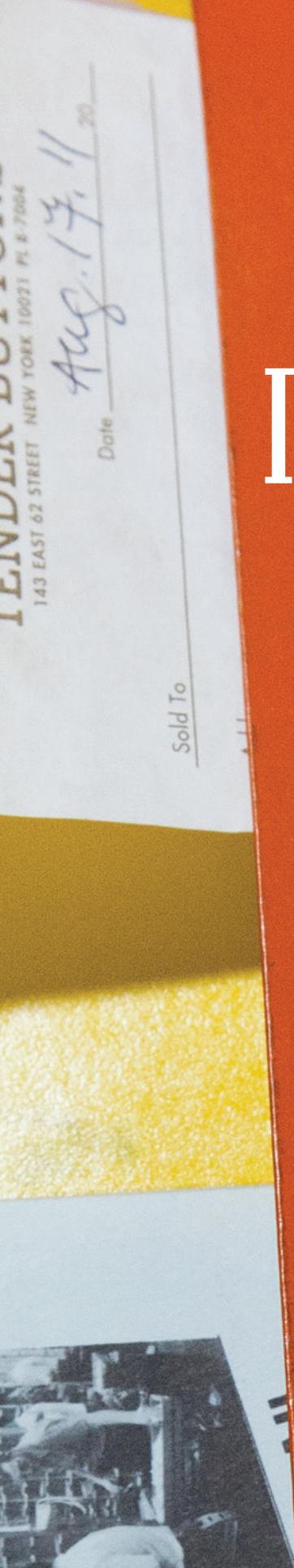


DESIGN FEATURE

BOB WARNER

Courting Ray Johnson



TO and FRO

An Interview with Robert Warner
By Miriam Kienle

I first met the artist, **Robert (“Bob”) Warner**, two years ago at small nonprofit gallery in New York. He was unpacking thirteen boxes that the renowned “mail artist” Ray Johnson gave him in 1988. Johnson, who spent his career connecting correspondents with and through collaged mailings (ultimately establishing a network of mail artists frequently referred to as the “New York Correspondance [sic] School” or NYCs), was known for bestowing special boxes upon particularly good pen pals such as Warner. Each box given to Bob was numbered and labeled “BOB BOX,” as they contained various ephemera that the now deceased Johnson had collected for him. Although Bob had these boxes for many years and occasionally sifted through them, this performance / exhibition was the first time that he had systematically catalogued their contents, rubberstamping each item with a box number and writing a description in a ledger. Inside the boxes was a curious assembling of objects that ranged from collages, photocopies, and magazines, to a colorful collection of men’s ties and a pile of worn plastic beach toys. Passing these items around, Bob animated the typically mundane process of cataloguing by allowing the objects to prompt thoughts or stories, either his own or those of interested gallery-goers. As we arranged the items on the table and conversed about them, correspondences between the items and among the participants emerged. The event—a kind of assemblage of people and things—seemed to many of us like a Ray Johnson “nothing” or “anti-happening.”

After the BOB BOX event, Bob asked me for my address and the nothing continued. I began exchanging mail and email with him, which initially was about Ray Johnson (on whom I am writing a dissertation), but soon expanded to include a whole host of peculiarities and coincidental correspondences. The following interview emerged from our email exchanges and was done in conjunction with our exhibition entitled, *Return to Sender: Ray Johnson, Robert Warner, and the New York Correspondance School* which will be on view at the Krannert Art Museum from August 28 – December 29, 2013.

MK How and why did you start making mail art?

RW In 1984 I was living in Oakland California...I met Joseph Lembo in San Francisco...he was returning from

Japan on his way to his home in Manhattan. I asked for his address to stay in touch with him. I sent mail to him as a means of courtship. It was my way to stay connected to another artist...we sent back and forth for months until I finally moved to Manhattan to be with him.... He was the business partner of Laura Bohn...who introduced me to Ray Johnson...through a postcard that he sent to Laura...(wife of Jim Bohn, of the Baby Spam club by Ray Johnson)

MK Could you describe a bit about your first correspondences with Ray Johnson? What did you send him? What did he send you?

RW I sent him a paper painter’s palette...it had an oval thumb hole...I rubberstamped cow heads on it...a repeat pattern...very pop in spirit...I was living in a loft in the West Village...on 13th Street...Ray sent me an early photograph from Black Mountain College...a Hazel Larson photograph of Ray drawing on a sheet of paper...a Xerox copy...standard 8½ × 11...

MK Interesting, so you sent him a paper palette and he sent you a paper portrait of himself drawing on a sheet of paper. Where did your correspondence go from there?

RW We continued the theme of ovals for quite some time...most memorable an Oval Teen...a nude teenager with the numbers 13,14,15,16,17,18,19 penned in the margin. And lots of phone conversations about the paper palettes and how to get more for a project Ray was planning.

He sent me a letter asking me to phone him...and I did and we conversed by phone daily, both at my home on 13th Street as well as my work place, Morgenthal-Frederics Opticians at 62nd Street on Madison Avenue...also, we would converse by phone when *Entertainment Tonight* was on... Mary Hart and John Tesh collages and comments...both verbal and collaged correspondence.

MK It all sounds so elliptical! Could you say a little more about your daily phone conversations?

RW Each day at my work place Ray would call. Sometimes it would involve a gallery that was showing his work... the Schlessenger Gallery was showing his James Cagney snake on the nose portrait...he would ask me to go there and view the work and then report back with the question of placement and price...That is how I met Steve Schlessinger and his wife Vera...I eventually had a show there of Unmailed Ray Johnson...and a conversation with Norman Solomon...of a collage titled *Norman Solomon’s Beautiful Shoes*...or another phone conversation was that Hacker Art

Books had a copy of Johnson's exhibition catalogue, *Famous People's Mother Potato Mashers*...he said that they would hold it for me and could I go to pick it up...the store was on 57th Street near my work place...I enjoyed the process of being an Art Spy for Ray Johnson.

MK Did you have a sense of why Johnson was sending you rather than going himself...why he wanted to operate in this remote way through a spy?

RW I was in an ideal location to the galleries and museums on the upper East Side of Manhattan...Ray was living in Locust Valley in Long Island...so it was about my location and timing to execute these tasks...I was an optician for Frances Beatty at Feigen Gallery, as well as the women who owned Tender Buttons, Diana and Malka...and to Horst P. Horst...so Johnson's friends in the New York world of art and fashion were all there at my fingertips...at one point Ray was calling two and three times a day and the owner of the shop where I worked asked that he not call so often...and so he would use the name Mr. Sassoon when he called, but the receptionist knew his voice and was aware that he continued...

Once, Ray asked me to deliver a copy of the Declaration of Independence to John Cage...he was living in a loft on 6th Avenue...when I delivered it to him...Mr. Cage. said, "I knew that you were coming. Ray telephoned me." So much of the tasks involved a third person who knew of the exchange...for example he sent me to David Bourdon [the art critic] to view the Corrine collages...Marilyn Monroe chorus girl torsos....

MK And did Bourdon show them to you?

RW Yes, I was invited to view them in his apartment on 23rd Street...he lined them up in his living room...there were three Marilyn Monroe collages, as I remember it.

David Bourdon also came to interview me after Ray's death for a magazine memorial piece...maybe it was *Art in America*?

MK Yes, I remember that *Art in America* article...it was a kind of "in memoriam" called "Cosmic Ray."

I am actually at the Museum of Modern Art today doing research in the David Bourdon Papers. I noticed that there were quite a few of your mail art pieces in his files. Is this usual? I mean, would Johnson put you in touch with someone for a particular reason and then you'd strike up an extended correspondence?

RW Ray Johnson connected me initially and then I would stay connected sometimes for years...

So yes I did correspond with a variety of connections through Ray. It was a pleasant surprise to hear from you today that David Bourdon kept the correspondence that I sent to him...thanks...and talk about synchronicity....

MK Yes, I think that Ray's mailings, as well as those of Ray's correspondents, were very important to Bourdon. He seems to have kept the vast majority of them. By chance, did he send you things in return? Was he (or someone else in the network) a particularly good correspondent?

RW I do not recall receiving mail from David B...The best and most responsive of correspondents was and is Rick Yamasaki, of Nyack.

MK Who is Rick Yamasaki in Nyack?

RW A friend of the New York Correspondence School... Ray suggested that I should send Bob Art to him back in the late 1980s. I did and now continue to send and receive.

MK Bob, I was wondering today, did you ever go to one of Johnson's "Nothing" performances or attend one of his meetings of the New York Correspondence School?

RW I was included in a list of a meeting at Tides Motel...in 1994...as far as I know it was a fake event...if I remember correctly it listed Candice Bergen and Macaulay Culkin among others who would be in attendance...and it was listed as a slumber party...with an image of young boys on a bed having a pillow fight...

Once, he did drive me in his Volkswagen to Utopia Parkway to the home of [the artist] Joseph Cornell...who was long dead at that time...1992...and we walked around the corner to the grocery store...and he sent a photograph of a dead possum in front of the store the following week...

...oh ME, Happy Saint Valentine's Fingernails Day to You! – Baby Thumb, Son of Tom

MK Ray Johnson did always say that his guilty pleasure was making fake collages by Joseph Cornell. But the part with the dead possum is very strange. Did you have a sense of why he sent it to you?

...Happy Valentines Toenails to you too! Hope you have a great one, Baby Thumb of Major Tom.

ps – I loved our Brooklyn Bridge walk on Tuesday...the orange box full of collages and your swinging potato masher sculpture were exquisite.

RW I also enjoy my *Collage by Kurt Schwitters* series that I sent to Ray...

I think he sent the photograph of the dead possum because of his visit following our visit together...the

odd occurrence of the grocery store sighting...curious...to consider.

ps – What is the name of your aunt who has a collection of potato mashers?

MK So it was a kind of a curious way to mark that the moment had passed...

ps – Anne Wright Wilson is her name. Would you like her address?

RW Thanks...I am boiling four potatoes now and will mash shortly...I am on Long Island today...in Port Washington.

MK What's in Port Washington?

RW A house that belongs to my friend Marcia and Wendy of the Tinsie Trading Co. and a cat named Rufus... and I am here house and cat sitting while they, Marcia and Wendy, are in California at a trade show...so I have mashed and eaten the potato event...it also contains carrots, garlic, butter and cream...so happy to have the BB masher with me on this event...now I have returned it to the box from where it was swinging...

MK It's funny, when I was mashing potatoes last night at my friend's place, I was thinking that her potato masher looked similar to the BB masher that you carried over the Brooklyn Bridge like a lantern...I served the potatoes with chicken, beet greens, beets, and oranges...

ps – I love the name Rufus for a cat!

RW Did you know Ray Johnson had two cats named Pansy and Petunia? I told Muffet Jones this tidbit of information...she said she was unaware of the two cats...

ps – Let's use this exchange in the *Ninth Letter* Interview...it's so chatty and engaging.

MK I didn't know about his two cats, but I did know that he was a cat person. There are loads of photos of him with cats. And in his high school newspaper, another student calls him "cattily" inclined because he had drawn twenty cats and hung them all over the art room. Wouldn't it have been great all those cats?!

RW Oh yes it would be splendid to see the cats in the art room...perhaps Pansy and Petunia were in that collection of cats?

MK Perhaps. I also wonder if the cats were possibly precursors to Johnson's famous bunnies. Did he send you many bunnies?

RW Multitudes of bunny heads...it was not until after his death that I was shown the Robert Warner bunny head,

it was in the shape of an oval, a re-occurring shape in our back and forth sending and receiving...it was sent to me by Muffet Jones in 1995.

MK I am in the process of mashing our correspondence into an interview collage by Ray Johnson, but before we conclude, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the thirteen boxes that Ray Johnson gave you in the late eighties. Did he specify what you should do with them?

RW Ray told me to hold on to them and he would instruct me as to how to disperse the objects...some of the objects were given to him by other members of NYCS, and with those objects he asked that I not tell them that I had possession of them...

MK How did he instruct you as to how to disperse them? And did any of the New York Correspondence School members find out that their objects were in the boxes?

RW Bob Box 14 and 15 were delivered to the artist Nikki Carson at his studio...as far as I know the other members were unaware of the contents of the Boxes.

MK Any sense of why those two boxes needed to go to Nikki? And did Ray leave any instructions about what to do with the other thirteen?

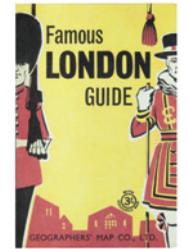
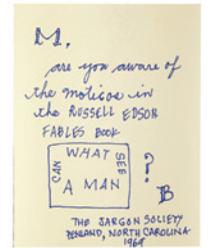
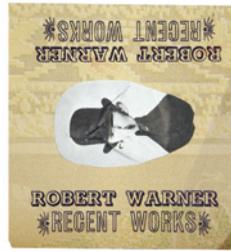
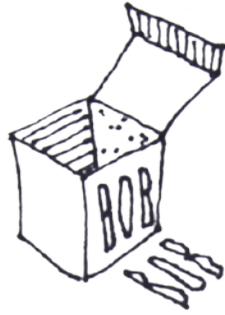
RW Bob Box 14 and 15 for Nikki Carson were filled with toilet paper tubes, emptied of their paper and each one was dated...Nikki Carson's claim to fame in the art world was painting portraits using a paint brush stuck up his ass. He asked me if I wanted to view his opening of the boxes and I agreed to be present when he opened them...it was quite astonishing to see that many toilet paper tubes all hand dated...

MK That is astonishing! In terms of the thirteen Bob Boxes you will be opening at the Krannert Art Museum, are there any items that you find particularly interesting or confounding?

RW The collection of ties are confounding...many lids from coffee jars seems excessive...the three leg/sock forms amusing....box of fish hooks and lures are engaging...more will come to mind eventually....

MK Through the process of unpacking these items have you had any realizations about the boxes? And do you feel that he is still instructing you as to how to disperse them?

RW It is such a wide ranging variety of objects that seems to display differently with each venue...I think at this point the mystery remains as to where to place them...that is the beauty of the process...it is a puzzle. **A**



Ray Johnson
UNMAILED
11.23.96 - 12.21.96



