

What Happened? Nothing

By GRACE GLUECK

THE Willard Gallery on East 72d Street is having a retrospective (OK—call it an introspective) of works by Ray Johnson, who may well be New York's most famous unknown artist. Though Johnson's collages have for years been creeping into first-rate collections, he's never before had a gallery show. His previous exhibitions have been fairly impromptu—on sidewalks, in Grand Central Station and down on Peck Slip.

"I've never really believed in the gallery thing," said Johnson, a baby-bald young man in a leather motorcycle jacket. "But at the same time I've been dying for a show. Ambivalence, you see. Occasionally I visit collectors with a box of collages wrapped in newspaper under my arm, like a Fuller Brush man. That pleases me. I've showed them on Mies Van Der Rohe tables all over town."

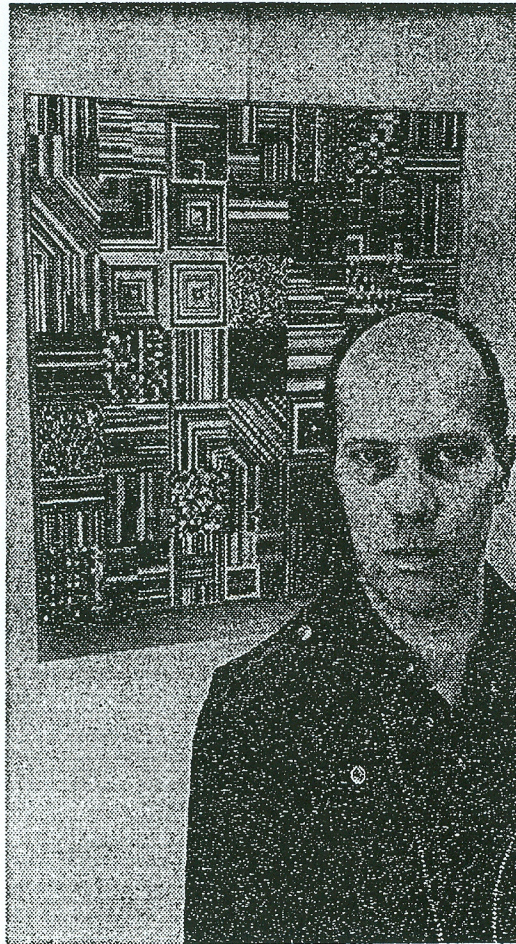
Epistolist

Johnson has also won underground fame for his Nothings, a type of cool un-Happening which he invented. His most eventful Nothing, a ½-minute affair, came about when he dumped two boxes of wooden dowels down a stairwell, just out of earshot of an invited audience. "It sounded to me like a waterfall, or coal going down a chute," he recalls. What else Happened? "Nothing."

But Johnson is probably best known for his epistolomania, an obsession that grips him anywhere from 8 to 10 hours a day. He is founding director of the New York Correspondence School of Art, composed of several hundred friends across the country with whom he is in constant pen-and-ink communion. Recipients of his letters, poems, cartoons, collages, announcements of spurious art shows and other Johnsonia tend to hoard them as collectors' items. Johnson, in turn, treasures what they send back.

"I study cancellations, the manner in which the stamp is placed, the way the address is done. Then I classify and file the contents. It's a marvelous art form, the letter—full of wonder and surprise."

To preserve his creative isolation, Johnson lives in "voluntary poverty" on the Lower East Side. "My apartment is absolutely bare—a table, a bed, a chair, a typewriter, a coffee pot. I can't stand works of art—they



Richard Saunders—Scope
Ray Johnson and early work
Ambivalence, you see

have too many associations. Living this way, I can do what I want—which is, to write letters."

PEEL

From London comes word that the staid Royal Academy of Arts, founded in 1768 and as predictably sedate as the British monarchy, is attempting a startling change of spots. In a desperate attempt to boost flagging attendance figures (and raise hard cash) the academy has decided shamelessly to woo modern art.

In fact, reports The London Sunday Times, things have already gone so far that at the forthcoming Summer Exhibition (a show that has tended to keep avant-gardists away in droves) pop king Peter Blake will show not one but three works, along with a major painting by Sandra Blow, a leading British abstractionist. The academy will also allow this year, for the first time, the works of important artists to hang together instead of separately

next to amateur daubers. And its president, Sir Humphrey Brooke, is attempting to break down the long opposition of important London dealers, who have traditionally kept their artists out of Academy shows.

It is no secret in London that the Academy has been in some financial straits. Most of its big recent exhibitions, with the exception of last year's Goya show, have been flops. Only 47,000 saw the recent exhibition of 18th and 19th century British art lent by the American collector, Paul Mellon, who paid the show's expenses himself. And 2½ years ago, to help make ends meet, the Academy sold its famous Leonardo drawing for over \$2,000,000.

An effect of the Academy's new approach, notes The Times, may be to attract more attention from TV, providing an additional attendance boost. One TV airing of a Dutch art exhibit staged by the Academy, said Sir Humphrey hopefully, had produced the next

day "a whole new class of gallery-goer. There was banana and orange peel all up the main staircase."

FACTS

Last week's rejection of Alexander Calder's crablike stabile, "Guichet," by Park Commissioner Newbold Morris as "too abstract" to adorn a city-owned plaza at Lincoln Center, has highlighted a pair of rather unsurprising facts:

Fact #1: The dearth of "abstract" art on New York City property. Compared with such European municipalities as Vienna, which has no hesitation about commissioning abstract art for park lands and housing projects, New York makes rather a dreary show. In fact, reveals the New York City Art Commission, the only really "abstract" art on municipal grounds is found in, of all places, the public schools. Examples: Exterior murals by Hans Hofmann for the New York School of Printing; an abstract "Flight" sculpture by Gwen Luks on the facade of the High School of Aviation Trades; a series of abstract panels by sculptor Constantine Nivola for the new West Side High School. There is no abstract art at all on New York City park lands.

Fact #2: Many Calder sculptures, of the type rejected by Mr. Morris, are right out on public view in cities throughout the world. Notable examples (excluding private museums, which are often apt to have a Calder in the garden) include one in front of UNESCO headquarters in Paris; another in the main square of Spoleto, Italy, a third before the American Consulate at Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany. And last year, French cultural minister André Malraux dedicated a whopping stabile at the Maison de la Culture in Bourges, France.

COLLAGE

The Detroit Institute of Arts is staging "Art in Italy, 1600-1700," the first comprehensive exhibition of Italian baroque art to be shown in the United States in two decades. . . . London small talk has it that John Pope-Hennessy, curator of sculpture at the Victoria & Albert Museum, may soon replace the retiring Sir Philip Hendy as director of London's National Gallery. . . . "Images of Leonard Baskin," a film produced and directed by Warren Forma, will appear on Channel 13 April 13 at 8 P.M.