Black Mountain College
MUSEUM + ARTS CENTER

**Dear Lorna, Love Ray | Ray Johnson's Queer Formalism**

Alex Landry

*Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*
Volume 14: Queer Life at Black Mountain College (Fall 2023)
Article URL: https://www.blackmountaincollege.org/journal/volume-14/landry
Published online: September 2023

**Published by:**
Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center
Asheville, North Carolina
https://www.blackmountaincollege.org

**Editors:**
Thomas E. Frank, Wake Forest University
Carissa Pfeiffer, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

**Volume 14 Guest Editor:**
Ant M Lobo-Ladd

**Production Editor:**
Kira Houston, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center

# Dear Lorna, Love Ray | Ray Johnson's Queer Formalism

Alex Landry


Ray Johnson, Envelope from Ray Johnson, Black Mountain College, to Lorna Blaine Halper, 101 East 85th Street, New York City, postmark March 8, 1947, mixed media. Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, Gift of the Black Mountain College Project and Lorna Blaine Halper, 2012.26.135.01. © Ray Johnson Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Dear Lorna, Love Ray is a digital exhibition organized by the Asheville Art Museum and curated by Alex Landry, Summer 2022 Curatorial Intern for Museum Diversity, supported by a Digitizing Hidden Collection grant from the Council on Library & Information Resources.[1] As an extension of this project, select highlights from the full exhibit have been lifted to explore connections between Ray Johnson's early mail art and contemporary discourses on queer art practices. Five themes—*unfixity in language, playful materiality, the line, surface, and found and saved materials*—rise from the letters not only as tactics and ideas which became more important to Johnson over time but can also be related to queer strategies of artmaking recognized by scholars of queer studies, such as José Esteban Muñoz, Lex Morgan Lancaster, Miriam Kienle, David Getsy, Benjamin Kahan, William J. Simmons, and so many others.

These scholars promote an expansive understanding of queer[ness] in art as an active process of destabilizing or refusing to signify, of challenging conventional modes of self-representation, and/or of diverting representation to "generate encounters in order to engage in the world."[2] In extending a queer framework to these letters, I look beyond (but do not ignore) purely textual aspects to appreciate their total construction as objects, infused with complex interactions between form and content. William J. Simmons's 2013 article "Notes on Queer Formalism" offers a salient lens for proposing how queerness operates in tandem with medium in Ray Johnson's early mail art:

> It follows that queer is both immaterial and corporeal. It is conceptual and reliant on the medium. It is deconstructive and authorial. It is the Self and the Other, together in perpetuity but not mapped onto each other. It is a multiplicity of media that lack a hierarchy, but it is not post-medium.[3]

In the letters' deployment of heterogenous materials, emphasis on the slippages and incoherency of language and forms, and attention to all their constituent surfaces, Johnson *queers* the traditional missive. The entanglement of these distinctions between envelope, letter, and message also serves to narrow the very real distance between Johnson and his close friend at Black Mountain College, Lorna Blaine Halper. Following the exhibition section, I offer an analysis of one of Johnson's later collages as a starting point for considering how these themes reappear and evolve throughout the artist's career.

## The Exhibition

According to its founder, artist Ray Johnson (Detroit, MI 1927–1995 Sag Harbos, NY), the New York Correspondence School's mail art activities began as early as 1943. This digital exhibition, *Dear Lorna, Love Ray*, explores a selection of early letters from Johnson to Lorna Blaine Halper (Boston, MA 1924–2012 Pawling, NY) in the spring of 1947, written while they were students at Black Mountain College (BMC). Johnson's collages, mail art, and photography have exhibited internationally since the 1960s, but most of his art made before 1950 was destroyed intentionally by the artist or scattered

among the private collections of his postal recipients. One such private collection of letters, sent to and retained by Halper and now in the Collection of the Asheville Art Museum, was made publicly accessible over the summer of 2022. This exhibition seeks to enrich the understanding of Johnson's practices and influences at this pivotal starting point of his career by coupling the letters with contemporaneous works by artists he knew and admired during his stay in Black Mountain. Including artworks by Blaine, Josef Albers, Elaine Schmitt Urbain, and more, the pairings help to visualize the intersections in Johnson's practice between painting, collage, design, and the postal system.

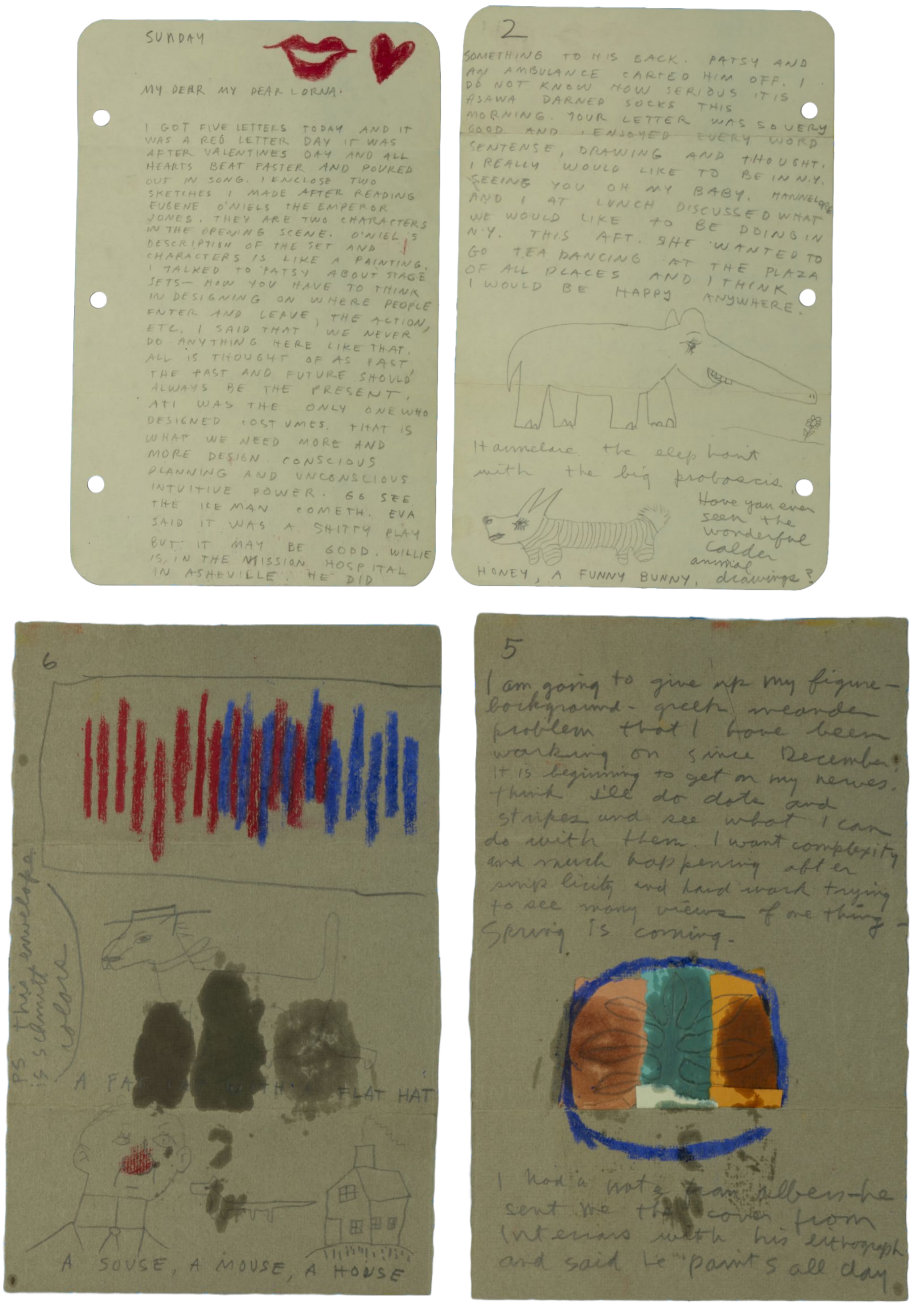
The ten or so letters from Ray Johnson to Lorna Blaine Halper date from February 10 through March 12, 1947. Johnson was not yet 20 years old. He arrived at Black Mountain College in 1945 and stayed through the summer of 1948, the year where he was crucially introduced to visiting figures Willem and Elaine de Kooning, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, and Richard Lippold. These artists would have a great impact on Johnson, including his decision to move to New York after the 1948 summer session. In 1947, however, he was still an avid student in an inclusive community of creative young minds. A youthful excitement and curiosity characteristic of an artist just starting out pervades his descriptions in his letters of painting developments, updates on various college happenings, philosophical quips, and amusing doodles. Seeing that Johnson never quite abandons this proximity to childhood wonder, the letters carry in them fragments of practices that he continued for the following four decades: collaging pieces of construction paper to make envelopes, gluing in pictures and scraps and writing over them, and making his letters on and with whatever substrate was at hand. He is playful, serious, spiritual, and characteristically curious of everything around him.

For a truly enigmatic figure whose later mail art would be characterized as far from traditional missives, this collection of letters to Lorna Blaine Halper is remarkable, because Johnson is more descriptive, more willing to share anecdotes and digress into stream-of-consciousness writings than nearly any other collection of his correspondence. They tell a fittingly complex story of a young man who writes of his

desires to become a prolific abstract painter—in letters on which he draws and collages. This is the same artist who just a few years after these 1947 communications destroyed his paintings and returned, for the rest of his career, to these letters on which he draws and collages.

Ray Johnson's community was always essential to his art. The interplay of ideas, which became the very fabric of his New York Correspondence School, began in the 1940s as letters between friends, relatives, and mentors. In winter 1947, classes at Black Mountain College began on January 8. Johnson's circle of friends included Lorna Blaine Halper, Ruth Asawa, Elaine Schmitt Urbain, Oli Sihvonen, Hazel Larson Archer, Lore Lindenfeld, and Vera Williams. Teachers Josef and Anni Albers took a sabbatical leave in the summer of 1946 and were set to return in February 1948, while Ilya Bolotowsky stood in to teach courses in painting and drawing. Johnson's close friend since 1945, Lorna Blaine, had just left on a trip and Johnson would possibly be visiting her in New York in late March. Even though Johnson wouldn't move to New York until after the 1948 summer session, he attended the Art Students League on scholarship in 1946 and had a growing network of friends living or wanting to live there.

**February 17, 1947 – UNFIXITY IN LANGUAGE**


Envelope and enclosures from Ray Johnson, Black Mountain College, to Lorna Blaine, 101 East 85th Street, New York City, postmark February 17, 1947, envelope: 4 1/2 × 6 7/8 in., letter with pencil and crayon (pg. 1 & 2): 8 1/2 × 5 1/2 in., letter with pencil, crayon, and glue on construction paper (pg. 5 & 6): 10 × 6 1/2 in. Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, gift of the Black Mountain College Project and Lorna Blaine Halper, 2012.26.140.01-04.. © Ray Johnson Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

*"HONEY, A FUNNY BUNNY"*
*"A FAT CAT WITH A FLAT HAT"*
*"A SOUSE, A MOUSE, A HOUSE"*

Starting in the mid-1950s, Ray Johnson's art famously dragged words, names, and phrases through countless arbitrary iterations to seemingly no end or distinct purpose. Puns, rhymes, anagrams, near- and misspellings were all equally available fodder for new works and could be repeated in endless variety. "For Johnson," says Elizabeth Zuba in *Not Nothing: Selected Writings by Ray Johnson 1954-1994*, "language and image are rarely metaphorical; all symbols are not what they were but newly open to serendipitous blunder, metonymy, parataxis, contextual transition and translation—correspondences." Johnson once received sponsorship from the Richard Feigen Gallery to drop sixty foot-long hotdogs from a helicopter above Ward's Island in New York City as a performance piece for the 7th Annual Avant Garde Arts Festival. When asked why he did this, Johnson claimed the length of the hotdogs (one foot) connected to a series of collages he was working on, called "Feetings". The very remoteness and serendipity of this connection between dropping dozens of hotdogs from a helicopter and his "Feetings" collages embodies Johnson's associative art practice.

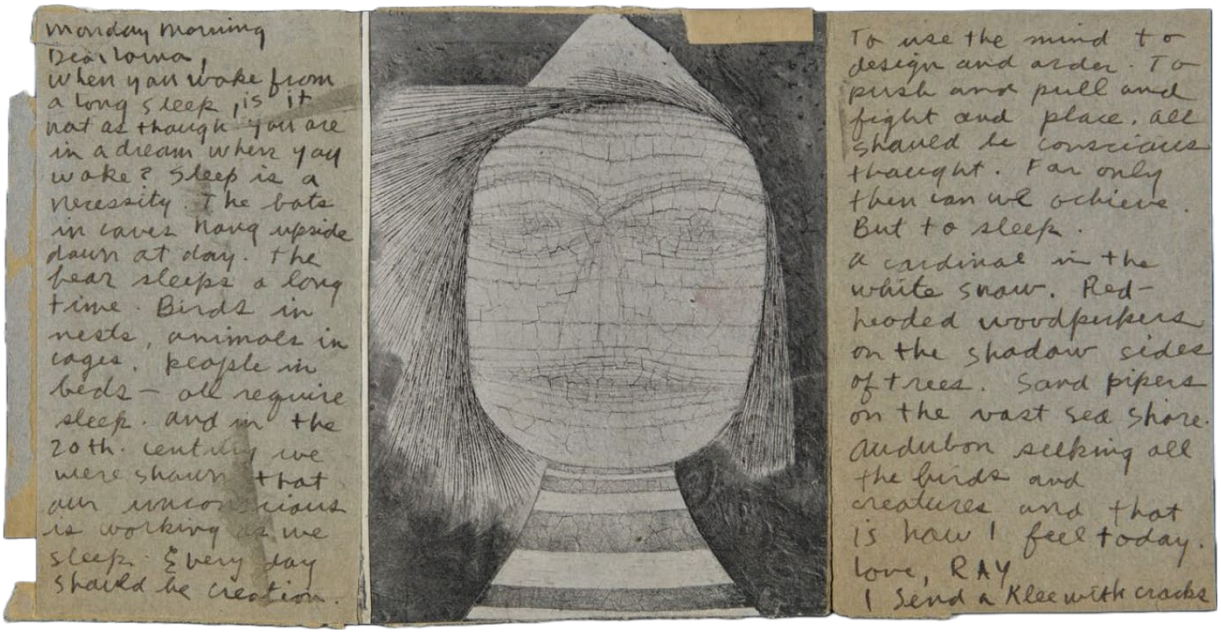
However, Johnson's primary focus at Black Mountain College was painting. He describes on page five in his letter from  February 17, 1947 how he was going to "give up" on what he called his figure-background problem to try "dots and stripes", and his cover design for the November issue of *Interiors Magazine* that year demonstrated his commitment to the idea. Using a restricted palette of red, black, and blue, Johnson offered a series of simply paired designs that generate the illusion of varying tones of color.[4] The style likely draws from an exercise that Josef Albers (Bottrop, Germany 1888—1976 New Haven, CT) often taught in his visual design classes, in which students combined colored sheets of paper to develop an awareness for color's nature as relative. Experimentation was a crucial aspect of Albers's teaching, as he believed creativity required not only physical skill or technique but perceptual training against mental habit and repetition. He asked students to practice mirror-writing (handwriting

backward using a mirror) and sketching with their non-dominant hand as methods for reorienting routine mechanisms between the mind and body. While effective, such exercises also yielded amusing results ("*My dogs look like an assortment of baboons, chinchillas, strange creatures...*").

*"He delighted in puns, rhymes, anagrams, palindromes, spoonerisms, homophones, homonyms, and words within words."*

— Kate Dempsey's "Code Word: Ray" from *The Tutelary Years of Ray Johnson 1943-1967* exhibition catalogue (2010)

**February 18, 1947 – PLAYFUL MATERIALITY**




Letter from Ray Johnson, Black Mountain College, to Lorna Blaine, 101 East 85th Street, New York City, postmark February 18, 1947, letter with ink, 4 3/4 × 9 1/4 in. Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, gift of the Black Mountain College Project and Lorna Blaine Halper, 2012.26.137. © Ray Johnson Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

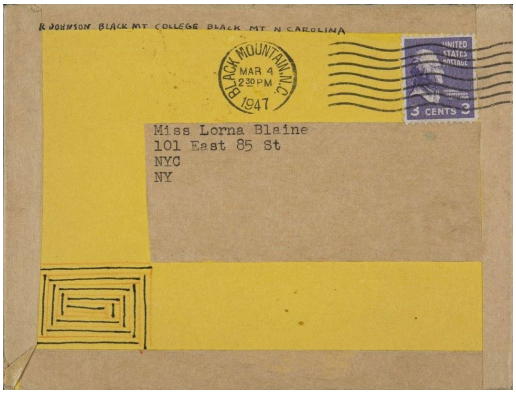
*"I send a Klee with cracks."*

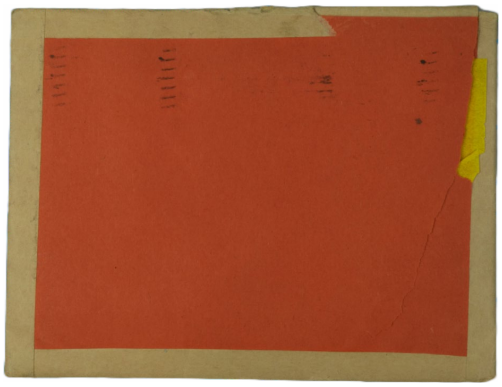
Ray Johnson's "Klee with cracks" is a pasted image taken from a newspaper or book of the *Actor's Mask*, an oil painting by Swiss-born German artist Paul Klee (1879–1940). While not confirmed, the reference to Klee may have come about via Fannie Hillsmith, an American Cubist painter and family friend of Lorna Blaine

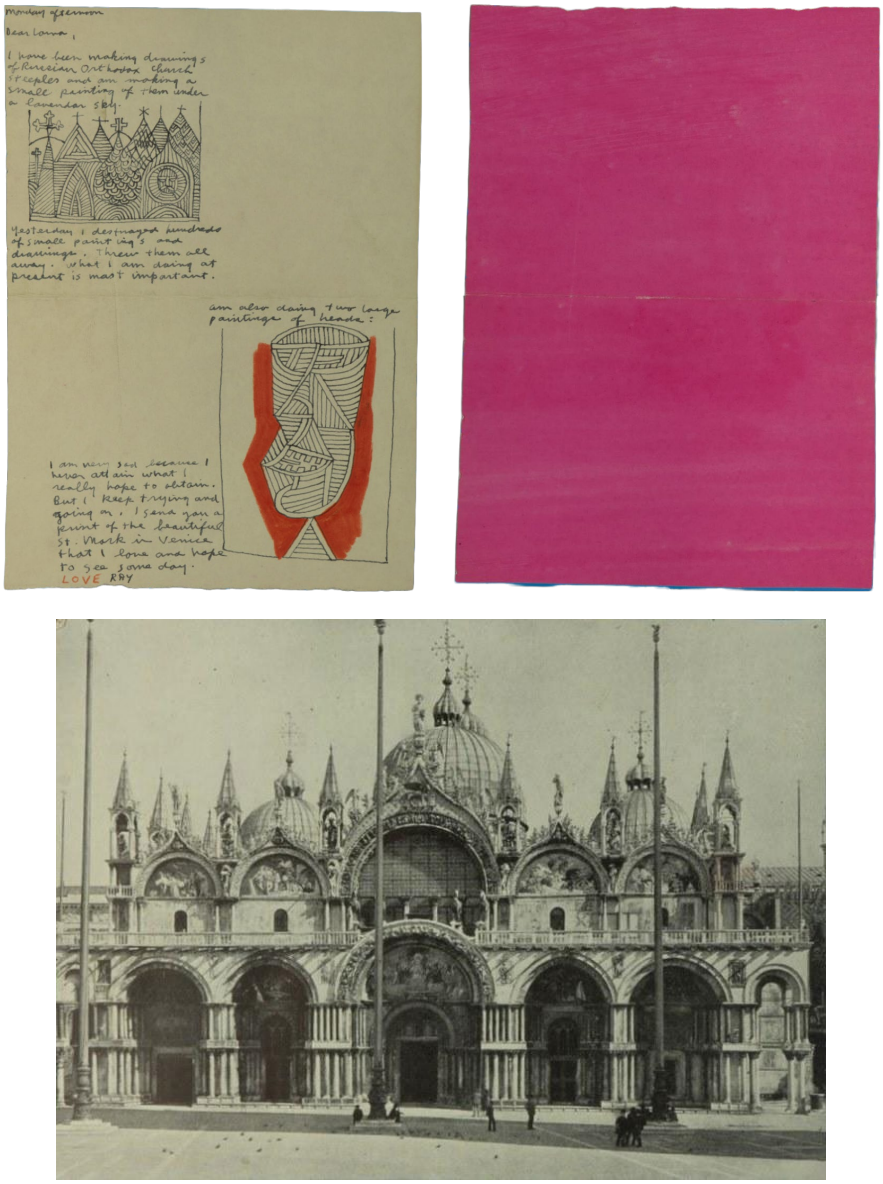
Halper who came to teach at Black Mountain College in 1945 with an expressed interest in Klee. Hillsmith was also a member of the American Abstract Artists group alongside Albers, who invited Hillsmith to teach at the summer session. Klee's flat, often playful or childlike forms compliment the style of Halper and Johnson's sketches to each other. Klee also experimented with his materials, mixing wet and dry media and roughening the surfaces of his paintings. Johnson, in the letter for March 7th, mentions his interest in Albers's **"**sand-blasting" paintings and here points out that the Klee is "with cracks." Perhaps influenced by Albers's *matière* studies, Johnson began to turn his attention towards textures, materials, and qualities of surface.

Like Albers's color exercise, *matière* studies are about developing new ways of seeing and engaging with a medium. The texture of a rocky surface might appear soft when surrounded by crumpled plastic; the surface of a leaf, when embedded in oil paint, might be mistaken for the gouge of a palette knife. Students developed a sense of the internal structure of materials and how a material's external appearance is mediated by its surroundings. Refined by his years of teaching at the Bauhaus in Germany, Albers's truly modern curriculum explored how basic sense operations play a pervading role in the transfer of meaning between an artwork and a viewer. His emphasis on deconstructing surface qualities may have been foundational to Johnson's low-relief collages, which he called *Moticos* (anagram of the word "osmotic," relating to osmosis), of the mid-1950s.

**March 4, 1947 – THE LINE**





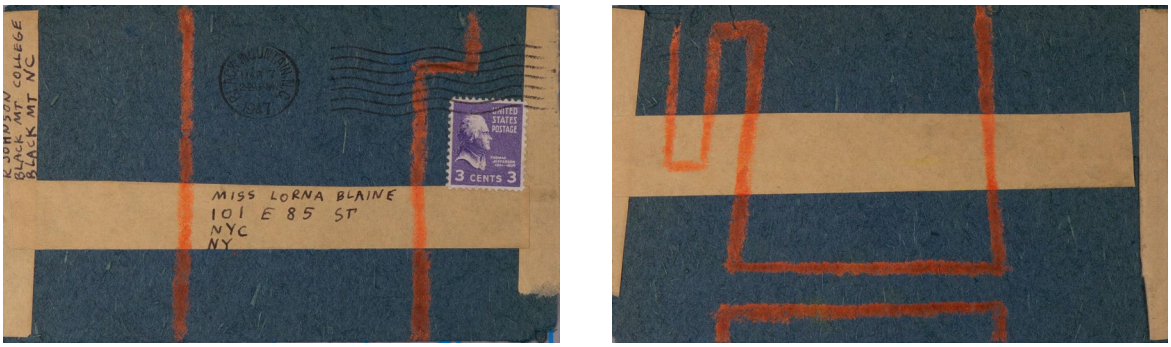

Envelope and enclosures from Ray Johnson, Black Mountain College, to Lorna Blaine, 101 East 85th Street, New York City, postmark March 4, 1947, envelope: 4 1/4 × 5 5/8 in., letter with ink: 7 1/2 × 5 1/4 in., image of St. Mark's, Venice: 4 × 5 1/2 in. Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, gift of the Black Mountain College Project and Lorna Blaine Halper, 2012.26.129.01-03. © Ray Johnson Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Spirals, linear designs, and geometric arrangements appear across both Ray Johnson's letters and Lorna Blaine Halper's sketches from their time at Black Mountain College, and both artists returned to these motifs in novel ways throughout their

careers. Halper's spirals are often more circular and depicted in relation to the body (as in Johnson's homage to her style in the final letter). These sketches demonstrate Halper's initial exploration of a spiral-headed character, "Spiro," who assumed a multifaceted life of its own in her work.

A spiral is a shape that records its making in its final appearance. As a kind of diagram, it embodies a tracing of the path made by one's hand, and Johnson's drawings even from this period demonstrate an awareness of this quality. In a letter to another friend at the college, Johnson sent a multi-page cartoon illustration in which some of the scenes connected through the appearance of a meandering line extending from a spider's web. Along this line traversing the various scenes, Johnson wrote pairings of anagrams ("LEEP/PEEL, TIME/EMIT, DOG/GOD") and other words simply spelled forwards and backwards ("WORK/KROW, HELP/PLEH"). He positions the line as a kind of mirror reflecting each word's opposite orientation. In doing so, Johnson draws attention to the way the line fundamentally leads the eye in opposite directions. His use of the spiral motif, which can simultaneously represent a point moving inwards or outwards, then comes as no surprise.

**March 7, 1947 - SURFACE**




Envelopes from Ray Johnson, Black Mountain College, to Lorna Blaine, 101 East 85th Street, New York City, postmark March 7, 1947, envelope: 3 5/8 × 6 1/8 in. Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, gift of the Black Mountain College Project and Lorna Blaine Halper, 2012.26.145.01. © Ray Johnson Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

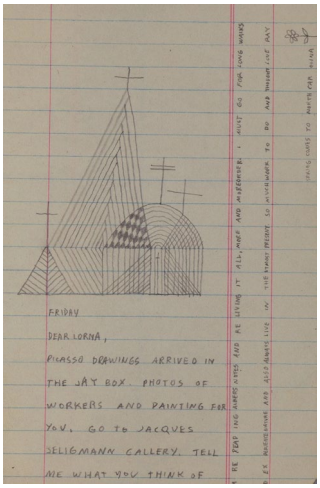
"I think that Schwitters collages and Rauschenberg silk screens should be put in envelopes and left as offerings in churches."
— An Interview with NOSNHOJ YAR, *Artforum* (1964)

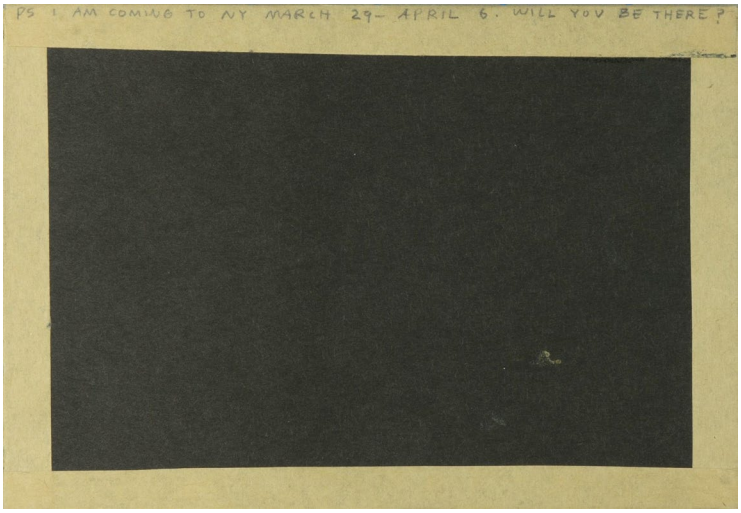
*"Ever see any KURT SCHWITTERS paintings or constructions? He was a post-war German DADA artist who raided the junk heaps and put together wonderful textured things and created from all the mess that was post-war Germany... I always remember Albers saying - we work in mud in the day and emerge in perfume in the evening."*

Kurt Schwitters's (Hanover, Germany 1887—1948 Kendal, United Kingdom) collage practice might be the furthest opposite in style to Piet Mondrian's rigid abstractions, but both artists sought to rebuild a war-wrecked world through their art. Where Mondrian was severely discerning in his use of materials, Schwitters combined all kinds of detritus and found objects in a technique (and as an artwork) he called *Merz*: ticket stubs, wrapping paper, cardboard, dolls, newspapers, broken furniture, and other recycled or discarded items. Schwitters never visited America, but he fled Germany in the late 1930s and was held in internment camps in Norway until his release in 1941. Schwitters picked up what the Cubists had explored in paper reliefs and exploded collage as a medium, later influencing a mass of contemporary artists, including Ed Ruscha and Robert Rauschenberg.

*Calm Center* (circa 1949-1951), one of Ray Johnson's most famous early paintings, draws together ideas he learned from Albers, Mondrian, and Schwitters. Johnson carefully labored over this painting for several months, adding one color at a time in neat stripes and squares. Of the 49 squares in the composition, Johnson never repeats a pattern, and yet the work is entirely balanced. In treating each color as an individual, movable fragment as he did with pieces of paper in Albers's color exercises Lorna Blaine Halper and John Urbain's studies, Johnson began his transition from painting to collage through abstraction. A color need not be blended with others or built up in layers but shuffled and arranged like cards on a table. This consciousness of surface never left Johnson's work and is perhaps the most crucial lesson Johnson took from his studies at Black Mountain College.

## March 8, 1947 – FOUND AND SAVED MATERIALS


Envelope and enclosures from Ray Johnson, Black Mountain College, to Lorna Blaine, 101 East 85th Street, New York City, postmark March 8, 1947, envelope: 4 × 5 3/4 in., letter with pencil: 5 1/2 × 3 5/8 in. Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, gift of the Black Mountain College Project and Lorna Blaine Halper, 2012.26.135.01-02. © Ray Johnson Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

*"AM | RE | READ | IN | ALBERS| NOTES | AND | RE | LIVING | IT | ALL, | MORE | AND | MORE | ORDER."*

Johnson couldn't help but adorn many of his envelopes and letters with delicate flares of design, a practice he would expound upon in his later mail art. In this example, he, quite appropriately, writes of the "order" in Albers's lessons in which every word (or syllable) of Johnson's fits between the grid lines of loose-leaf paper. He then achieves this same format on the cover of the envelope by neatly splitting Halper's address between the blue and yellow rectangles. Like nearly all his letters to Halper, Johnson handmade the envelope with construction paper and neatly taped every edge to protect its contents. There even seems to be some laden intention in having the cover in "in color" (including the address) and the inverted side all black. Many of the letters also demonstrate Johnson's consciousness of the geometric interactions between the edges of the rectangular envelope and the possible re-emphasis of this frame with tape, which afforded him another straight edge in his designs.

Johnson wrote his letters to Halper on various found substrates, reflecting the immediacy and naturalness of his anecdotes and doodles. His envelope for February 17th included four types of found paper, with the succeeding pages cut to roughly the size of the first hole-punched sheet. Many of the letters fit in the envelopes at their precise edges, or in the instance of February 18th, the envelope becomes the letter itself. Johnson said in a radio interview in 1984, "Correspondence art consists of compression of ideas and images into envelopes, and I spent my entire life condensing—in a conceptual art fashion—fitting things to fit envelope sizes and folding things to fold into envelopes."

**An envelope is the letter's container; it encloses, envelops.**
**What happens when an envelope discloses?**

Johnson viewed the words, the substrates, and utensils he used all as opportunities to generate further interactions between the constituent elements in his letters. Lines and rectilinear shapes decorating many of the envelopes reemphasize the crispness of their edges, the seriality of looseleaf lines (as in the March 8th letter), or else draw out the edge's slight crookedness, leaning into human's inevitable bends (as in the February 18th letter). A post-script appears on the top edge of an envelope.

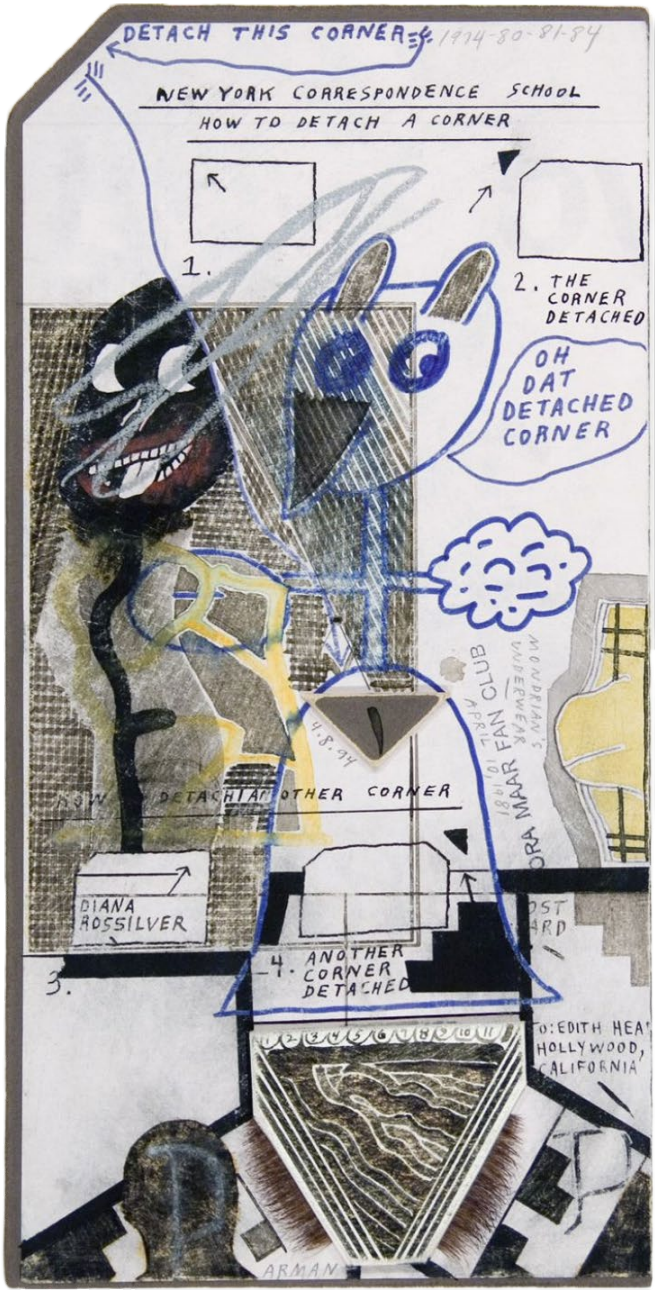
Scraps of various materials are cut to accommodate another. Another letter becomes the envelope. Although these are flat objects, they produce a network of visual exchanges leading the viewer across, around, and within their surfaces—constantly pulling the inside out and outside in.

Despite these complex relationships embedded in the construction of the letters, Johnson restrains from obstructing their functionality; they were received by Halper after all. His interventions playfully interrogate rather than reinvent conventionalities of letter-writing, as in the opening homophone (or accident), “My Deer My Dear Lorna” from February 18th. More rhymes are threaded into this letter’s anecdotal writings and doodles:

> My dogs look like an assortment of baboons, chinchillas, strange creatures, my sketches created much amusement in class. [James] Thurber drawings are really something I think. A dog is more than a dog…
> A FAT CAT WITH A FLAT HAT…
> A SOUSE, A MOUSE, A HOUSE

In the way that “Deer” reads as “Dear” when written at the top of a letterhead, Johnson also seems to be considering how a dog, taken from real life, can hardly be neutrally or faithfully reproduced in a drawing, nor even be encapsulated in a word. Words are predisposed to substitution and transformation. The written word ‘cat’ becomes ‘flat’, ‘fat’, or ‘hat’ easily enough, and of course produces a humorous surprise when represented as a drawing. That humor finds meaning in how those words strung together, their proximity. Context makes their meaning, hence why ‘Deer’ slips off the [writing] hand or tricks the [reading] eye. William S. Wilson, one of Johnson’s closest friends, lends a queer beauty to this analogous kind of logic: “each scrap or detail becomes a little plane suspended among deflections from other planes.”[5]

## Untitled (Detached Corner) by Ray Johnson




Ray Johnson, *Untitled (Detached Corner)*, 1974 with additions in 1980,1981, 1984, and 1994, mixed media on mat board, 11 x 5 1/2 in. Asheville Art Museum, Black Mountain College Collection, Museum purchase with funds provided by the 2005 Collectors' Circle with additional funds provided by Rob Pulleyn, Phillip Broughton & David Smith, and Mary Powell, 2005.16.01.29. © Ray Johnson Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

> Such destructiveness is also evident in an encounter where Chuck Close asked for 'an artist's discount' while purchasing a portrait of himself from Johnson. "Ray said, 'Of course.' **Then he cut the upper righthand corner to match the price break**." Similarly, when Schuyff offers Johnson $1,500 for a portrait that Johnson wanted to sell for $2,000, **Johnson cuts out a quarter,** making a new work of art in collaboration with Schuyff.[6]
>
> — Benjamin Kahan, "Ray Johnson's Anti-archive: blackface, sadomasochism, and the racial and sexual imagination of pop art" (2018)

*Untitled (Detached Corner)*, a modestly sized yet peculiar collage also held in the Asheville Art Museum, resonates with the exchanges described by Kahan in the above quote. Johnson's 'conscious short-circuitry' of the normative modes of collecting and exhibiting has become part of the artist's lasting expression, and not surprisingly, given his unprecedented adoption of the postal system as a system for distributing his art.[7] While keeping this in mind, a comparison of the creative strategies employed in the letters with this later collage allows for a discussion centered on material and technical evolutions, methods such as illustration and collage, which Johnson began developing long before his involvement with the New York Correspondence School.

Many years after sending them in the mail, Johnson returns to the themes identified above in his letters to Halper again in *(Untitled) Detached Corner*. The latter's small size does little to detract from its complexity, produced by Johnson in bursts over two decades. The collage depicts a hyperbole of its title: in the top register, a diagram of a corner being detached from a rectangle, outlined as discrete steps numbered one through four, leading to the bottom of the composition. A blue, winding line leading from the top margin down the center tracks the path of the literal corner of the substrate (mat board), which Johnson shifts from background to relief. Other corners litter the surface, unevenly overlapping various textures and linear progressions which compress the composition: the triangular nose or snout on the face of the (central) bunny head, a short profile of a stair in black reflected in white, and thick black contours making right angles marking where a human head might depart from the neck. Johnson leads the

viewer through a maze with little means of escape, each piece corresponding to another at repeated, yet individual intersections.[8]

Like the letters, *Untitled (Detached Corner)* is contingent upon and *interacts with* the very materials Johnson chose for its creation. Instead of literally detaching a corner of the piece, he recycles it over and over, complicating a straightforward idea and softening the boundaries between the literal and figurative. Compositional elements rest on no figurative "ground" but are instead woven together, and text is made into an active negotiator in the composition, including the various locations where he dates the work. These choices recall the way Johnson wrote his message to Halper from March 8th between (and perpendicular to) the orientation of looseleaf lines or the various examples in which he frames the recipient's address in terms of the envelope's design.

In activating the "given" or prefabricated aspects of the medium, Johnson directs the viewer towards the source of the work's construction—towards that missing corner, towards the grids of envelopes and paper and sums of vowels and consonants—such that every distinct element radiates with particularity while constantly reemphasized in the context of the whole. Simmons' further thoughts on queerness bring these comparisons into relief: "Queerness 'represents' an unsure mixture of singular embodiment and a passionate ownership of one's identity with the refusal of singularity. So too does the medium." Johnson's queer formalism engages us to look at objects more closely, to never take for granted they hold no surprises, and to seek in them, as we do in ourselves, boundless possibilities.

Out of these connections explored between Johnson's letters and this more recent collage, I have hoped not only to demonstrate how Johnson held to certain methods he learned as a student at Black Mountain College, but also to show how such lessons, centered often on the haptic, textural, and performative qualities of materials, can be read queerly as they relate to these later artworks.

In the reflection of Johnson's art, form seems all the more queer.

[1] These archival documents and many others have been digitized and shared in the Asheville Art Museum's Online Collection Database. Transcripts of Ray Johnson's letters may be accessed via this online database or in the digital exhibition. This digitization project is also supported in part by North Carolina Humanities, the state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

[2] Lex Morgan Lancaster, *Dragging Away: Queer Abstraction in Contemporary Art*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 55. muse.jhu.edu/book/102123. See also David Getsy's *Astract Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) and *Queer Behavior: Scott Burton and Performance Art*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

[3] William J. Simmons, "Notes on Queer Formalism," *Big Red & Shiny*, December 16, 2013, https://bigredandshiny.org/2929/notes-on-queer-formalism/. In 2021, Simmons expanded on this article in *Queer Formalism: The Return*, the first installment in an essay series published by Floating Opera Press.

[4] Julie J. Thomson in an earlier volume of this journal addresses how Johnson's magazine cover also reflects Alvin Lustig's lessons in graphic design, citing Johnson's expressed curiosity in the artist's cover design for *A Season in Hell* by Arthur Rimbaud. In addition, Kate Dempsey Martineau discusses in *Ray Johnson: Selective Inheritance* how Johnson undertook weaving classes at BMC with Trude Guermonprez and Franziska Mayer during the Albers' leave in 1947. Her argument that Johnson "combined" the former's weaving techniques—integrating painting both during and after the weaving process—with Josef Albers' teachings in perception and design suggests the myriad of disciplines informing Johnson's early compositions at Black Mountain College.

[5] William S. Wilson, "Ray Johnson: The One and The Other," in *Ray Johnson : Correspondences*, ed. Donna M. De Salvo and Catherine Gudis (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1999), 166.

[6] Kahan's compelling exploration of these exchanges also considers a queer-oriented framework, proposing "we might understand Johnson and his 'students' in the Correspondance School as engaged in a sadomasochistic scene of instruction, one where there are severe consequences (the work is partially destroyed) and pleasures (Schuyff gets the work for $1,500 after all) in obeying and disobeying Johnson's 'lessons.'"

[7] Jonathan Weinberg, "Ray Johnson Fan Club," in *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, ed. Donna M. De Salvo and Catherine Gudis (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1999), 100.

[8] Those familiar with Johnson's vast symbology will also identify in this collage the central bunny head, a pair of underwear on the right edge, a blacked-out silhouette of a human face in the bottom left corner, among other referents found in many of his other mature collages. Johnson's evident reference to blackface or minstrelsy represented in the graphic figure in the center-left of the composition also appears in multiple artworks across his career. Benjamin Kahan's 2018 essay, quoted above, productively engages some of the racial and sexual themes in Johnson's art from a contemporary perspective.