





# The Paper Snake

## Jordan Carter

A visionary of the printed page, nineteenth-century French poet Stéphane Mallarmé famously declared, “Everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book.”<sup>1</sup> Fluxus artist, poet, and Something Else Press founder Dick Higgins espoused this view when he set out to make a book containing a cross section of all the “writings, rubbings, plays,” and other miscellaneous items that Ray Johnson mailed or otherwise delivered to Higgins’s doorstep between roughly 1959 and 1964.<sup>2</sup> Translating the contents of envelopes into the pages of a book, Higgins repackaged and published Johnson’s correspondence art into fifty, nonlinear pages arranged in no discernible order and directed not to addressees but to consumers of experimental publications.<sup>3</sup> Released on Valentine’s Day 1965 and conceived as “a sort of love letter or a time capsule for the future,” *The Paper Snake* provided a “new body for Johnson’s ideas” that would be “more permanent,” in Higgins’s view, “than a mailing piece or even than our own physical [bodies].”<sup>4</sup> A book-as-exhibition, *The Paper Snake* was technically the first public presentation of Johnson’s mail art.<sup>5</sup> For Higgins, it was only Something Else Press’s second volume.

To prepare *The Paper Snake*, Higgins packed two suitcases full of Johnsoniana, spread it out on his mother’s dining room table, and “sorted the book into piles—performance pieces, poems, collages, things to be typeset, things to be reproduced in Ray’s writing-taking care to include at least some of each category.”<sup>6</sup> Like a curator of the page, he next organized Johnson’s mailings spatially and typographically in a way that “would invite the reader to experience Ray’s pieces as [Higgins himself] did upon receiving them.”<sup>7</sup> The contents of multiple envelopes might share a given spread, with their color, scale, and typography manipulated to simulate the experience of receiving Johnson’s mailings, rather than to document the contents of any

particular mailing.<sup>8</sup> Visual and cultural theorist Johanna Drucker has suggested that, just as a musician performs sheet music, a reader performs a book.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as a product of performative interpretation rather than objective replication, *The Paper Snake* is meant more to be performed than read.<sup>10</sup> Higgins treated Johnson’s poems, plays, and other imagined scenarios like Fluxus scores—indeterminate text-based performances to be realized on and off the page in the minds and bodies of future readers. For example, taking a cue from Johnson’s so-called Nothings, Higgins deliberately employed expanses of empty space throughout, interjecting pauses and opportunities for participatory readership and performative intervention. Responding to the playful, even juvenile nature of the mailings he received—one reads “I went to the sea and peed and kept peeing and a mermaid threw a big green turd at me”—Higgins chose a horizontal, hardbound format

reminiscent of a children’s picture book. This would also encourage *The Paper Snake* to be read aloud and performed. In summer 1969 Johnson realized this potentiality with Higgins’s twin daughters, performing voices and using different intonations in response to the content and design of the page (p. ??).

Although the book was sometimes enacted in this convivial manner, an antagonistic dynamic nonetheless haunted various stages of *The Paper Snake*’s production. The development of the book’s cover exemplifies Higgins’s and Johnson’s power play. Higgins wrote to Johnson that he had chosen a blue-and-white composition for it, recomposed from pieces of a cut-up collage that the artist had sent him in a “huge carton of ripped up collages.”<sup>11</sup> “I rescued them,” Higgins proclaimed, “and now I figure maybe the right thing to do is use them for the cover of the book.”<sup>12</sup> Higgins proceeded to instruct the artist how to execute his signature on the cover, scoring his own variation of Johnson’s trademark directive, “Please add to and return to Ray Johnson.”

Higgins instructed the artist to write out by hand the phrase “The Paper Snake by Ray Johnson” in black crayon on an enclosed sheet of paper (p. ??) and send it back posthaste.<sup>13</sup>

Just weeks prior to providing the publisher with the handwritten title template, Johnson lamented to May Wilson, “I got proofs today for the Dick Higgins book on Ray Johnson and I always find anything in public or print an embarrassment because I’m so dumb. But it’s going through and

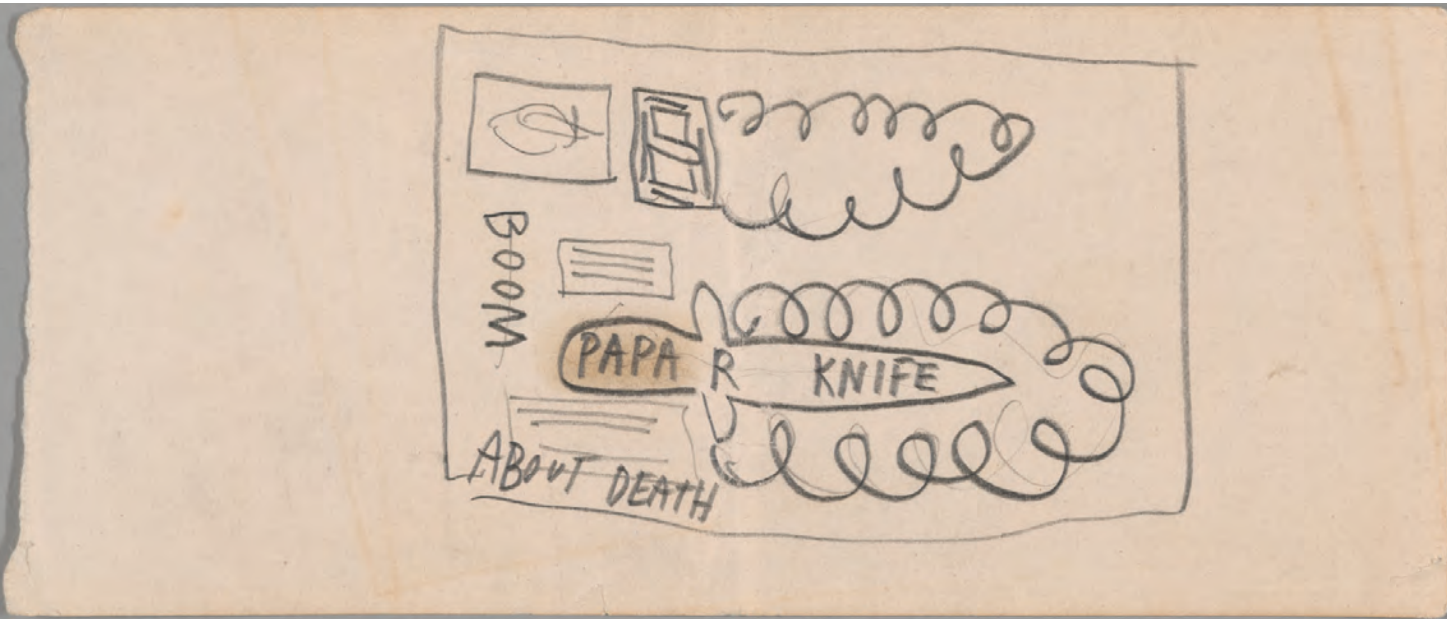


FIG ?? Untitled (58 05 04), 1958 Gift of the William S. Wilson Collection of Ray Johnson, 2018.802.15.4



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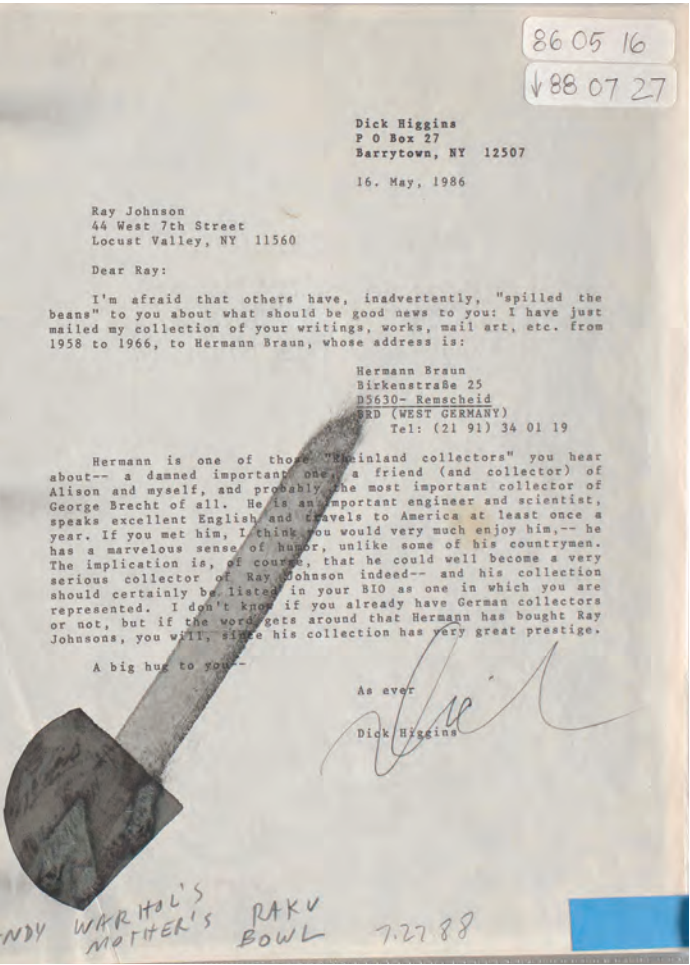


FIG ?? Untitled (58 05 04), 1958 Gift of the William S. Wilson Collection of Ray Johnson, 2018.802.15.4



Dear Mary - glad you  
W. - as we say in Chicago "Who here peils,  
all youn ill!" Don't Max will str  
Sunday used Lori Lunn's station wagon a  
mole and loaded a bunch of washing machine  
ad records up on it to sell. (Max will st in  
know is a sort of market place closer to a me  
market place than say Delaney st in N +  
some blinks on the way there  
Lori Lunn who  
a wonderful  
(mole, me, S  
social worker  
looks quite a  
by the by gave  
possibly as one  
small with it  
so we no longer  
a large panel.  
it I was stude  
whizzing by par  
anfull close to  
up I driving  
a car that had  
we couldn't tell  
so on ed to b  
you

RAY

This is  
significant  
don't cut y  
on it.

RAY

This is very significant, but don't cut yourself on it.

JOKE AND DAGGER DEPT. PART II

Here's another installment of that friendly rivalry between the man in black and the man in white, both dedicated to the "cause" . . . of outwitting each other as-

EARLY COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON

9. y Times 1959  
P 16

A Brit. med. Assoc. spokesman said:  
"a doctor's whole duty is to  
relieve pain, it is entirely a  
matter for his own conscience  
what he does to effect this."

"Whip me? No, no; let carman whip his jade:  
The valiant heart's not whipt out of his  
trade."

- Measure for Measure, II, 1, 282 f.

COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON

Higgins Ignatius  
Lowell Wilson

BILL  
WILSON

dear ray johnson

today it rained all day then robin came by with package for me but I couldn't open it because it was alone thing and we talk him over all day and swinging doctor at the is finally giving away she went DOWNTOWN to buy fish to replace the one terrible women by the nally reams flushed down toilet. (Miss reams is married this spring I hear perhaps her husband will get her down a toilet to look for my goldfish which I only LOANED to robin, but was going to let her keep because she loves all living things even dead ones.) Later I opened the package and found a shattered light bulb with writing on it and pieces hanging so that it was impossible to make sense. Perhaps she was come to dinner next week at the library and I will introduce her to Randall. She did not really love Ken because he had admired something and breathed on her forehead. But then again she really ought to get away from clare and his sometimes friends.

ray  
FEB 24 1965

or something and breathed on her  
comrad. But then again she really  
ought to get away from clare and  
his sometimes friends.

ray  
FEB 24 1965

3  
201-  
3701-3701

COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON

A black and white photograph showing a close-up of a classical column capital. The capital is decorated with several large, stylized acanthus leaves that curve upwards and outwards. The carving is deep and detailed, showing the veins of the leaves. The top of the capital is flat, and the overall shape is somewhat cylindrical. The background is dark and out of focus.

**Yu—Mark**  
Mr. and Mrs. Lin-Chuan Yu, of Kew Gardens, Queens, have announced the engagement of their daughter, Miss Wen-wei Yu, to Gene Mark, son of Mr. Yu, to Gene Mark, Mark of New York. An early September wedding is planned.  
Miss Yu and her fiancé are graduates of Pratt Institute. She is an artist and illustrator. Mr. Mark is an electrical engineer with the Western Electric Company.

COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON  
Send to Mark Lancaster

## Black Mountain

## The Hallowe'en Apples

are still  
in the refriger-  
ator.

**BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE SUMMER** ..... **TITUTE**  
Catalogue on request  
*(Note: The word "TITUTE" appears to be a misreading or bleed-through from another page.)*

Teachers and lecturers: painting: Feininger, Hillsmith, Motherwell, Scipio  
 Albers, Textile design: Anni Albers, Architecture: Gropius, Paul Beldier, Woodworking:  
 Mory Gregory, Leather Work: Berta Rodofsky, Photography: F. W. Goro, Art History:  
 Alexander Dornier, Karl With.  
 Address: Black Mountain College, Black Mountain, North Carolina

# Fathers Come in All Shapes and Sizes

Can hardly wait for page 10. Did you hear about my picture in Norfolk, Va. Yes, Dorothy could shoot my mummies. I can start on .

I have never when what I wrote to you a year ago if you let out ONE WORD about the upset, because EMMIL is, and she means to die of the Jewish Comm. Cause. I said yesterday to pick work for a New York foul temper because they got lost and two minutes of my soothing oil, and was the worst and one of the ladies bought the Michael West, her husband, Sir RARO, in coming here next week and Lovell's opening, a cocktail party, her Georgetown house. I am all scared, met, I charged her by mail and was scared.

**what else comes in as many sizes and shapes?**

**Dunbar** from Idaho

A9a

[illegible]



1 Richard Bernstein, "Ray Johnson's  
World," *Andy Warhol's Interview*, no.  
24 (August 1972): 39.

2 See Ray Johnson, Invoice No. 4, April 1965; the William S. Wilson Collection of Ray Johnson, the Art Institute of Chicago (hereafter Wilson Collection).

3 Here I have in mind volumetric or domino-like tesserae, such as those in the lower right portion of *Untitled* (Johns Hancock Lynda Benglis) (1976) (p. ??), which develop out of the earlier low-relief tiles in the 1962 works *Tesserae 2* (p. ??) and *Untitled* (*Tesserae 3*) (p. ??).

4 For more on Johnson's use of the term "flop artist," see Clive Phillpot, "To and from Ray," in *Please Add to and Return to Ray Johnson*, exh. cat. (London: Raven Row, 2009), n.p.

5 For Johnson's fascination with theft and robbery, see Miriam Kienle, "The Robbin Gallery," in this book, and "Ray Johnson's Robin Gallery: Queer Publicity Network as Counterpublic," *Oxford Art Journal* 42, no. 2 (August 2019): 197-215.

6 Bernstein, "Ray Johnson's World,"  
39.

7 Occasionally, Johnson would  
provide a key, such as the note to  
Wilson in *Untitled (Triptych Willenbe-*  
*cher)* (p. ??): "Bill, This is Roberta  
Gag's mouth & should go below the  
Willenbecher eyes & above the Rimbaud  
mouth on south wall. Man Ray."

8 Lawrence Campbell, "The Ray Johnson History of the Betty Parsons Gallery," *Art News* 72, no. 1 (January 1973): 57.

9 See Wilson Collection, WSW 67? ??  
??.

10 The allusion to dominoes follows  
Lawrence Campbell, "The Ray Johnson  
History of the Betty Parsons Gallery,"  
*Art News* 72, no. 1 (January 1973): 57:  
"And like the sandman who throws sand  
in the eyes of children to make them  
fall asleep, Johnson rubs sand into  
his images so that they look like the  
battered dominoes or building blocks  
that children play with before  
bedtime."

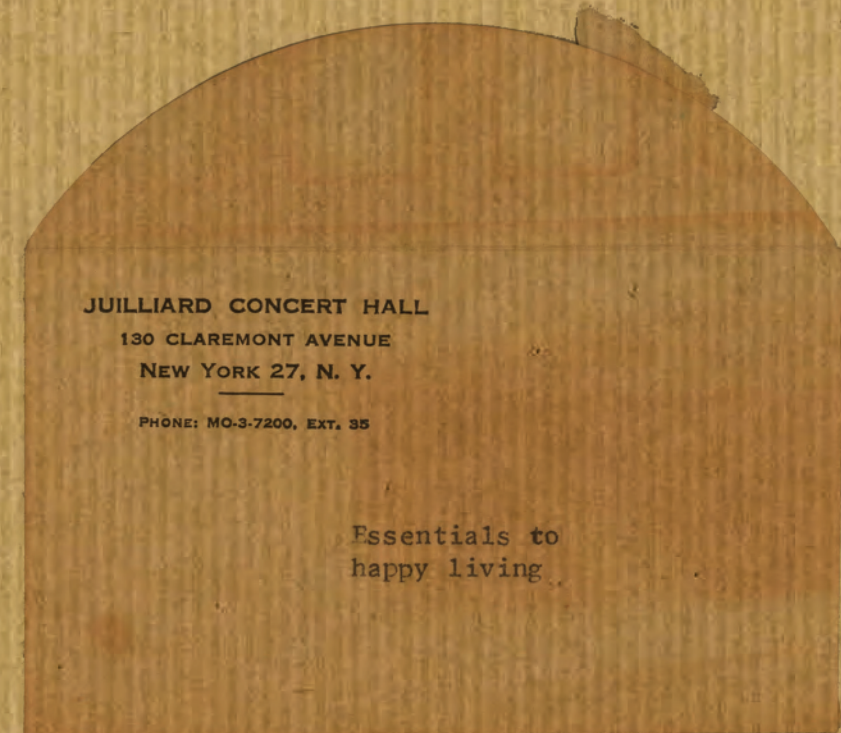
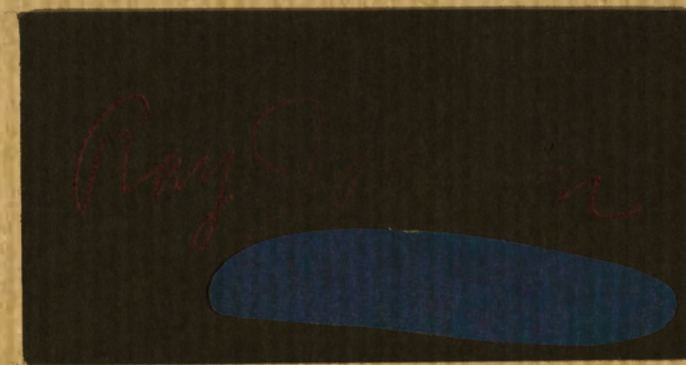
11 Ray Johnson, "Laughter poem for James Wearing, 2 Aug. 1960," in George Brecht et al., *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (New York: H. Friedrich, 1970), n.p.

12 See Michael von Uchtrup's  
 annotations on Wilson Collection, WSW  
 67? ?? ??.



A collage of five torn paper scraps with various patterns and textures. The scraps are arranged on a light beige background. The top-left scrap features a red and black striped pattern. The top-middle scrap shows a dark, textured landscape with a small building. The top-right scrap has a pink and red pattern with a large red Christmas tree and two black circles. The bottom-left scrap is a purple and black pattern. The bottom-right scrap is a light beige pattern with orange circles and black floral designs. A small piece of text is visible on the right side of the collage, partially obscured by the scraps.







# Death, A Book About Thea Liberty Nichols

Despite the finality of its ostensible subject, *A Book About Death* (ABAD) was “indefinite and undecidable,” as William S. (Bill) Wilson characterized it in his 2009 text *A Book About A Book About Death* (ABABAD). Johnson made this open-endedness physical through an unbound book of loose pages, perfectly symbolized by the ouroboros, which Johnson pictured on page one (see p. ??). This open-mouthed snake eating its own tail—an ancient symbol of infinity—signified both death and rebirth. A mordant talisman, it epitomizes the self-sufficient and self-destructive aspects of Johnson’s artistic practice.

Called variously *A Boop About Death* and *A Boom About Death*, ABAD comprised thirteen loose pages each measuring ?? by ?? centimeters. Johnson began the project in 1962 and realized it between 1963 and 1965—the same years as he worked on *The Paper Snake*—when he reproduced original ink drawings through black-and-white photo-offset lithography. In addition to his formal, artistic experimentation for the project, Johnson also worked as author, designer, publisher, and promoter. Through an entrepreneurial arrangement of patronage of the work in progress (including commission, collaboration, and sponsorship) and subscription and direct sales of the finished product, he pioneered new methods of subverting established art-market systems. “Porous” pagination (Johnson made no pages thirteen and fourteen, going straight from twelve to fifteen) and piecemeal distribution (he issued pages one at a time, delivering them personally and by the mail) ensured that few would obtain a complete edition of this “open book.”

Johnson deliberately made ABAD appear to be the work of multiple authors so that it in many

ways it functioned as a protozine. Karl Wirsum, however, was integral to the book’s production and an actual artistic contributor, supplying drawings for ABAD in response to source material and requests Johnson sent him (see p. ??).<sup>2</sup> Their interdependent creative output ran parallel to the mail art activities that increasingly occupied Johnson until his death, and preceded many of the activities that Wirsum and other members of the Hairy Who exhibition group pursued, including coproducing and self-publishing comics and posters.<sup>3</sup> With Wirsum, Johnson fostered a symbiotic and collaborative relationship with a friend and fellow artist that spawned the generation of multiple drawings that he peppered throughout the pages of ABAD, in addition to a decades-long exchange of illustrated letters and swapped ephemera.<sup>4</sup>

In stark contrast, Johnson and Andy Warhol—who would later treat the subject of death in his *Death and*

Disaster series—

had a more

transactional relationship, insofar as it was a sponsorship. Ultimately Johnson linked Warhol content

with darker in ABAD that took the form of appropriation and erasure. By 1962 Warhol had achieved wide recognition and commercial success thanks to classic Pop Art works such as *SOH Green Stamps* (see p. ??). Warhol sponsored page five of ABAD, where Johnson visually riffs on this painting, satirizing what Wilson calls Warhol’s “repetitions and passivities” through Johnson’s signature iterative activity.<sup>5</sup> Fastidiously altering the lettering, placement, and spacing of Warhol’s name in fifty stamps (see p. ??), Johnson revisits the composition on page twelve (see p. ??) but here blacks out select letters while adding a row of stamps that bear Fred Herko’s



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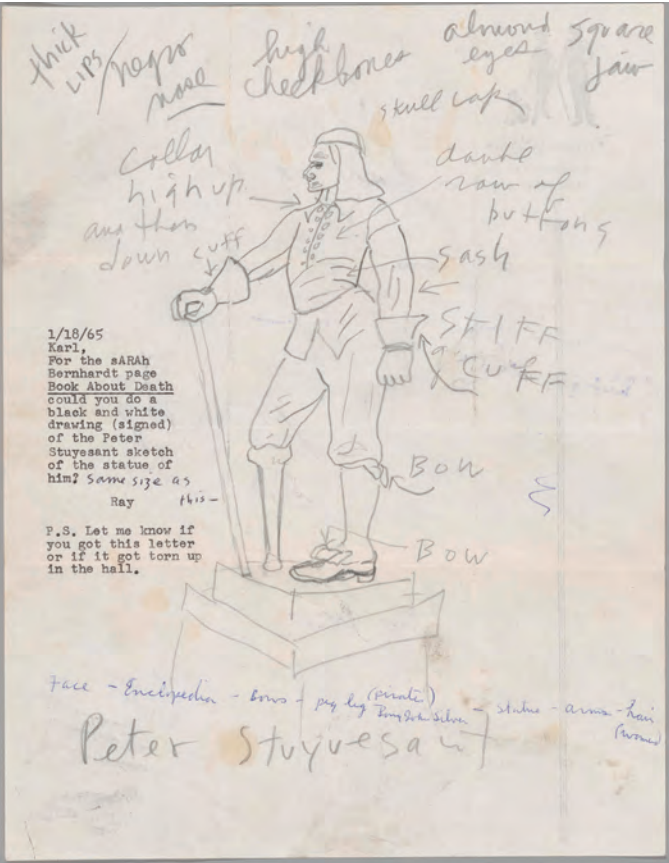


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EDWARD T. CRINNION  
FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

DEPARTMENT  
OF  
HOUSING AND BUILDINGS  
CITY OF NEW YORK

LIST OF FAMOUS PEOPLE AND WHAT THEY HAVE TO  
SAY ABOUT RAY JOHNSON'S NEW \$30 BLACK LEATHER  
MOTORCYCLE JACKET

1. Taylor Mead: You look like a teenager.
2. Larry Cornfeld: You look prosperous.
3. Harry Smith: You look sinister.
4. Donna Rinaldi: Sexy.
5. David Bourdon: Just beautiful
6. Marvin shoe salesman: I used to wear one of those myself.
7. Girl who always purchases greeting cards at Michael Malce's: You bought it because it's devilish but you don't wear it with devilishment.
8. Jim Brody: Pretty tough.
9. Larry Ree: It's not too much. Too dramatic.
10. John Cale: I like it.
11. Elsie Becherer: I like it.
12. John Richardson: It's nice. It's good.
13. Richard Frost: Doesn't have enough brass - it needs studs across the top.
14. Bob Raushenberh: Is that new?
15. Jimmy Moss: I like it lots.
16. Sari Dienes: I was admiring it silently.
17. John Quinn: It's hard to see it in this light.
18. Marilyn Henrion: It's beautiful. Where's your motorcycle?
19. Gerard Malanga: Very becoming, man. I dig it.
20. Wallace Zuckermann: I love it. Where's your motorcycle?
21. Michael Rapatch: Did you get that at the party?



EDWARD T. CRINNION  
FIRST DEPUTY COMMISSIONER

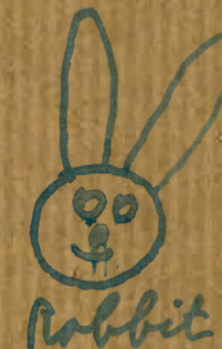
DEPARTMENT  
OF  
HOUSING AND BUILDINGS  
CITY OF NEW YORK

1/5/64

Billy,

Once when Michael Malce and I walked into the Copper Cup, the front glass door was all smashed and the juke box was playing "I Want To Be Around To Pick Up The Pieces".  
Now, when I walk into bars (How Dt  
Now, when I walk into bars (How Dry I Am), they play "I Left My Arp In San Francisco".

Ray



This is a sublime rabbit with a runny nose (slime).



(red-light district) but also a sinister quality that recalls rock ’n’ roll’s reputation, inherited from the blues, as the “devil’s music.” A connoisseur of puns and wordplay like Johnson would not have missed the anagram of *Elvis* and *Evils*.

Like his Sophoclean predecessor, the young Elvis was known for his swagger, deviance, and pathos. With his virtuosic imitation of African American musical genres, Elvis mined racial and sexual taboos and destabilized the existing social order to earn the title of King. Yet, regardless of his talents as a singer and performer, some critics have argued that Elvis capitalized on white audiences’ hunger for black music sans black musicians, his fame overshadowing that of many deserving contemporaries and precursors. Like Oedipus, then, Elvis could be regarded as a pretender to the throne instead of its rightful heir, and by extension, a King destined for a fall. Likewise, whereas Oedipus atoned for his transgressions by blinding himself, this act of symbolic castration calls to mind the prurient public fixation on the rocker’s gyrating hips, which earned him the nickname Elvis the Pelvis. When his hip thrusts were censored from live television programs like *The Ed Sullivan Show*, it functioned as a double symbolic castration, at once “blinding” his audience and cutting Elvis off below the waist.

Myths, like moticos, tend to move in cycles. By the end of 1968, Elvis had temporarily regained his status as a serious musician and sex symbol in his iconic NBC comeback special, *Elvis*, in which he delivered a career-best live performance while clad in a skintight black leather suit. In “Presliad,” the appositely Homeric chapter on Elvis in his book *Mystery Train*, rock critic Greil Marcus mythologizes the broadcast as a kind of Oedipus redux: “If ever there was music that bleeds, this was it.”<sup>8</sup> But this second coming would last less than a decade. On October 13, 1977, two months after Presley’s fatal heart attack at age forty-two, Johnson sent Wilson a letter replete with references to Elvis (p. ??).<sup>9</sup> Typed on decorative “Farmer’s Special” signage, the mailing’s scarlet hue and deckle-edge design are reminiscent of the Elvis moticos’ rough-hewn red surfaces. The letter makes reference to an enclosed collage titled *In The American Groin*, a pun on the title of William

Carlos Williams’s book of essays, for which Johnson designed the cover of the 1956 New Directions edition. On the verso of the letter, Johnson mentions Mark Stevens, the name shared by a New York art critic and a notoriously well-endowed adult film star; Johnson includes the latter Stevens’s moniker, 10 1/2. Together, these priapic references produce a domino effect, circling back to Elvis the Pelvis. As a relic of mourning, fandom, and coded speech, “Farmer’s Special” positions Johnson’s King as an allegory of virtuosic imitation, taboo desire, and polymorphous suggestion that connected the artist to Wilson across four decades of correspondence, and the subsequent two decades’ efforts to archive and decipher it.

1 The genesis of Johnson’s Elvises circa 1956 coincides with Presley’s commercial breakthrough and initial Hollywood crossover. After he was drafted into the US Army in March 1958, Elvis released a string of hits, prerecorded to tide fans over until his return from active duty in Germany. When he returned in 1960, he was primarily engaged in Hollywood films.

2 Henry Geldzahler, *Pop Art: 1955-1970* (Canberra, AU: International Cultural Corporation of Australia, 1985), 34-35. Lucy Lippard concurs: “The *Elvis* of 1956 . . . heralded Warholian Pop.” See Lippard, “Special Deliverance,” in *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, ed. Donna De Salvo and Catherine Gudis, exh. cat. (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1999), 142.

3 See Caitlin Haskell, “Chop Art,” in this book.

4 Wilson quotes Johnson in “Ray Johnson: Vibration and Reverberation,” *Ray Johnson Ray Johnson*, ed. William S. Wilson (New York: Between Books, 1977), 3. See also Suzi Gablik, *Pop Art Redefined* (London: Thames and Hudson; New York: Praeger, 1969), 236.

5 Wilson, “Ray Johnson: Vibration and Reverberation.”

6 Biographer Peter Guralnick characterizes Elvis as a mother-fixated adolescent who was teased by his classmates for their affectionate relationship and was devastated by her early death. See Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1994), 474-75.

7 This motif recurs in numerous undated moticos featuring photographs of Elvis on which black tesserae form an irregular grid across his visage, resembling freckles or blemishes.

8 Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of American in Rock n’ Roll Music*, 5th rev. ed. (New York: Plume,



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