



The Cobble Poley Gallery at Moore College is showing the work of Ray Johnson, probably the most famous unknown artist alive today. As the patriarch of mail art emanating from the New York Correspondence School (his invention), he is a hero to thousands. His signature bunny head has appeared in homage to him in works by many other artists. Yet he seldom permits an exhibition of his iconoclastic cartoonish poetic collages and mail art mis-

uses. Art is Ray Johnson's life in a way that few people can claim. Aside from various media confusions (his death was announced a couple of years ago and in 1973 he was listed — erroneously — in a dictionary of Afro-American Artists), he constantly uses art as a personal Duchampian form of communication in appropriated print images, drawing and words. Mail art is the most subversive form of art in the world today. It bypasses the art systems of buying and selling and judging art. Mail art exhibitions always show all the art that is submitted.

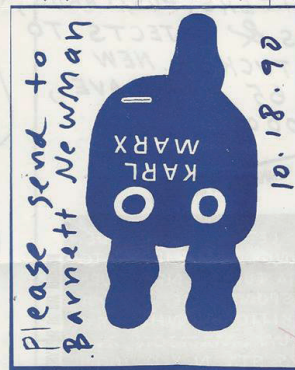
Johnson's personal practice of mail art does not bypass self-promotion. A lot of his mail is directed to famous, influential people. A favorite play is to mail something to one person with instructions to forward it to someone else. On the other hand, Johnson's mail art, is brutally satirical. Some people must hate it. Johnson is related to the pop artists who find their identities in exposing our cultural feet of clay: mocking our heroes (James Dean and Elvis) and our susceptibility to advertising. He is of the macho branch of that school, exhibiting a many interest in phallic-looking objects (his bunny head signature, for one), a disdain for effete sorts of things, and a commitment to searing in print.

That might get old if he weren't so endlessly inventive. He understands everything (so it actually seems) about art in the 20th century. Somewhere, in his prolific output you will find a parody, or a reference, or a borrowing from every important artist that you have ever heard of. Many of his art-historical works are from his *Book About Modern Art*, a mail art project. His use of pop art, minimalist, and serial images is so on target that it is educational — even at its most savage.

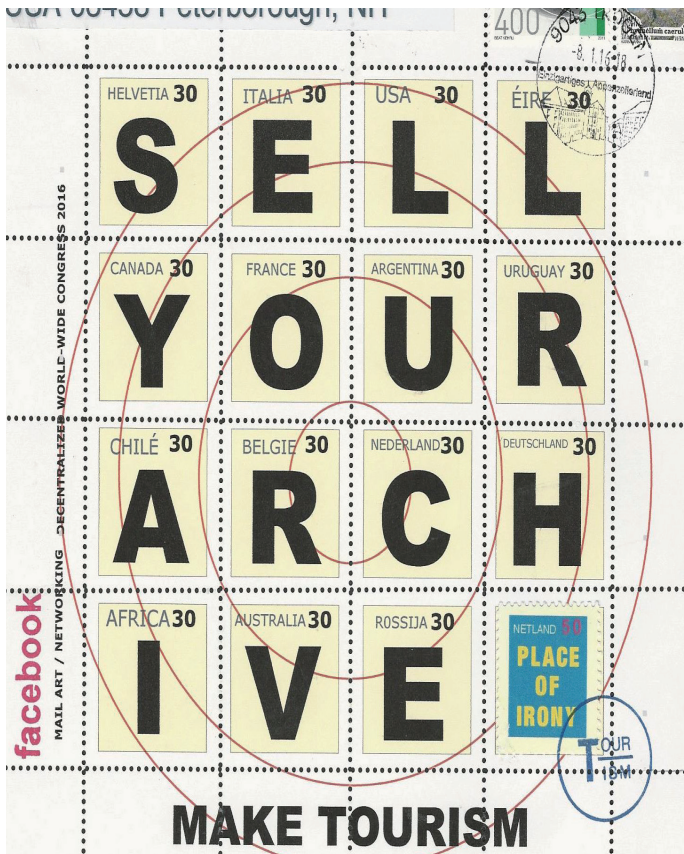
His rubber stamp *Col. Age by Sherrie Levine*, which appeared on many mailed items, effectively turns the work of Levine, whose schtick is to make perfect copies of famous art "masterpieces," back upon itself. What does it mean when an original piece of art — though it perhaps employs a photocopy — is stamped with a false signature of a professional forger?

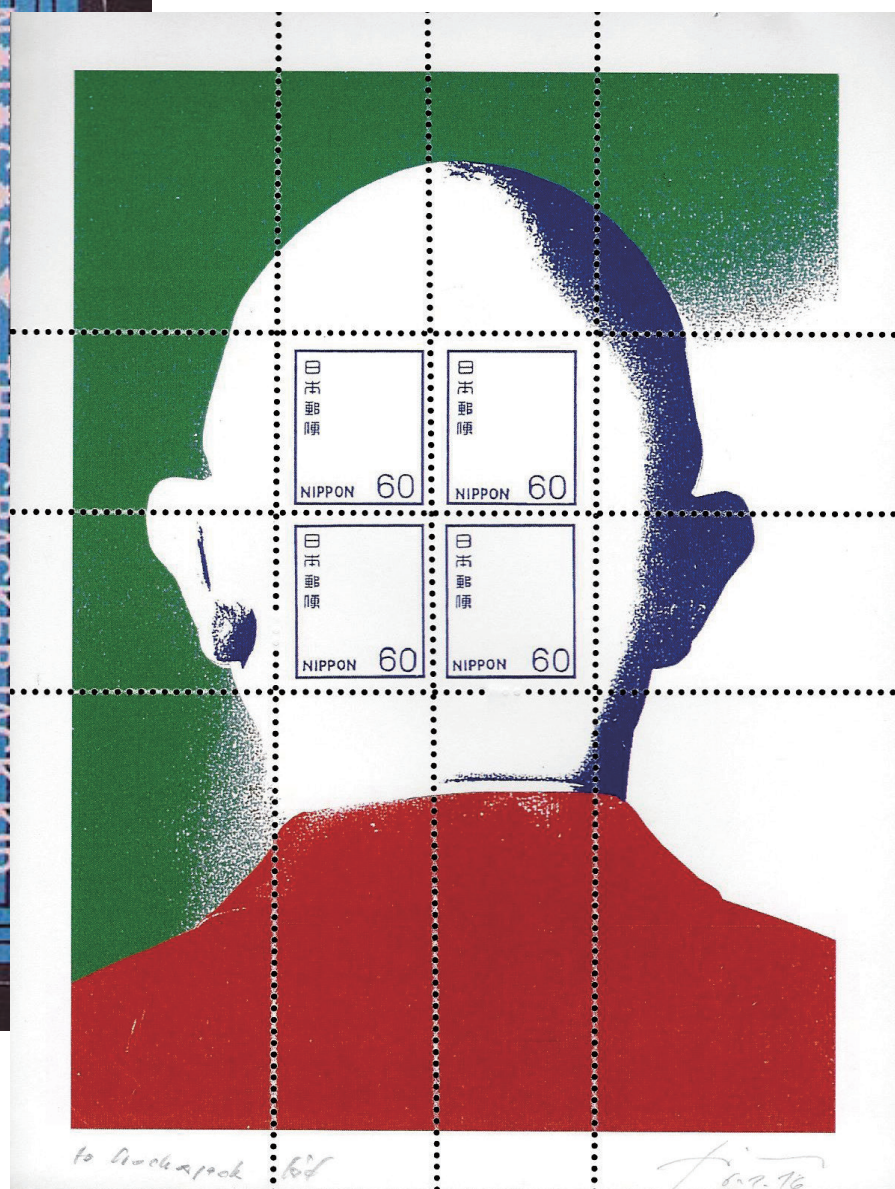
Johnson's own signature cartoon bunny face (and to a lesser extent his valentine-lipped female face) are serial objects evolving throughout his oeuvre. He takes the bunny apart — even draws diagrams telling how to draw it — and puts it together. Few serial objects have had the career of this little face. It's beginning to challenge Albert's *Homage to the Square* as a long-term subject.

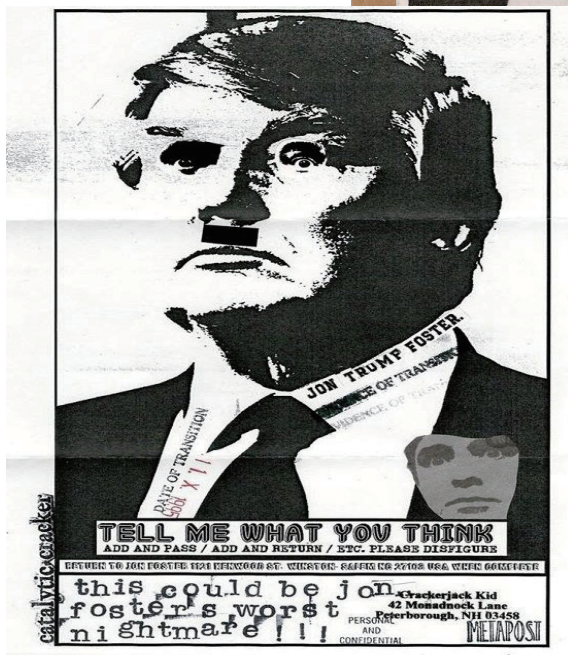
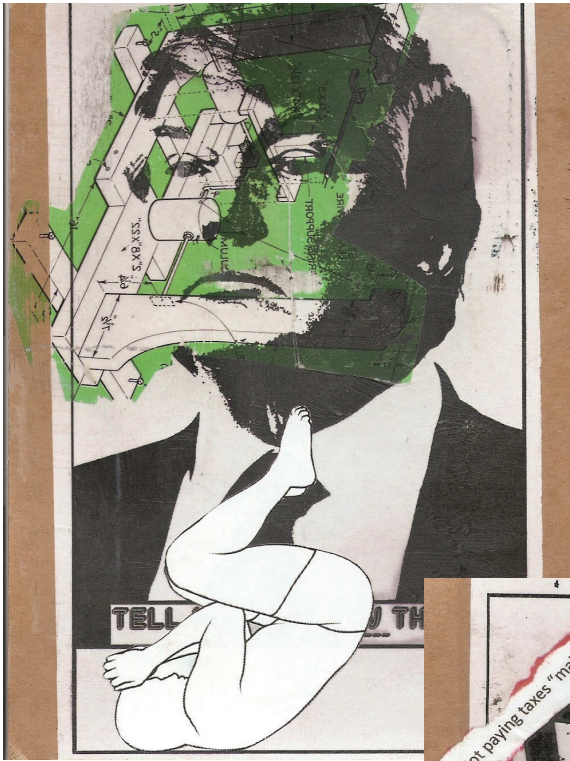
This show is ultimately indescribable. The closest parallel I can come up with is the novel *Tristram Shandy*. Like that book, the show is utterly personal, wildly funny, and opens lots of unexpected doors — many of which are funhouse mirrors, many of which are enlightening.

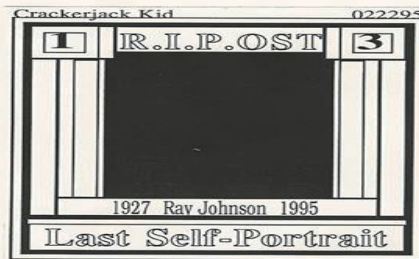


RAY JOHNSON, KARL MARX, CORRESPONDENCE SENT TO CELLE PHILLIPS, THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART LIBRARY, NEW YORK, OCT. 18, 1970









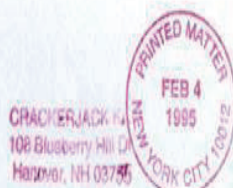
A self-portrait presented to Crackerjack Kid by Ray Johnson for the April-May 1994 exhibition of "Artists' Stamps International Mail Art Exhibition," AVA Gallery, Lebanon, NH

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

Mail Art STORIES Mail Art STORIES Mail Art STORIES Mail Art STORIES



Eternal Network
A Mail Art Anthology
Book Launch
Edited by Chuck Welch



Mail Art Statement - Crackerjack Kid/Chuck Welch

I META-NETWORKER IN SPIRIT
CRACKERJACK KID

My first exposure to mail art was April 8, 1973 at the historic "Omaha Flow Systems," in Omaha, Nebraska. Curated by Ken Friedman, "Omaha Flow Systems" was the direct forerunner of today's standard mail art shows. I have become an active participant in mail art since 1978 when I chose the pseudonym Crackerjack Kid. My reasons for entering mail art were primarily to escape geographic and cultural isolation, to find a global community, to collaborate with others, and to explore new "outsider" forms of expression.

Mail Art crosses borders between individuals, nations and cultures and transforms my mailbox into a central grounding space for the merging of art and life. And how do I view mail art today? At its best mail art is open, honest, democratic and collaborative. At its worst mail art is selfish, petty, factionalistic and clubish. Historically, mail art has traveled an intermedia course that diminished distances between communication forms as divergent and different as copier machines and telecommunications. As the international post declines will mail art too? I think not! The spirit of mail art is already transforming as the ethereal, eternal network in cyberspace-what I've termed in my neologism "emailart". Long live the eternal network!

Mail Art STORIES Mail Art STORIES Mail Art STORIES Mail Art STORIES