

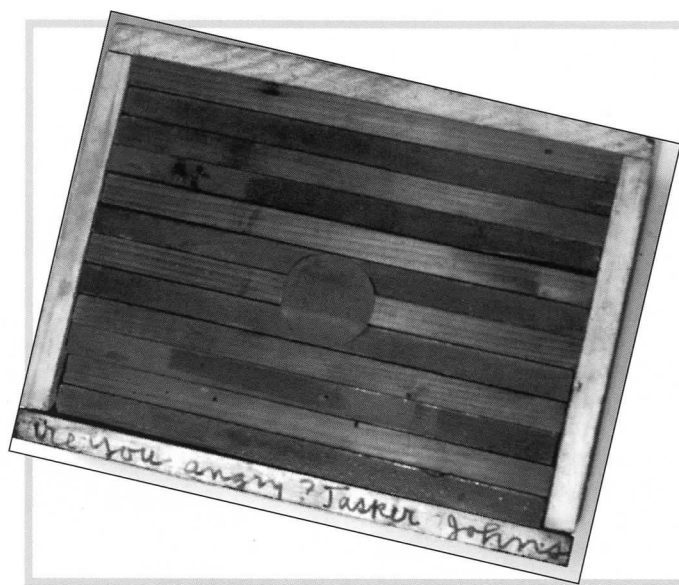
THE HATCHING OF THE PAPER SNAKE

By Dick Higgins

Back in 1963 when, out of a mixture of desperation and naïveté, I founded Something Else Press in order “forever” to publish the best work

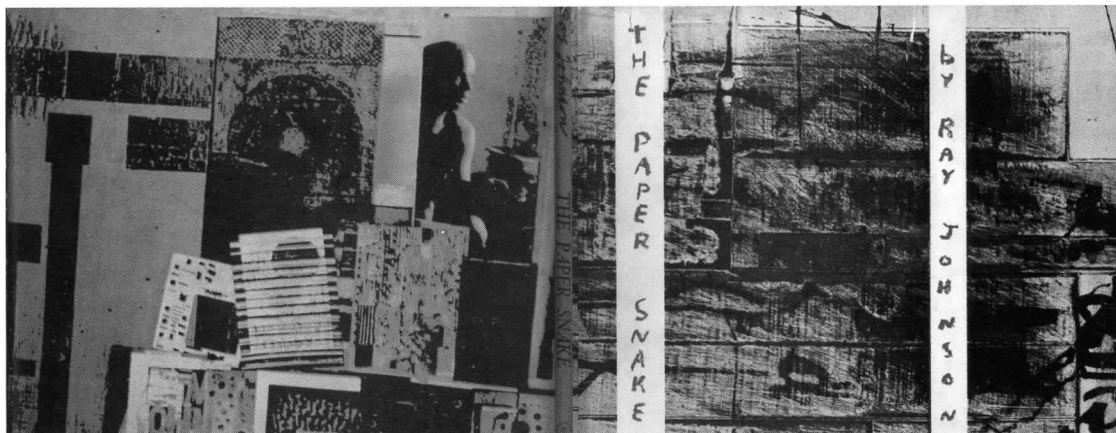
which others could or would not, after my own Jefferson's Birthday/Postface (1964) my second proposed title was to be a sort of Ray Johnson sampler. Why? In the first place it was clear to me that his collages and other major works were among the most innovative pieces being done, on a par with, say, the best of Johns and Rauschenberg, who were considered the superstars of the time. Warhol would soon be added to this group, though the other pop artists seemed (and still seem) too self-conscious and formally timid to rank with that trio. In the second place, Johnson was without gallery representation, and thus it was hard for people with whom he had no direct personal connection to find out about or to experience his art. Third, though Johnson had performed at George Maciunas' AG Gallery and most of us Fluxus artists considered him somehow one of us, he did not work closely with Maciunas and was thus considered something of an outsider to Fluxus. Therefore, since I did not want to compete directly with Maciunas's Fluxus publications, I ran no risk of offending would-be Pope George if I published Ray Johnson. Fourth and perhaps most interesting, I was fascinated by the way that the small works which Ray Johnson used to send through the mail seemed so routed in their moment and their context and yet somehow they seemed to acquire new and larger meaning as time went along. For instance a number of works by Johnson describe him as “silent” or from the “Land of Silence.” I always assumed that this was Zen imagery in some way, and perhaps it was partly that. But Johnson was of Swedish-Finnish descent and only this spring (1995), during which I visited Swedish Finland, did I discover that the people there really do regard themselves as unusually silent people, that there is a joke, which I heard over and over again, that “The Finns are a people who are silent in two languages.” Thus Johnson's image is expanded many years after the fact, as he almost certainly knew it would be. Since a book is a more permanent body than a mailing piece or even than our own physical ones, I could not help wondering what it would be like to make a new body for Johnson's ideas as a sort of love letter or time capsule for the future, since it was quite clear to me that the book would entail a sacrifice of resources for the present—no way could this be a money-making project. Like Maciunas, I sought to keep the costs down by doing most of the work myself in consultation with Johnson, and a small legacy which I received from the death of a member of my family provided the cash for typesetting, printing and binding costs.

I had first seen Johnson in 1958 when he was working on a “mural” for the Living Theater's then-new premises at Sixth Avenue and Fourteenth Street in New York. My task there was to paint the Ladies Restroom purple, and I would see Johnson in discussion with Julian Beck and Judith Malina or others when I came out from my labors. I did not meet him, but I kept hearing the name of Jasper Johns, so I assumed that this was who the gentle-voiced man with close-cropped blond hair must be. In April 1959 there was a concert at “The Village Gate” which we both attended. Standing next to him I asked him if he were Jasper Johns. He said that no, he was Ray Johnson, and our conversation started from there, touching on Zen, the Living Theater and cabbages and kings. Sometime later I received in the mail a small wooden construction that suggested a Japanese flag with the caption, “Are you angry? Jasper Johns” The piece is now in the Ernst/Siegel Collection in Paris. I don't recall what I sent him back, but soon I received a marzipan frog and a broken watch and this was followed by a flood of little plays, carbons of letters to people illustrious and less so, poem inventions, drawings and cut-up collages (“moticos”), to which I replied by sending him either similar things by myself or found things that seemed suitable but which sometimes weren't, such as a large *Polyporus sulphureus* mushroom which rotted in transit and must have given poor Ray a jolt when he unpacked it, since I received a good many worm-like inscriptions shortly after that.



A “Japanese American Flag” sent to Dick Higgins and made by Ray Johnson in which he associates this small wooden construction with Jasper Johns via the caption “Are you angry? Jasper Johns” written by Ray on September 16, 1959

In due course my filing cabinet needed a whole drawer just for Ray Johnson things, those which I kept and did not send back or along to others. Ray would visit, often in the company of “Dorothy Nonagon” (Dorothy Podber), his frequent companion of the time. She had listed the art gallery she had run, the Nonagon Gallery, as if her last name were “Nonagon” to avoid the higher rate which the New York Telephone Company charged to corporate customers. Her name survived the gallery for several years. The two would arrive unexpectedly at my apartment, now for a visit, now to



The Paper Snake by Ray Johnson (front and back covers shown) was published in 1965 in a pressrun of 1840 copies, plus 197 special copies with an original collage or ephemeria by Johnson.

take me off on a ramble (they introduced me to my wife of now thirty-five years, Alison Knowles), now to go to some strange event, and many of these things would turn into art. The process of interrelationship of art and life, which we in Fluxus referred to as the "art/life dichotomy," found its own form in Johnson's sendings and those whom he stimulated to act in a parallel manner. Too, the personal had a greater role in Ray's work than in Fluxus works; one would not learn much about Ray's very private life and loves (other than a few names) from his work, but one would learn who liked herb teas, the size of composer Earl Brown's cat "Sam," and similar seeming trivia which give personality to life.

153 EAST SIXTY-THIRD STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10021

September 22, 1965

Mr. Charlton Burch
Lightworks
P. O. Box 1202
Birmingham, Michigan 48012-1202

Dear Mr. Burch:

In reply to your letter of 31 August, it will not be possible for Jasper Johns to make a contribution to the article you are planning to commemorate Ray Johnson.

We appreciate your sending copies of your publication, *Lightworks*, and your thinking of Mr. Johns in relation to the project.

Sincerely,

Sarah Taggart
Sarah Taggart

A decidedly wooden reply was offered by Jasper Johns via his associate Sarah Taggart in response to an inquiry by the editor on Ray's "Are you angry? Jasper Johns"

And yet where would it lead? I was fascinated then (as I have been since childhood) by books and printing, I had, as I said, started Something Else Press, and to assemble into a suitable format a collection of these seemingly ephemeral pieces by Ray Johnson seemed like one of the most worthy statements I could make. First I needed Johnson's permission. He gave it to me but seemed not to believe that such a book was possible. Next I went through the files and, by then, boxes of Johnsonia which I had accumulated. I wanted a

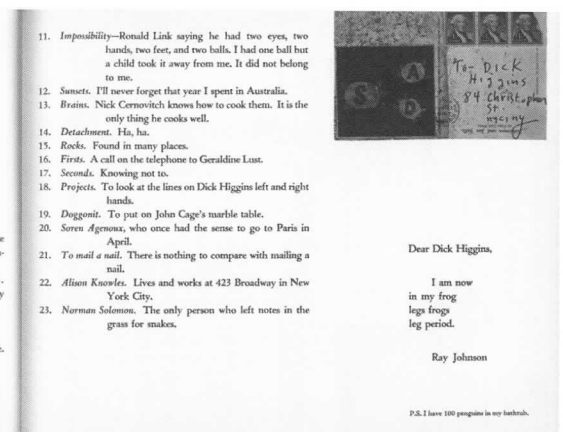
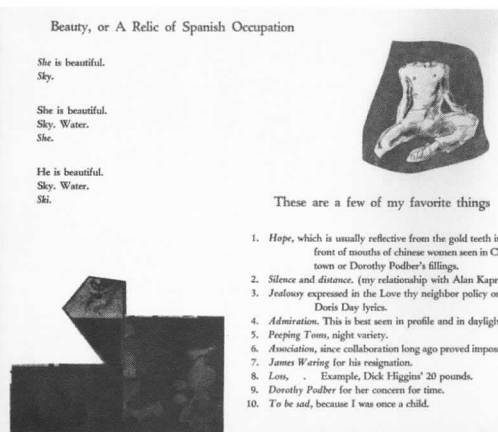
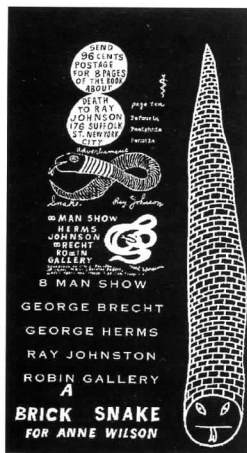
representative collection, and when I told Ray about this, he proceeded to send me all kinds of additional materials whose existence I had not even suspected. As soon as my *Jefferson's Birthday/Postface* was pasted up and "on press" I had most of the texts for *The Paper Snake* type-set using Morris F. Benton's "Cloister" typeface. I liked its archaic look, which was largely due to its Venetian e with its slanting cross line—e—since this suggested the interweaving of past and present, old-fashioned and very modern, an idea to which I, like George Maciunas, was committed.



In 1963-5 I worked for Book Press, a book manufacturer, and for Russell and Russell, a scholarly reprint publisher, doing production and design. At Russell and Russell I learned the importance of using pH neutral papers, papers which would not yellow, as well as other long-lasting materials. To think of design as merely type layout and graphics seemed silly, akin to a designer of aircraft whose plans might look good but which would become unsafe after a few years use. At Book Press I learned to make really rugged books, as well as to use "self-endsheets" when desired, how to fold heavy papers, what cloths would last the best, and so on. In addition I had built a small graphics studio for myself, and could make my own half-tones. Trained in color separation, I was fascinated by the technology of breaking down colored materials into their constituent parts in various ways, some quite unconventional. *The Paper Snake* was designed to resemble a juvenile, with large format and heavy materials. But there was no money to print it in four-color process, the usual way to print color. So I used two colors for the cover (printed on binding cloth and also on the jacket), a cyan blue (normal for four-color work) and a cheap, sour red which looked almost orange when printed solid and almost rose pink when printed pale. When different strengths of these colors were combined, using halftone dots the result suggests brown, black, purple, pink and so on, giving the effect of a much more lavish production than we could actually do. These colors were also included inside the book by using a four-page signature which wrapped around the main ones in the middle, thus creating a contrast with the navy blue and brown inks of the main body of the book. None of Johnson's collages looks exactly like the printed image; but most have very much the same overall appearance as their printed images.

The book was to be a statement made in collaboration with a visual artist; so it must be a





Pages 12&13, plus endpaper graphic reprising Ray's various projects including an "8" man show (two threes make an eight, oftentimes presented horizontally as if also an infinity symbol and/or snake) at the noncorporeal Robin Gallery.

visual work and should, ideally, parallel the quality of his visual work, projecting off the page into the world. While this last could not be done exactly, the effect could be suggested by having some of the texts run side by side with other pieces to which they were not related. Other texts were simply repeated at different spots on the page, allowing a visual layout which was certainly non-linear. Johnson liked the work to suggest a juvenile, with the freshness which juveniles are supposed to have. He was drawing many snakes at the time, such as a "brick snake" for Ann Wilson which appears at the very end of the book, and he decided to call the book "The Paper Snake" to indicate that it was a work in its own right. I asked him what the book should cost; he said immediately "\$3.47," a thoroughly unusual price. I gagged, knowing that I was unlikely ever to recover my investment in the project at that rate, but I used that price anyway, thinking that the price, which startled people, was a form of publicity—they would never forget it.

Finally the paste-ups were done, the book was printed by my former employers, Zaccar Offset, and was taken to be bound by Charles Bohn and Company (which no longer exists). Ray did not seem to believe that the book would ever actually materialize, and, since I wanted Ray to remain interested in the book long after its publication, I phoned Emily Swisher, my service representative at Bohn's and with whom I had become friendly, and I arranged to take Ray to Bohn's bindery right when the book was being cased in, that is when the sheets were being glued into the assembled board bindings. So it happened that one cold day in February 1965 Ray and I appeared at Bohn's and we watched the team of people in the bindery putting the books together. He was so delighted to see a team of people actually working on his book that it moved him enough to provoke a very unusual postcard for him, probably in the Sohm Archive in Stuttgart today, which reads, simply, "Thanks."

There was a "Special Edition" too, bound in book cloth which I designed; and each copy contained a small original Johnson. It consisted of 197 unnumbered copies. In my naive way I imagined that those who could afford to do so must

want to own an original Johnson; but they didn't. Johnson's friend Stanton Kreider bought a copy and then spent the next year telling me what a silly decision that had been. That edition hardly sold at all, even for its modest price of \$12.00, but today it is very very rare and is probably worth about \$400 as of this writing. I wish I owned even one copy.

The book was not understood. I think that of the dozen or so reviews which appeared none was favorable. The silliest was one in *Art Voices* which accused the book of elitism and preciousness, but none saw the relevance of doing a book which would share the private with a public world in the way that this book did. However the artists seemed to understand and they have used it as a paradigm ever since. When Something Else Press went bankrupt in 1974 there were still around seven hundred copies of the original 1840 copies left; most of these wound up in a tomato warehouse in Vermont which had formerly been a marble worker's union hall, and were stored under the podium where Rosa Luxemburg gave her one and only speech in America early in this century. Is there a correspondence ("correspondance" is the corresponding term in Johnson's world) between *The Paper Snake* and Rosa Luxemburg? Ray Johnson might have found one. Eventually the books left the tomato warehouse and were acquired by Jon Hendricks in New York (who may still have a few copies for sale, though probably not for \$3.47). He is also curator of the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, some of which is stored on Hendricks's premises, so it is very gratifying to think that Johnson has wound up side by side with Fluxus though not officially a Fluxus artist. ☉

This piece was written by Dick Higgins in May of 1995. In October of 1998 he died at 60 years of age. Besides founding Something Else Press and co-founding Fluxus, Higgins was a primemover in the 1960s avant-garde that included happenings and concrete poetry. He led an incredibly prolific and creative life as a writer, poet, artist, teacher and composer. Dick Higgins was both a contributor and supporter of this publication and a deep inspiration. His thoughtful and far-ranging perspectives were matched only by an enormous capacity and energy to bring his work, the overlooked works of others, and fresh ideas into the world.

Photograph by Buster Cleveland