

ART

Conceptual Art, in the Days Before E-Mail

By PHYLLIS BRAFF

EAST HAMPTON

RAY JOHNSON (1927-95) seemed to be into something new during the many years he was sending what is called mail art and staging his "Nothings," usually a one- or two-hour display of his works on paper presented in off-beat locations that were an easy drive from his home in Locust Valley.

Initially it was tempting to regard the work as inventive, idiosyncratic contributions to Pop art because the pieces used lettering, cartoon-like motifs and commonplace found imagery. Links to performance art were mentioned too.

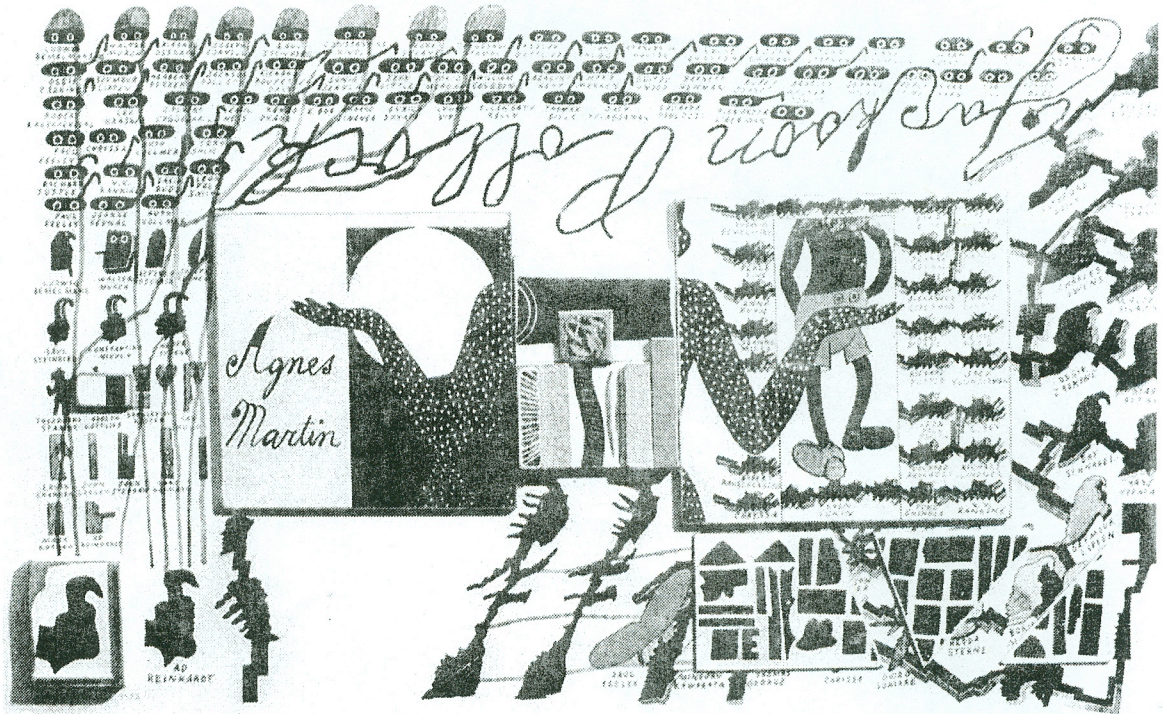
Now it seems more appropriate to consider Johnson a pioneering Conceptual artist who explored ideas involving language, communication and audience participation.

"Dear Jackson Pollock, Collages and Objects by Ray Johnson," at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center here, is a concise, effective exhibition of Johnson pieces that contain references to Pollock. It calls attention to how Johnson could weave strong, iconic personalities into his complex, message-filled graphics.

Organized for the Pollock-Krasner House by a guest curator, Edvard Lieber, the show takes its title from lettering on a collage Johnson mailed to Mr. Lieber. A specific thematic focus like this serves Johnson's art well, for it tends to make his complex manipulations of linguistics and visual symbols more accessible. The great range offered in the gallery and museum exhibitions of Johnson's work since his death has been exhaustively rich, though welcome.

Although Johnson preferred word-game opaqueness to obvious interpretation, his attitudes toward the art world and its celebrities are inevitably part of these Pollock-oriented selections. In one example, bearing the lettering "Please send to Jackson Pollock," Johnson placed a built-up collage of abstract motifs above a cut-out illustration of an old car similar to the one Pollock owned. Johnson seems to be implying that abstraction is also past, and that he is the younger explorer of new alternatives for art.

In a second example of this idea, the "Dear Jackson Pollock" piece, a simulation of a red paint drip passes



Ray Johnson's "Agnes Martin," above, and an untitled collage are on display at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center.

through a cut-away in the paper and leads down to an irregular black form labeled "thrown away black marks" and placed in a bottom corner.

Decoding Johnson's play on words, images and connections frequently involves discovering hidden messages and even being alert to the auditory associations that he translated into corresponding graphic signs. Treating the sound relationship between the words ice and eyes, for example, one untitled work turns ice cubes into eye sockets.

Often both physical surfaces and cognitive references are densely layered. Two high-impact works, "Jackson Pollock Artforum" and "Agnes Martin," have dozens of symbols animating the composition, including silhouette shapes that appear to be taken from Pollock's painting, "Blue Poles."

Johnson's pieces reflecting his career-long obsession with death become hauntingly profound, even unnerving, in the setting of Pollock's home. "Minute Jack," a mixed-media object fashioned as an hour-glass,



uses Pollock's fatal automobile crash on the nearby road as its subject and includes the initials of the car's three occupants and a suggestion of dripping blood.

Jarring resonances aside, the building's modest scale gives these detailed works an ambiance well-suited to the intimate, personal com-

munications the artist intended. ■

"Dear Jackson Pollock, Collages and Objects by Ray Johnson" is at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, 830 Fireplace Road, East Hampton, through Aug. 3. Information: www.pkhouse.org or (631) 324-4929.