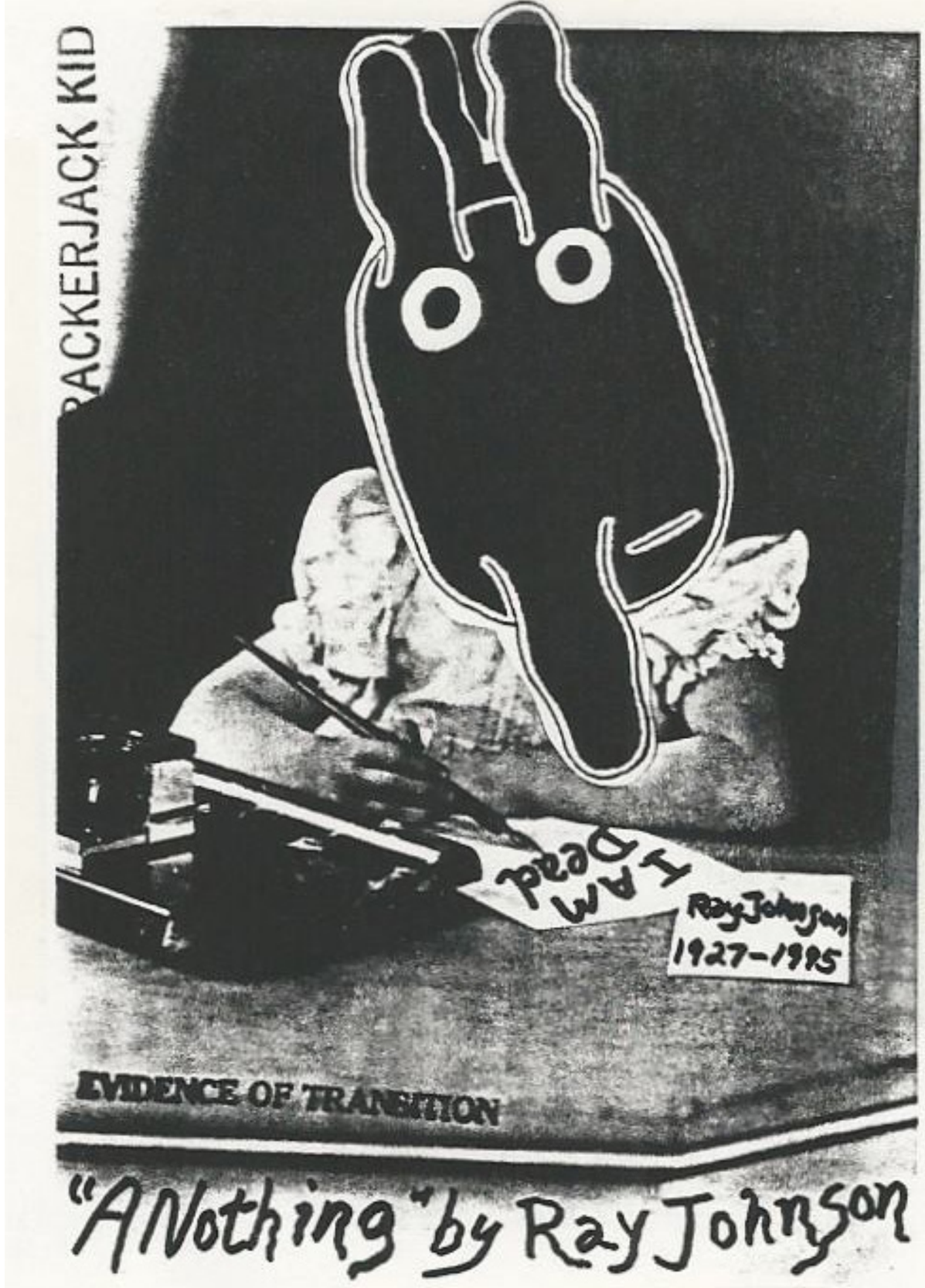
Mail art networkers experience the form and content of the information age. They dare to apply values that will nurture a larger global society. It comes as no surprise that pioneering telecommunication artists like Judy Malloy, Carl Eugene Loeffler, Anna Couey, George Brett, and Fred Truck were all active mail artists during the early 1970s before they moved towards telecommunications art. Time has obscured the fact that many idealistic, democratic values of early mail art were carried forth in the development of today›s online telecommunications community.

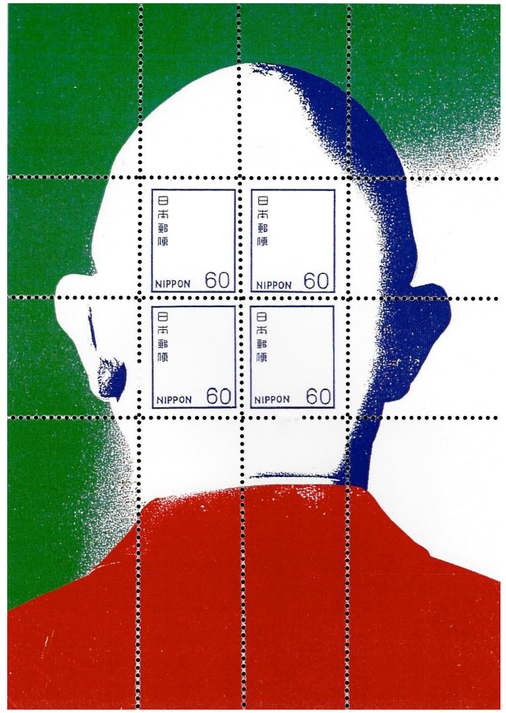
Networkers use both telecommunications and mail art as tools rather than boundaries. These intermedia networkers embrace immediate, direct concepts of exchange that sometimes lead to real-time, face-to-face conferences. Networkers are equally comfortable using the postal mailstream to meet vicariously as “tourists.” The hallmark of both mail and telecommunications art resides in attitudes of creative freedom, collaboration, the abolition of copyrights, and independence outside mainstream art systems. Telenetlink is a forum created to celebrate this interactive spirit between mail art and telecommunications artists.

Evolution of the Telenetlink Project

The international Telenetlink evolved in June 1991 as an interactive part of Reflux Network Project, an artists' telecommunication system created by Brazilian artist Dr. Artur Matuck. Reflux Network Project was an ambitious, progressive experiment that interconnected 24 on-site nodes located in university art departments, art research sites, and private internet addresses. Through Reflux, the Networker Telenetlink became mail art's first active online connection with the world of internet.

Telenetlink became an active component of mail art's Decentralized World-Wide Networker Congresses, 1992 (NC92). Throughout 1992 the Telenetlink Project functioned as the only continuously active online mail art resource in which the role of the networker was actively discussed. An international community of mail art and "internet-workers" were introduced to each other before and during the NC92 Telenetlink. Telenetlink's emailart addresses were first actively exchanged in an international scale by Reed Altemus (Cumberland, Maine) in collaboration with Crackerjack Kid (Chuck Welch). This list has grown exponentially through mail art magazine email lists from Ashley Parker Owen's Global Mail, (now online with her CompuServe address), Mark Corroto's Face and by Telenetlink's continued emailart connections to internet; ArtCom, Post Modern Culture Electronic Journal, and numerous other online sources.





Some mail artists claim that the 250 sessions of Networker Congresses in 1992 were carbon copies of the smaller 1986 Mail Art Congresses. But NC92 differed from the 1986 Mail Art Congresses in a major context. Participants in the 1992 Networker Congresses were challenged to interact with other marginal networks parallel to mail art; to build, expand, introduce, alert, and interconnect underground network cultures. These objectives were underscored when the Networker Telenetlink bridged the telecommunications art community and the mail art culture. I chose internet as the focal point for understanding the role of the networker. Why internet? Because it is the world's largest information superhighway that is moving art towards new communication concepts.

The Mail Art-Internet Link

Internet is a parallel world to mail art, but Telenetlink envisioned mail art as emailart; an effective global tool for electronically altering art images, building network interaction, assembling large numbers of people for online conferences and creative workshops. Already, internet is a moving, virtual world of over 20 million people networking from an estimated 1.7 million computers in over 135 nations including the former Soviet Union. Internet was paid for and created in 1972 by the U.S. Defense Department's ARPAnet, built to survive a Soviet missle attack on the U.S. Today nobody (yet!) governs internet save its individual member networks. Anybody from senior citizens to average working people can play "keypal" with the establishment or underground network cultures.