In both his art and life, Ray Johnson challenged and stretched existing art practices, establishing new methods, new content, and new mediums. Throughout his career, from his shaped moticos of 1953, but most concentratedly from the late seventies on, Johnson chopped, mutilated and sliced his cardboard supports, thereby "challenging rectangles." This small exhibition comprises a selection of works from the Estate of Ray Johnson to present in Basel, June 2008. These eccentrically shaped works represent a significant formal theme for Johnson, and their meaning is explored by William Wilson.

Frances F. L. Beatty

RAY JOHNSON: CHALLENGING RECTANGLES

…sudden rightnesses, wholly

Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,

Beyond which it has no will to rise.

Wallace Stevens "Of Modern Poetry"

Ray Johnson studied in Cass Technical High School in Detroit during World War II. When he registered for the 10th grade, he wrote on his list of courses, "I should have Geometry II instead of Art Comp II." Geometry, which was taught as idealist geometry, had since Plato and Euclid inspired philosophic and religious idealisms. The Euclidian rectangle was an abstract hypothetical thought about an ideal that could only be imagined, and it was used as a model of rationality. Ray was taught formulae for a perfect circle, an immaterial triangle and an ideal rectangle—pure ideals, rational and mysterious, yet never to be realized in this world. Ray learned about the Golden Section, while also learning that the perfect rectangle existed only in the mind of the geometer as an imitation of an immaterial mathematical reality. In geometry, the Ideal claimed the title of the Real.

Thus, the lessons of geometry in practice include relations between an actual rectangle, and an ideal rectangle, which can be understood as

the criterion-idea of the form, but which could never be more than imagined, hypothesized and postulated. The ideal was a standard to which actual homemade rectangles were answerable. Yet, as any boy would have learned studying the history of art, most architects and Modernist artists renounced ideal forms in favor of workable shapes.

Much of Modernist art turns on the difference between a rectangle that aspires to transcendental ideality, and a rectangle that gets constructed, and thus is explained by the specifications for constructing it. An ideal rectangle is aloof and forever recedes as it is approached; a constructed rectangle gets along with and plays well with other shapes and figures. A young artist might leave Euclidian perfections behind in high school, yet never forget that what can be known is different from what can be seen.

In 1944, Cass Technical High School geometry easily slipped toward its origins in sacred and mystical geometry, recalled in abstract figures drawn on the covers of religious tracts. Ray Johnson, at sixteen years of age, had his reasons for entering Christian Science reading rooms, where idealist geometry easily combined with the idealism of the Church of Christ, Scientist. As a Christian Scientist, to a degree yet unknown, Ray would be taught that evil had no real existence. Evil was an error in perception, a failure to adjust vision to see a reality which could be known by the pure of heart and mind, although that spiritual mansion for the soul could not be seen with earthly eyes. Ray was being taught the power in adjustments of vision and the use of reversals to discover and to invent.

The way Euclidian geometric forms existed was a model for the way religious entities and powers, as well as moral and aesthetic values, existed. Thus how to judge a rectangle was a model for how to judge oneself. A religion which denied the existence of evil, and which encouraged the power of the mind to cure and to overcome sickness, seemed to offer methods to cure homosexuality. What happened later, to glance ahead, is that Ray turned away from the idealisms of transcendental monotheistic religions toward the immanences of Buddhisms, where he learned to accept going with the flow of turbulences, among constants like gravity and the speed of light.

During 1944, that year with bodiless geometry, in a rowboat on a lake in a park in Detroit, Ray had made an erotic error with a boy who was his friend. He had broken a rule of friendship, with lasting effects on his attitude toward rules. At the time, to restore the friendship, he mailed his friend a self-portrait inscribed, "what’s say let’s be

buddies?," and indeed, they became buddies again. As Ray reconstructed the friendship, he was teaching himself about construction as bringing forth something for which we have no prior rules, and something for which no transcendental ideal can exist the way an ideal rectangle exists, like a phantom haunting the geometry of 1944. Let Ray's constructivism in restoring a friendship represent the methods of thinking that should be called "constructivist." We may have rules for friendships, including rules against sexual acts. However, we have no rules for restoring a friendship after a mistake, after an accident, or after a failure to understand what a friend could have been thinking. Throughout his life, Ray followed self-set rules in accord with self-set standards.

As a teenager in 1945, Ray lived in oscillation between the absolutes of religion and the construction of experience according to his own specifications. The history of art in the last two centuries—the history of Modernism—should be described in terms of the tensions between two poles, with one pole of philosophic and religious idealisms supporting faith in the unseen and non-sensory, and with the other pole of workable constructivisms which rely on the specifications of credible belief committed to a credible world.

When Ray signed up for Geometry II to fulfill requirements, he also signed up for two hours of freehand drawing. When he was calculating a Euclidian rectangle, or in contrast was sketching a free-hand rectangle, he was contrasting philosophies. He would understand from studying and practicing the concrete operations of freehand drawing—a process of irreversible marks with no abstract standards of perfection—that concrete operations were not reversible like abstract operations. Yet while Ray drifted away from the reversals of abstract thought in mathematics and transcendental religious thinking, he retained an appetite for reversals. Thus he attempted to discover reversals within his experiences in life and to invent reversals within his visual and verbal arts, feeling free and autonomous because no one could give him rules or instructions for when or where to reverse anything. His characteristic move in art was to discover or to invent a reversal within the irreversible flow of events. Reversal was one of his ideas of order in chaos.

Ray's sketches which survive from high school show his commitments to freehand, homemade and handmade rectangles, demonstrating his commitment to the geometry which is immanent in our experiences. When Ray prefers the rectangles that are subject to the accidents of

experience, usually drawn without a ruler, to the ideal rectangles that are imposed on our experiences, he is at the same time preferring the construction of himself according to self-set standards and self-constructed rules. If he had accepted the imposition of Geometry II on himself, then to be consistent, he would have had to accept religious idealist judgments on himself. To save himself from self-condemnations, he had to learn how to teach himself to believe in himself. In that process, he worked at art in order to set in motion toward "life;" he was learning how to understand life as "*the freedom of form within form*," and as "*a stable, open system,"* near where Wallace Stevens staked his claim: "The imperfect is our paradise."

Ray attended The Summer School of Painting at Oxbow, in Saugatuck, Michigan: "Here I am at Saugatuck,/ Without a nickel or a buck." At Saugatuck, he learned about Black Mountain College. At Black Mountain College, Euclidian geometry was taught in sophisticated modern terms by Max Dehn, and it remained a vehicle of Idealism for non-mathematicians. In response, the students at Black Mountain College learned to teach themselves to avoid smooth surfaces, and to eschew smooth talk about art and truth. On the ground in North Carolina, the mountains themselves resisted abstracting the globe of the earth to the ideal sphere of Euclidean geometry. A statement quoted from James Stephens' *The Crock of Gold*, a book widely read at the time, spoke to the mood: "Nothing is perfect. Everything has lumps in it."

The emphasis at Black Mountain College was to come up from mysterious unplumbable depths and to come down from unreachable heights, working toward "sudden rightnesses, wholly/ Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,/ Beyond which it has no will to rise." Movement was toward the surface, not toward idealist aesthetic illusions or immaterial auras. The surface was as much as one was going to know, and for practical purposes, the surface was all that one needed to know. While an ideal rectangle had no surface, actual rectangles had a surface that was not smooth—it was bumpy, lumpy, scratched, or corrugated. Each art at Black Mountain College found a different way not to be smooth, to distress a classical form, to go against the grain, to become rough-grained, with even poems so roughing up an empty page of rectangular paper that the empty space became a specific place. While idealism in art smoothed over the roughness, rough-and-ready constructivisms roughed up the smoothness. A few years after Black Mountain College, Ray, a friend to John Cage, Morton Feldman and Earle Browne, broke his engagement with the silent idealist rectangle, displacing rectangles with moticos,

each of them a law unto itself. In New York, his teachers and friends may have spoken of Marxist praxis and of American pragmatism, but they certainly spoke of Dao, they consulted I Ching, and they read *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics,* the book by R. H. Blyth that outwitted Anglo-American literary criticisms.

Ray moved from religions of transcendence of the material world into religions of immanence. His practice did not ally him with commitments to theory in Pragmatisms or to politics and economics in Marxism, but engaged him in the Dao, where he was learning to swim among the immanent forces of the Cosmos. While Euclidean rectangles had been used for eons to challenge actual imperfect rectangles, Ray Johnson, participating in Buddhism practices, became an artist challenging the very rectangles which challenged him with ideal forms. Those ideal rectangles were models for the ideal forms of masculinity to be imposed like rectangles. Square-jawed heroes and "straights" who were sometimes called "squares," in an analogy between a person and a rectangle, sung in 1957, *West Side Story*: "Officer Krupke,/ You're really a square."

Challenging the idealism in rectangles, while simultaneously abandoning both Christian Science and judgmental psychoanalysis, and accepting himself as he happened to have become, Ray bodied forth his judgment of moral, economic and aesthetic values while working part-time in the mailroom at Orientalia Bookstore. His tasks included wrapping books for mailing, re-using paper and cardboard, but more emancipatingly, unwrapping books from Tibet, China and Japan. The trash basket was an art-supply store for an artist who was mad about paper. The flow of images which came together playfully in the mailroom became a lesson in moving pictures, with an unexpected image arriving at any moment. The rectangle of a book was not astonishing, but it could be the vehicle of astonishments.

For himself, Ray so wanted truth to the moment, he so yearned for commitments to immediacies, that while he allowed rules such as the rules of the rectangle to function in a subsidiary background, he was committed in his foreground to a focal plane of either rulelessness or of improvised provisional rules. By letting go of laws and other people's rules, he arrived beyond the rules, even putting new constructions on language.

Ray Johnson worked with mass-produced rectangular supports as ready-mades. By 1953, he was using the rectangular shirt-boards that

came from the laundry with Richard Lippold's shirts, and he was also beginning to cut the rectangles into the eccentric shapes of the glyphs that he glued onto the cardboard. At first Ray called these non-rectangular collages "moticos," a word which was both singular and plural, like "fish" and "sheep." By 1956, he used the word "moticos" for both a non-rectangular collage, and for a rectangular collage, especially if it had an earlier moticos glued into it. A confusion arises because he called the irregular collages "moticos," but he also called "moticos" any rectangular collages which included irregularly shaped moticos. Thus a single word constructed two senses, one for irregular shapes and the other for regular rectangles which included irregular shapes.

Not every rectangle was a challenge to Ray's developing philosophy—some were familiar, non-assertive, inexpressive and unemphatic. One of his strategies was to acknowledge the rectangle and its rules, but to render it subsidiary by showing how it was overruled. He would draw a rectangle with ink but then allow the ink to run down from the rectangle. Thus the abstract rectangle was challenged by the specific gravity of ink or paint. And thus the cosmos participated in collages by setting the very ink in motion, so that while the rectangular shape might pull toward the timeless ideal, the ink pulled the rectangle down into this momentary world. The drips rendered the collages into responses to the whole universe, of which they became a material part, an object well within the physical world. Such drips are found in nature, and accord with the nature-philosophy of painters who work to become participant-observers who are both outside and within the Cosmos. Here is where Ray Johnson overlaps Jackson Pollock, at least in a letting go of abstract concepts in order to go with the flow of paint and ink as evidence of going with the flow of the Cosmos.

Shaped works of art have often had exposed edges or sides where the canvas was folded around the stretcher. The shapes not only call attention to the stretchers as physical objects no longer completely subordinated to aesthetic illusion, but by exposing the sides of the paintings, shaped canvases also make an increase in the area of surface with no increase in physical mass. The shaped canvas, by breaking the rectangular plane, scratches the surface of illusions, giving it a non-illusory physical surface. A shaped canvas, or a shaped collage, frustrates idealities by making a work of art become one of the things of this world, yet without so many questions of illusion. Any course in geometry sets in motion toward the ideal, while any course in freehand drawing pulls back toward things as they are.

An ideal rectangle has been allied with an ideal of the human male or female fulfilling criteria that have been revealed in epiphanies or other revelations from on high. Those ideals have not been constructed within experience, yet sometimes are imposed upon it in harsh judgments. The ideal rectangles, forever challenging our rectangles, must in a reversal be challenged, at least if we also are to find the courage of our own tenderness. Judging from and interpreting from Ray Johnson's practice, I think that his ultimate implication is that only an art of "sudden rightnesses" can save us now.

William S. Wilson

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