

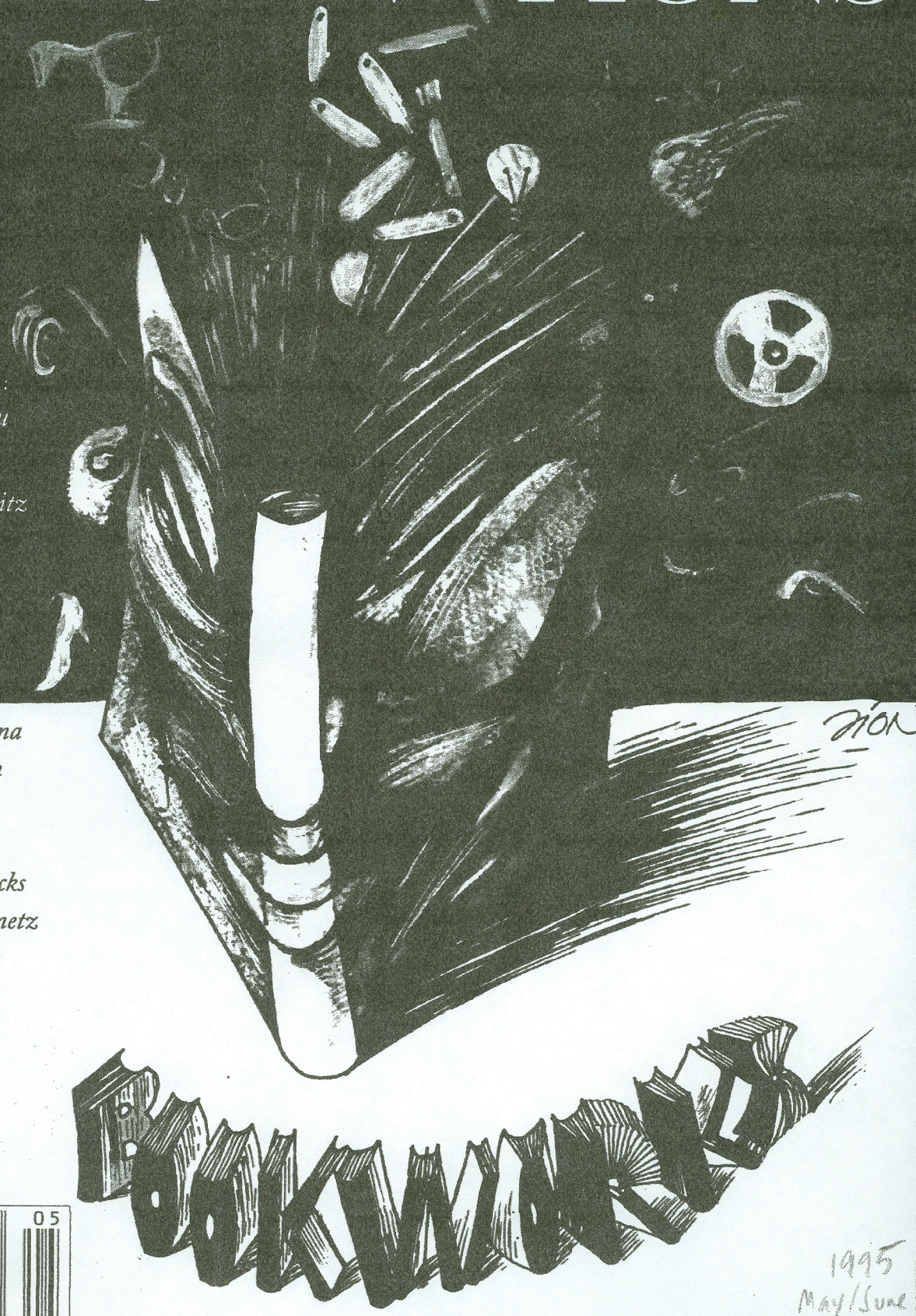
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NEW OBSERVATIONS

GUEST EDITOR:
Valery Oisteanu

Craig Anzelowitz
Ira Cohen
David Ebony
Amy Ernst
John Evans
Albert M. Fine

Kimma Gerlovina
Valeriy Gerlovin
Coco Gordon
Paul Grillo
Geoffrey Hendricks
Richard Kostelanetz
Andrei Oisteanu
Miriam Schaer
Sur Rodney Sur
Ilka Scobie
Gig Wailgum



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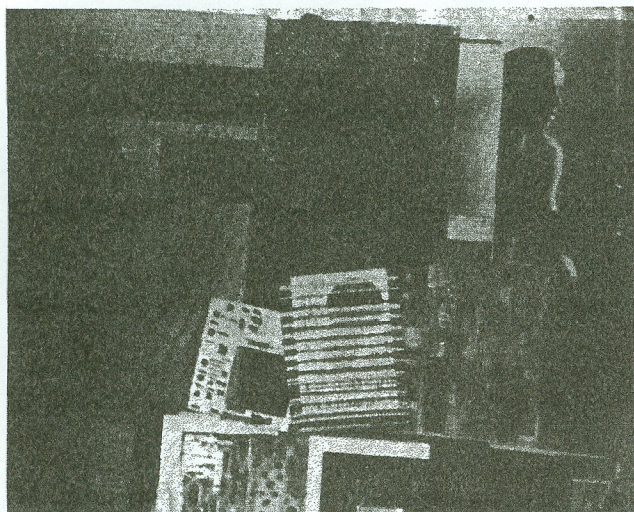
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SONIA DELAUNAY-TERK *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* by Blaise Cendrars, 1913.
Detail. Cabinet des estampes du Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva



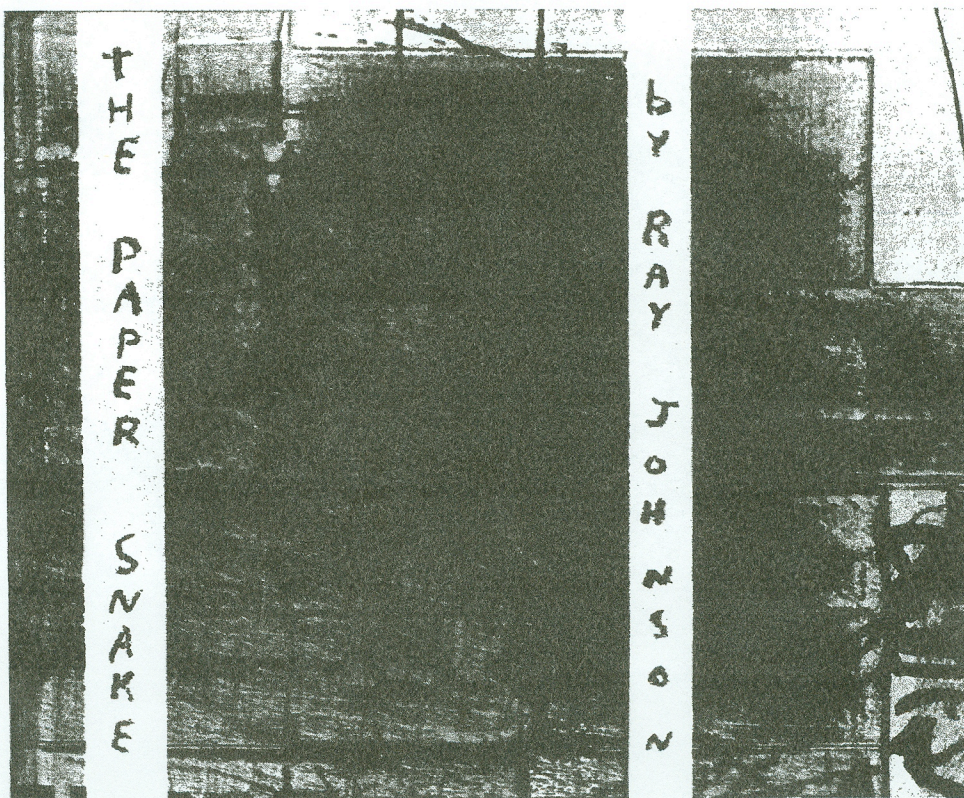
David Ebony

RAY JOHNSON, FROM THE PAPER SNAKE TO SHELLEY DUVALL

In his jacket notes for the seminal artist's book, *The Paper Snake*, produced in 1965 by Ray Johnson, William Wilson states that Johnson's works... "are surely not eternal, but they are moments without time. They are to time as echo is to sound." This collection of mail art, doodles, photos and brief poems can be seen as Ray Johnson's love letter to eternity. The book starts out with a valentine: "a valentine for A and D, BC (written while eating potato salad,)" and ends with a valentine: "a heart is not so far." *The Paper Snake* may also be a love letter to reality (and some of its attendant social constructs) written by one who may have found himself an outsider.

Central to Johnson's work is the proper name. After numerous first names mentioned in *The Paper Snake*, including Valentine, Alison, George, etc., the first full name to appear in the book is Max Ernst. Johnson writes, "Dear Max Ernst, at the Central Park zoo, a sign misidentifies a crow." Here, like a dutiful son, Johnson points out a mislabeled zoo exhibit.

The next full name mentioned in the *Paper Snake* is George Washington. The name of the father of the United States could add a political dimension to the work were it not for its juxtaposition to names of artists Jim Dine and Albert Fine. According to the text, the latter, with typically disruptive bad manners, "threw Judith Malina's shoes in the gutter." In retrospect, the Washington reference stands as a bit of Americana, a kind of homespun sentiment that Johnson did not hesitate to add to his work, even to some works that were otherwise extremely abrasive and outrageous. This down-home, folksy charm that sometimes borders on camp, permeates much of Johnson's art and provides



its strongest link to Pop Art. Unlike much Pop Art, however, Johnson's work is rigorously anti-commercial and anti-consumerism. His enterprise was more conceptual than most of the better-known Pop artists, and some of his most important endeavors, such as the New York Correspondence (or Correspondance) School which questions prevailing notions of authorship, originality and the nature of artistic purity.

In *The Paper Snake* Johnson bemoans his silent and distant relationship with Alan Kaprow, while commending the expressiveness of Doris Day's lyrics. He lists his favorite things, including the word, "Doggonit," with the explanation, "To put on John Cage's marble table," and "projects," one of which is to look at the lines on Dick Higgins' hands. Some following pages of the book seem like transcriptions of Johnson reading Higgins' palms. "Dear Dick Higgins, I am now in my frog legs frogs legs leg period. Ray Johnson. P.S. I have 100 penguins in my bathtub."

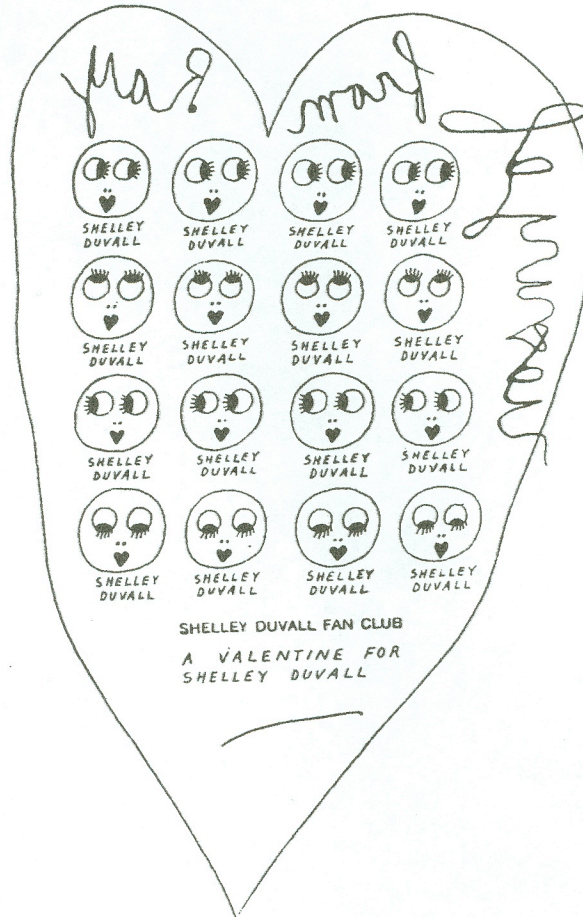
Johnson's mysterious death by drowning this past winter was as startling as it was sad. Johnson seemed to be the last person one could think of to succumb to despondency. But in recent years the loss of so many of his friends to AIDS may have worn down his once exuberant optimism. There is a page in *The Paper Snake*, bearing the date 1/11/62, that now seems ominous and prophetic. It features a warning in all caps: LOVE MAKING CAN KILL YOU. Comments about blood and disinfectants, and another warning, "Don't be a spreader of infection," read like excerpts from an AIDS prevention brochure. Johnson often made artworks using blood and semen, years before today's trendy body artists. A collage the artist sent me in 1978, soon after I returned from a trip to India, is splattered with a reddish-brown liquid, presumably blood. Stamped with a rubber stamp that says "Hepatitis Club," this "blood painting" anticipates the abject or pathetic art that is now so in vogue. (I admit, with guilt, that I held on to this work even though Johnson instructed me to forward it to John Evans.)

Painting was of special concern to Johnson and in *The Paper Snake* he asks, "How many legs does Jackson Pollock have?" Elsewhere, he mentions something to Al Kotin about

a kid ..."who sandpapered your painting." When asked if he was an artist, Johnson usually replied that he was a sandpaperer. He loved to relate the story of the sculptor, Mae Wilson, who in the early '60s received a valuable "dots" painting from the artist Larry Poons. She promptly sanded it, painted it black and used it to cover a patio table. In *The Paper Snake's* "Monuments," (64 word poems for Larry Poons, by Dick Higgins) contains what could be verbal inter-

pretations of the rhythmic dots and lozenge patterns in Poons' paintings. But Johnson obliterated much of it by obsessive typing-over in blue ink. Another description of a painting, in a piece called "Drums" (provocatively printed upside-down), is also obscured, this time by scrawled blue letters that read, "Boom Boom Boom Boom," which mimic the beat of a drum.

The Paper Snake includes what may be a tribute to feminism in a piece called "A Bill for Dick Higgins," in which pronouncements are made such as, "Gertrude Stein is dead," and, "Peggy Lee is virile." Later, we find out that Dick Higgins is Peggy Lee. On the facing page Johnson describes a kind of erotic experience with a Louise Nevelson sculpture. This short piece acts as a segue to some proclamations about art. Johnson says, "I am interested in the art of the greatest simplicity." It is Johnson's own simple, concise drawing



and his off-handed understated visual sense that give *The Paper Snake* its exceptional graphic power. The book predates his bunny and duck heads (which served as portraits). Here silhouettes and smily-faces with protruding tongues predominate. Inside the back cover, beside a strange notice to send 96 cents to Johnson for 8 pages of a book about death, and an advertisement for an 8 man exhibition that includes George Brecht, George Herms and Johnson, is a carefully rendered brick snake for Anne Wilson.

The Paper Snake is the cornerstone of Johnson's early work. One of the first artist's books, it remains a true landmark of post-war American art. It evokes the spirit of its author who was such an inspiration to so many artists, writers and performers — echoes of *The Paper Snake* will be heard for a long time to come.