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Kira Houston

Among Black Mountain College alumni associated with queer art movements, Ray Johnson is a crucial figure. José Esteban Muñoz secured Johnson's place within the canon of queer postmodernist theory when he included a chapter on Johnson in *Cruising Utopia*, a seminal work in the field. Working in the tradition of theorists like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Muñoz's concept of "queer utopianism" came about as a reaction to contemporary politics and scholarship which polarized the queer community. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz uses art history to excavate and reactivate the concept of queer utopianism, a generative ideality which foregrounds the power of artmaking, performance, and boundary shifting in the face of systematic oppression. In Muñoz's own words, "Queer utopian practice is about building and doing in response to the status of nothing assigned to us by the heteronormative world."[1] Muñoz argues that Johnson's life and work emblematize this queer utopian impulse, a theoretical alignment that has propelled Johnson's significant impact on Black Mountain College's queer legacy.

Since Muñoz's chapter, Johnsonian scholarship has enjoyed a queer renaissance. Articles from scholars like Miriam Kienle and Benjamin Kahan have reemphasized Johnson's deeply queer modes of being and creating. The 2021 exhibition "Ray Johnson: WHAT A DUMP" at David Zwirner was "the first exhibition to foreground him as a queer artist,"[2] and curator Jarrett Earnest's essay for the exhibition uncovers significant histories that reshape our understanding of Johnson's work.[3] Following Johnson's rapidly evolving relevance to contemporary queer theory, this article seeks to highlight how artistic and personal influences at Black Mountain College shaped Johnson's queer visual language. His enduring fascinations with art history and graphic design connect concretely to his early work at Black Mountain College. Utilizing a 1947 mailing from Johnson to Elaine Schmitt Urbain as a visual case study, I will discuss how silhouettes and spirals come to emblematize Johnson's mode of "queering

the body." Through this exploration, I demonstrate how Johnson's experiences at Black Mountain College presaged some of the queerest aspects of his work.

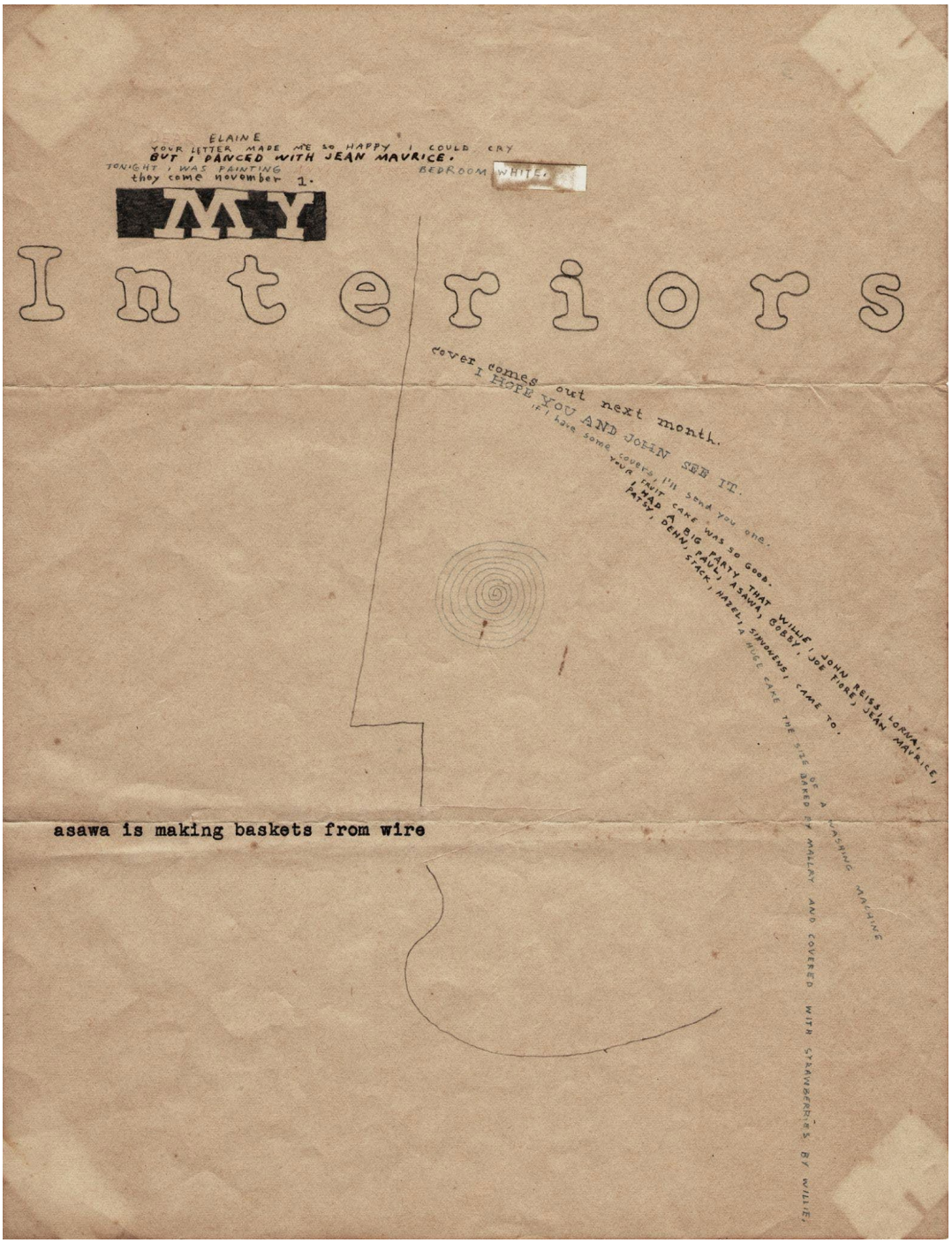

Figure 1. Ray Johnson, *Untitled Mailing (First Page)*, 1947. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center.

Ray Johnson is perhaps best known for his lifelong project, the New York Correspondence (or Correspondance) School. Under the name of this imaginary school, Johnson created and maintained a vast network of correspondence through the postal system, sending mailings back and forth with friends, acquaintances, famous art-world names, and just about anyone he could convince to correspond with him. Before the New York Correspondence School's invention, Johnson began his mailing practice at Black Mountain College. Many of his earliest letters were exchanges with classmates or professors from the college. In a mailing to Elaine Schmitt Urbain (Figure 1), we find one such early example of Johnson's correspondence. Johnson was either 19 or 20 when writing this letter in 1947; he may have just turned twenty, as the letter would have been written in October, around his birthday. In it, he writes to Elaine Schmitt Urbain about life at the college: painting the Alberses' bedroom white in advance of their return from Mexico and having a party with his classmates, probably his own birthday celebration. Some names mentioned include: Lorna Blaine Halper, who Johnson would go on to frequently correspond with; Ruth Asawa, who was a close friend of Johnson's and later became part of his silhouette series; and Hazel Larsen Archer, who photographed Johnson at the college.

In this mailing, we see Johnson's graphic lettering above, around, and atop a drawing of a silhouette with a spiral in place of its eye. This anticipates two of Johnson's consistent fascinations: silhouettes and spirals. I use these two motifs to enable a small foray into the queer visual language of Johnson's complex collages—a sexually suggestive, self-referential language which scholars have spent decades trying to decode. In Johnson's work there is always a not-yet-here, a glimpse of meaning that pushes us to reconsider past, present and future—one reason why Johnson's archive makes such a perfect match for projects in queer utopian scholarship. Through this article, I explore silhouettes and spirals as two out of many motifs which Johnson deploys to radically queer the body, each influenced by his BMC training in art history and graphic design.

Firstly, I will discuss the silhouette as a motif which emblematizes Johnson's method of "free association" as queer utopian practice. In 1976, Johnson made the first

in a series of silhouette drawings of friends and acquaintances, silhouettes which he would use as collage materials for the next two decades until the end of his life. Johnson integrates these silhouettes into complex compositions with disparate elements. On a formal level, those elements might be clippings from magazines or mailings; text; recurring design elements, like bunny heads or snakes; abstract glyphs; tracings of hands or feet; or other silhouettes, one encapsulating another like a nesting doll. On a symbolic level, they are references to people, places, or things; sexual imagery; pop imagery; and sometimes completely inscrutable. Through this process of combination, Johnson accomplishes two radical aims: he showcases his own methodology of free association, which has significant transformative power to queer the body, and he also inspires free association in the viewer, creating a microcosm of queer symbology in each collage.

The silhouette has its roots as a pre-photographic method of capturing a person's likeness—sometimes romantically, as in the myth of the Corinthian maid who traces her lover's silhouette before he goes to war,[4] and other times violently, as in the case of 18th-19th century silhouettes reproducing the likeness of enslaved people as a proof-of-purchase.[5] Silhouettes condense an individual's personality into the contours of their profile. They provide a representation of identity somewhere between a portrait and a fingerprint; still suggesting the face, like a portrait, but also creating a one-of-a-kind symbolic marker, like a fingerprint. Thus, while silhouettes are in some ways anonymizing, removing naturalistic detail from a person's face, they have also been used throughout history as identification. Johnson exploits this paradox to include personalities while also occluding them, converting silhouettes into a sounding board, worktable, or dump. The silhouettes continue to signify personalities, but those personalities coexist with Johnson's own symbolic language.

This symbolic language is born out of Johnson's free association. Johnson was interested in chance as a psychological and sociological phenomenon, differentiating him from the likes of Jackson Pollock, who concerned themselves with chance in the physical realm. Ellen Levy introduces the Freudian term "free association" to describe Johnson's semiotic methodology of linking people, places, and things on the basis of

chance connections. Levy writes that "Johnson came to see the self-enclosed, self-sufficient image as a trap… What began to matter to him most were not things or people, but the constantly shifting relations between them."[6] Even outside of his mail art practice, Johnson's work always involves networks of meaning. He viewed associations, substitutions, and double meanings as radically transformative potentials, both enjoyable and productive.

For William S. Wilson, Johnson's close friend and a principal cultivator of his legacy, Johnson's free association represents a queer mode of thinking:

> For Ray, anything intended for one specific purpose could serve a different purpose. A principle within his life, justifying himself in erotics and in art, was that an object identified by its purpose could serve a different purpose. An object serving different purposes did not necessarily lose its identity. A different purpose for anything, an image clipped from a magazine or an orifice of anatomy, added a layer of identity, possibly increasing possibilities… Ray had, since puberty, been divided within himself, as both the good son and the gay boy, using parts of his body for purposes which differed from biologically authorized purposes. A task was to work out his identity as one man, in spite of differences, which seemed to divide him in two. Ray acted on the suggestion of Modernism to "Make it new" by constructing new purposes.[7]

In this excerpt, Wilson identifies Johnson's ability to correlate people, places, and things with new purposes as a queer sensibility. Johnson's objects "do not necessarily lose their identities" but instead acquire layers of meaning. Ray departed from normative modes of being by "using parts of his body for purposes which differed from biologically authorized purposes," and he enacts this same methodology of queering the body in his silhouette compositions. Speaking about his own process, Johnson said, "these portraits are all about… the interior of the head. I'm trying to depict what goes on in the interior of the head: thoughts, images or ideas."[8] We might take this to mean that Johnson wants to depict what goes on in each individual's head—that Andy Warhol thinks about nothing but snakes, nail polish models, and Richard Brown Baker, for

example. But Johnson really depicts what goes on, or could go on, in any given head; he depicts the very process of free association that is so central to his own mode of being, and that viewers can potentially learn from.

Figure 2. Ray Johnson, *Untitled (Double Andy with Nail Polish Model)*, 1977. Courtesy of the Ray Johnson Estate.

In *Double Andy with Nail Polish Model* (Figure 2), Johnson constructs a collage using Warhol's silhouette as a flat plane with all other elements playing within its

perimeter. A magazine clipping picturing a nail polish model immediately confronts us, her gaze extending towards the viewer while Warhol's does not, or cannot. The clipping becomes buried beneath another visual layer, Johnson's abstract, almost cellular shapes called "moticos." The writing at the top of Warhol's head calls them "Moticos for Xenia Cage"—these might be a prior mailing repurposed as collage, a mailing never sent out, or neither. We also see Johnson's characteristic bunny head portraits, in this case labeled with the name Richard Brown Baker, each one substituting "Brown" for a variety of different colors. Another silhouetted profile sits inside Warhol's, but with close attention to the outline we can see that they are not the same individual; Warhol's has a gap between the lips and a more prominent brow.[9] A rectangular shape which we might interpret as a building with a smokestack emerges from the second silhouette, exiting towards the top of Warhol's head.

Bringing all of these elements together, Johnson creates a visual representation of his free association. Thinking about Warhol perhaps makes his mind wander to Richard Brown Baker, prominent 20th century collector, whose name then leads him to a proliferation of colors. Other social references, like Xenia Cage's name, dance alongside the stuff of everyday visual culture—magazine ads, smokestacks—and Johnson's moticos. I can only link these elements myself through speculation. While Johnson's silhouettes send our minds along a path of association, turning us into poets and matchmakers, we can also never recover the precise lineage of psychological chance born of Johnson's own thoughts. In this sense, Johnson's works create an experience of the queer utopian "not-yet-here." In the case of *Double Andy with Nail Polish Model*, the silhouette occludes Warhol's part in the piece while also foregrounding it, encouraging us to dig through the layers to find the original personality. It is a collage merging a nail polish model with bunnies and moticos, but it is also Andy Warhol's portrait. The female model's eyes meet our own from inside Warhol's skull, her gaze becoming his. Johnson exposes the constructedness of gender, as Warhol's void-like presence absorbs, or contains, the uber-feminine model. Has he feminized Warhol, or has he masculinized the model? This very question reveals how, from Johnson's perspective, gender is not inherent to any object or person, but constructed through a

web of associations. Thus, Allowing bodies to coexist with objects, flattening elements into a single semiotic plane, Johnson seems to say that we are all "an open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning."[10] In addition to its implications about gender, this queer schema of the body also aligns with contemporary theoretical projects such as, for example, somatechnics, which sees the body as always having been integrated with technology.[11] Somatechnics embraces embodied realities while acknowledging that the body is constructed, just like any other thing, through relational factors—and, furthermore, it seeks to expand, question, and reorganize those relational factors. I suggest that Johnson's silhouette collages engage in a similar project, queering the body's normative modes through free association.

Johnson's 1947 mailing to Elaine Schmitt Urbain is striking in its use of a graphic silhouette drawing, marking an early appearance of this motif. The written contents of the letter slant across the silhouette's forehead, the words becoming hair. Where lips would be, Johnson has instead included text reading, "asawa is making baskets from wire." Perhaps the silhouette is speaking this phrase, or perhaps it is eating the words. In either sense, Johnson creates an interplay between text and image where text becomes an object in its own right—a philosophy that later structures his collages. Considering his education at BMC, Johnson's usage of silhouettes may trace back to his knowledge of art history. As friends often remarked, despite his aloof persona and reclusivity later in life, Johnson was always curious and up-to-date on art world happenings, and he had a nearly encyclopedic knowledge of art history.[12] It is relevant to mention that the silhouette he designed for this mailing does not represent any specific individual. It is prototypical, almost mimicking an Egyptian profile of the type Johnson might be learning about at school, either under Albers or through his peers. Rather than a silhouetted personality, we can see it as an idea of a silhouette, exemplifying all that the silhouetted form might be able to accomplish. In October 1947, Johnson is beginning to think about the human silhouette as a tool for graphic design and a dumping ground for words. The silhouette in this mailing memorializes that burgeoning preoccupation. Thus, Johnson's training at BMC helped him build a

conceptual background for silhouettes as powerful, uniquely embodied design motifs. This 1947 silhouette presages Johnson's combinatory techniques in his Silhouette University series, lending insight into the effect of his Black Mountain College education on his semiotic queering of the body.

Considering their sharp contours and potential to confuse negative space, Johnson's silhouettes also show influence from his background in graphic design. To explore this aspect of Johnson's visual language, I will turn to discuss the spiral motif in Johnson's 1947 mailing and later works. In the silhouette drawing from 1947, Johnson draws a spiral in the place of an eye. The spiral is one symbol which appears frequently in Johnson's visual alphabet, its open, swirling shape relating to his stance against the "self-enclosed, self-sufficient image."[13] Investigating this symbol, we can see a glimpse into Johnson's web of references achieved through his recurring designs.

Figure 3. Ray Johnson, *Cow II*, 1972. Mixed media collage on cardboard panel, 21 x 21 (53.3 x 53.3). Private Collection, Courtesy of the Ray Johnson Estate.

One high-profile appearance of spirals is in Johnson's "Famous People's Mother's Potato Mashers" series. Johnson was fascinated with potato mashers, drawing them frequently. About potato mashers, the Ray Johnson Estate says, "Johnson tips the head of the masher onto the same plane as the handle creating a flattened, (mashed) image."[14] Just as discussed with Johnson's silhouette series, this conceptual flattening relates to his technique of free association, letting objects, names, and symbols coexist in a web of meaning. It further relates to the critical turn towards the flatbed picture plane, a crucial conceptual success for Johnson's collages. The estate also writes, "the idea of bodies flattened one on top of the other was part of the appeal of 'mashing,' as Wilson has described it. The weight of water in the ocean, as it presses against bodies and moves them at its will was another sexual metaphor for Johnson."[15] Again, Johnson's conceptual methodology links concretely to an interest in sexual practices.

It becomes relevant to reconstruct details surrounding the artist's personal life at Black Mountain College and his views on sexuality. In an interview with scholar Benjamin Kahan, William S. Wilson describes Johnson's sexuality, saying, "Ray… was trying to elude this sense of classification. He never said, 'I am a gay man.' Ray was not lying, he was not hypocritical or insincere, he refused the system of classification that sees heterosexuality as the opposite of homosexuality. Ray never concealed his sexuality; there was no closet to hold him."[16] Thus, Johnson follows the queer anti-identitarian strain which Muñoz so closely identifies him with. Johnson's experimentation began at Black Mountain College, where he had an intimate relationship with sculptor Richard Lippold, who was about ten years his senior. Wilson refers to their ongoing sexual encounters, which may have occurred in Lippold's hearse—one which he used to transport his sculptures.[17] Wilson believes this relationship had a significant psychosexual impact on Johnson, influencing his future involvement in S.M. subcultures. Later in life Johnson is recorded as active in the New York leather scene, bringing figures like Jimmy DeSana and Diane Arbus to his favorite club circuits.

Benjamin Kahan's essay "Ray Johnson's Anti-Archive: Blackface, Sadomasochism, and the Racial and Sexual Imagination of Pop Art" expands on this idea of S.M. as central to Johnson's work. Kahan articulates the connection between Johnson's vested interest in dismantling art-world hierarchies of wealth and race and his interest in sadomasochistic themes. He points to S.M. references in Johnson's recurring graphic motifs—for example, in his bunny heads, where the bunny's ears and nose often become phallic, or when Johnson pastes the bunny head atop a photograph with eye and mouth holes like a leather mask. Kahan contends that these references form a part of Johnson's larger project towards "non-genitally organized eroticization of the body" and his "resistance to sexuality's classificatory seizure," echoing Wilson's explanation of Johnson's anti-identitarian views.

Considering these details, I contend that Johnson's interest in the potato masher also comes from its visual character, in some ways resembling a tool with sexual potential. The handle of Johnson's potato masher design resembles the handle of a riding crop. Johnson also drew another object with a similar suggestive design, a Japanese "massage ball"—and he owned both a potato masher and massager upon which he based these designs. By physically flattening the potato masher into a 2D design, Johnson creates an imaginary tool which could be used to whack, flatten, and mash—its spiral shape, now in line with its handle like a paddle, enables a lateral movement of the arm or wrist. The spiral symbol, like the snake, not only has sexual associations newly created through Johnson's visual vocabulary. It also represents turning in, swirling, and proliferations of meanings, all part of Johnson's larger project of queering normative modes of being. This marks just one example of a recurring, suggestive symbol developed through Johnson's mode of free association, creating new purposes through combination in his enigmatic collages.

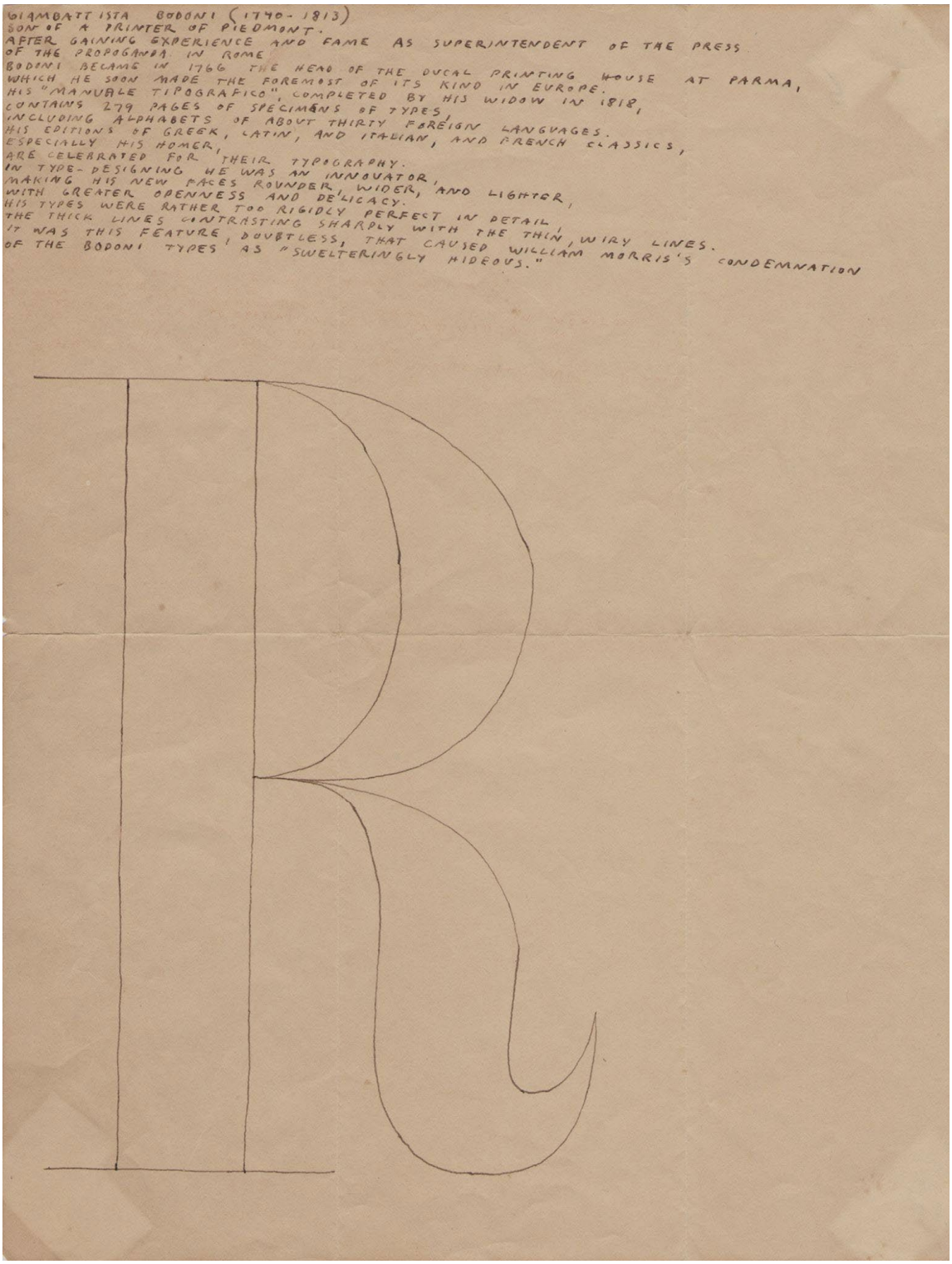

Figure 4. Ray Johnson, *Untitled Mailing (Second Page)*, 1947. Collection of Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center.

Johnson's graphic design background proves fundamental for his queer visual alphabet, allowing him to create a repertoire of characteristic design elements based in techniques of linework, lettering, and silhouetting. Johnson's distinct graphic characters are one aspect that differentiates him from other collagists, enabling a specific, suggestive, expansive queer symbology. In the 1947 mailing, Johnson writes about his cover for the November 1947 edition of *Interiors* Magazine, one of his first professional forays into graphic design. The training Johnson received in graphic design at Black Mountain College launched his career in New York, having a significant, lasting impact on his artwork and social circle.[18] The second page of the letter (Figure 4) further demonstrates Johnson's fascination with design. A large, serif letter R appears below an excerpt about Giambattista Bodoni, designer of 17th-18th typefaces which eventually became the still-popular Bodoni font. At Black Mountain College, Johnson not only received training as a graphic designer from Josef Albers and Alvin Lustig, but also learned about design history. Tying together history and practice, these experiences laid the groundwork for Johnson's future works on the cutting edge of conceptual collage. Like in the case of silhouettes and spirals, crisp visual motifs build a rich, queer visual language.

In Johnson's mailing to Elaine Schmitt Urbain, we see both the silhouette and the spiral make an early appearance in the artist's correspondence. Johnson was not the only Black Mountain College student to develop a vested interest in spirals as a design element. Johnson's close friend Lorna Blaine Halper went on to utilize a spiral as the head of her character, Spiro, who appears in sketches, engravings, and even steel sculptures. We can also see a spiral-like influence in Ruth Asawa's twisted, woven sculptural forms. Johnson's training under the Alberses, learning to deploy basic shapes and understand interlocking forms, enabled his radical collage techniques. Understanding Johnson's impact on contemporary queer theory in context with his training at Black Mountain College, artistic and personal influences from the college clearly arise as core aspects of Johnson's career-building, artistic practice, theoretical concerns, and social life. It was the highly experimental, highly queer environment at Black Mountain College that enabled Johnson's radical work.

This deeper understanding of Johnson's biography helps put his theoretical alignment towards queer relationality into context. In particular, his silhouette compositions reflect his "non-genitally organized eroticization of the body" manifested as markers of absence. As I have stated, his silhouettes include personalities while also occluding them, creating an experience of the queer utopian not-yet-here—a merging of past and present to inspire the future. Relating to his interest in S.M. and anonymous sex, silhouettes present a method of portraiture which is highly embodied on the part of sitter and artist, literally leaning in close and tracing a person's physical form, yet also anonymizing, flattening the subject into a featureless void. In this way, they connect to a sense of longing for something not-yet-here, something both personal and anonymous, which has long formed a part of queer counterculture. In part, queer longing arises from the stigmatized position of queer individuals, who must traverse non-normative channels to find connection. Summing up this common aspect of queer experience, which often becomes an in-joke, a social media user in 2023 writes, "the absence of something is also its presence," followed by the comment, "why does everyone keep tagging this post as yuri." But this longing also arises from what Muñoz identifies as a utopian impulse, a longing not just for human connection in the present, but for connections across time that might give rise to different, queerer, ways of living in the world. In Johnson's silhouettes, the absence of the silhouetted bodies is also their continuing presence. The individuals' physical absence but perpetual signification inspires us to think of the connections that were, that could be, and that could have been.

Thus, as an art-historical figure, Johnson not only presents a body of work with clear aptitude for contemporary queer theoretical frameworks. His biography also illuminates countercultures from the queer artistic scene in New York, helping us picture the networks of individuals which become social references in his work. This biography then cements our understanding of his silhouette compositions as products of queer counterculture, with silhouettes becoming an integral tool to inspire the queer utopian not-yet-here.

[1] José Esteban Muñoz, “Utopia’s Seating Chart: Ray Johnson, Jill Johnston, and Queer Intermedia as System,” in *Cruising Utopia : The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009): 118.
[2] *Ray Johnson: WHAT A DUMP*, curated by Jarrett Earnest (New York, NY: David Zwirner, 2021), exhibition webpage, https://www.davidzwirner.com/exhibitions/2021/ray-johnson-what-a-dump.
[3] See Jarrett Earnest, “WHAT A DUMP,” written on the occasion of *Ray Johnson: WHAT A DUMP*, curated by Jarrett Earnest at David Zwirner, New York, NY, 2021. I am indebted to this essay for its excellent investigation of Ray Johnson as a queer figure, and to this exhibition for the light it shed on Johnson’s silhouette collages.
[4] Earnest, “WHAT A DUMP,” 38. See Jarrett Earnest’s essay for a discussion of this myth, codifying the silhouette’s associations with absence, presence, and sentimentality in Romanticism.
[5] For a discussion of one such historic silhouette, and the grounding of this practice in phrenology, see Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Duke University Press, 2004): 22-23.
[6] Ellen Levy, *What's in a Name? Ray Johnson's Free Associations*, edited by Frances F.L. Beatty, PH.D. (New York: Richard L. Feigen & Co., 2011), 4.
[7] William S. Wilson, “Ray Johnson and Dick Higgins: Reciprocities,” *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* 8 (2015), accessed online.
[8] Diane Spodarek and Randy Delbeke, "Ray Johnson Interview," *Detroit Artists Monthly* 3 (February 1978): 8.
[9] Comparing many other images of Johnson’s silhouette compositions, I was not able to ascertain the identity of the second silhouette. The outermost silhouette is Andy Warhol’s, as demonstrated in Appendix C. I would guess the innermost silhouette might be a different person also named Andy, hence the title “Double Andy.”
[10] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993): 8.
[11] For a discussion of Somatechnics as a theoretical project which queers the body, see: Matt Lodder, “A Somatechnological Paradigm: How do you Make Yourself a Body Without Organs?” in *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies*, ed. Samantha Murray and Nikki Sullivan, (Farnham, UK: Routledge, 2009), 187-206.
[12] For references to Johnson’s knowledge of contemporary art and art history, see: “Ray Johnson's (Un)birthday,” hosted by Book Beat and Julie J. Thomson with special guests John Held, Jr., Weslea Sidon, and Richard Pieper, YouTube video, recording of a Zoom call, October 14, 2021, 00:16:40 - 00:17:30. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jZ3cjFWu6I. See also Frances Beatty and Elizabeth Zuba, “On Ray Johnson’s The Paper Snake,” Journal of Black Mountain College Studies 8 (2015): Postscript by Frances Beatty. Accessed online.
[13] Levy, *What's in a Name?*, 4.
[14] “Glossary,” Ray Johnson Estate Website, New York, NY: Ray Johnson Estate, accessed online. https://www.rayjohnsonestate.com/glossary.
[15] “Glossary,” Ray Johnson Estate Website.
[16] Benjamin Kahan, “ON RAY JOHNSON'S SEXUALITY, LOVES, AND FRIENDSHIPS. An interview between William S. Wilson and Benjamin Kahan,” *Angelaki* 23, no. 1 (2018): 85-86.
[17] Kahan, “ON RAY JOHNSON'S SEXUALITY, LOVES, AND FRIENDSHIPS,” 87.
[18] For a detailed analysis of Johnson’s early work in graphic design, see Julie J. Thomson, “The Art of Graphic Design: Lustig, Albers, Johnson, and the 1945 Summer Session,” *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*, 6 (2014), accessed online.