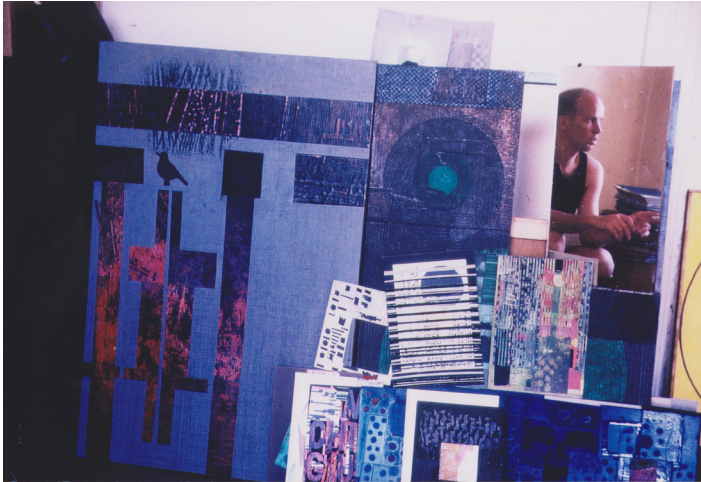
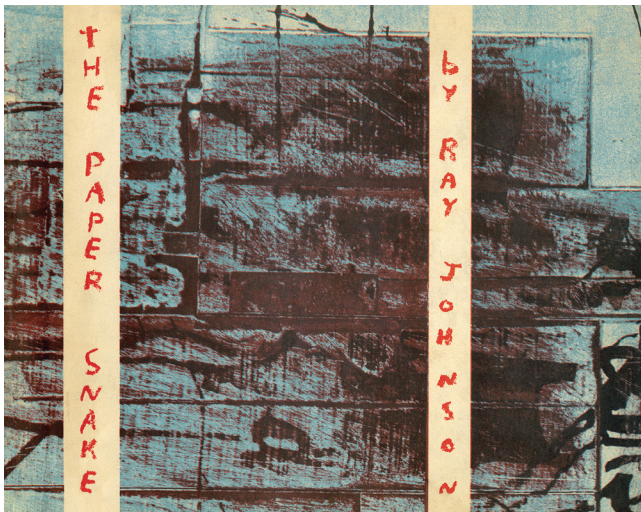


# SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY:

## Ray Johnson, Dick Higgins + the making of THE PAPER SNAKE



Above: Ray Johnson among his collages in his Dover Street apartment, 1959. Photo by Dick Higgins. Reproduced on the back cover of THE PAPER SNAKE. Collection of Maria & Walter Schnepel. Below: Front cover of THE PAPER SNAKE by Ray Johnson. New York: Something Else Press, 1965.



### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Comments from Alice Sebrell, 2

*To Dick from Ray: Dick Higgins's Something Else Press, Ray Johnson, and The Paper Snake*, Julie J. Thomson, 3

*Highlights of the Exhibition*, Michael von Uchtrup, 11

*"Remembering Ray,"* Marie Tavroges Stilkind, 15

Related Publications available, back cover

Sometime after 1965, it seems, a large brown envelope made its way from Something Else Press—or from artist Ray Johnson—to what Ray would refer to as his “official New York Correspondence School archive”: the nearby home in which Ray’s close friend William S. Wilson was raising his three young children and—unknowingly at the time—preserving the early history of what became the mail art movement that proliferated in the 1960s and continues even into our highly digitized era.

The envelope disappeared from sight for several decades before re-surfacing. When it did, it was found to contain much of the production material used in the creation of THE PAPER SNAKE, a lively compendium of Ray Johnson’s correspondence and collages from 1959 to 1964.

Released on Valentine’s Day of 1965, THE PAPER SNAKE was the second book published by the groundbreaking Something Else Press. It was arguably one of the most influential of the press’ publications, which included works by some notable figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, among them John Cage, Marshall McLuhan, Nam June Paik, Claes Oldenburg, Gertrude Stein, and Dick Higgins, poet, performer, and Something Else Press founder.

THE PAPER SNAKE appeared before it could be widely appreciated. In 1965 Ray Johnson was not well known outside of the New York Correspondence School, the far-flung, sometimes mischievous mail art network he’d created. He defined himself less by what he was, a gifted collagist, a witty satirist, and mail artist, than by what he was not—NOT a Pop artist, or a Fluxus artist, or a Conceptualist. NOT a poet.

What is THE PAPER SNAKE? It is NOT, by definition, an artist’s book. It is not a children’s book, but it’s not NOT for children. It is NOT a narrative or a manifesto, or an autobiography, though it is partly all of those. THE PAPER SNAKE is... Something Else.

**Ray Johnson** (1927–1995) arrived at Black Mountain College from Detroit at age 17, for the 1945 Summer Institute, as WWII was coming to a close. The formidable Josef Albers was at the helm, and by the time Johnson left the college more than three years later, he'd studied alongside fellow students Hazel Larsen Archer, Ruth Asawa and Kenneth Noland while both Josef and Anni Albers, Ilya Bolotowsky, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Lyonel Feininger, Buckminster Fuller, Walter Gropius, Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Richard Lippold, Alvin Lustig, Robert Motherwell, M. C. Richards, and many others taught at or visited BMC during this robust era of its history.

In 1949, Ray moved with sculptor Richard Lippold to New York, where he continued several friendships—and embarked upon new ones—with others who had come to the city from Black Mountain College. Originally a painter exhibiting with the American Abstract Artists group, Ray had turned to collage by 1955, when BMC alum Andy Oates (who exhibited several others who'd also attended the college) gave Ray his first real solo show at his Boylston Street Print Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

No longer making paintings, Ray founded the New York Correspondence School (named in 1962 by an NYCS “member”) as a way of randomly distributing his small collages and printed ephemera to an ever-widening circle of accomplices, all of them, like Ray, mailing to and for each other envelopes stuffed with their art, clippings, junk, almost anything the postal service would transport. Missives and flyers with the phrases “please add to and return”, “please add and send to...”, and even “please do not send to...” circulated; often the mailings contained references that would only be understood by their intended addressees. Dick Higgins was a recipient of Ray's own mailings, and the contents of some of those mailings became *THE PAPER SNAKE*.

A decade after the 1955 show in Cambridge, Ray had a series of well-received solo exhibitions over a six-year period from 1965 to 1971, at the Willard Gallery in New York (via Richard Lippold) and at Richard Feigen Gallery's New York and Chicago locations. On April Fool's Day of 1968, the NYCS held the first of its many “meetings,” gatherings called by Ray at which something might, but didn't have to, happen. Weeks later Ray, startled by the shooting of his friend Andy Warhol, moved from New York, eventually settling in the small Long Island town where Lippold and family then lived.

1978 was the last year in which Ray would exhibit in a solo show at a commercial gallery. His NYCS meetings and public performances became less frequent, and ceased altogether in 1988. Only after his suicide by drowning in January of his 68th year could Ray Johnson's work once more be widely appreciated. Ray's collages and mail art are now regularly shown at museums throughout the world, and an award-winning feature-length documentary, “How to Draw a Bunny,” was released in 2002; it will be screened at BMCM+AC while *SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY* is on view (see page 16).

**Dick Higgins** (1938–1998) was born in Cambridge, England, and raised in the U.S. Having moved to New York, Higgins enrolled in the hugely influential music composition class given by John Cage at The New School in New York in 1958. Two years later he married fellow artist Alison Knowles (who he probably met via Ray Johnson); Knowles and Higgins had twin daughters and later divorced, reunited, and remarried. Primarily a poet and performer, Higgins was a proponent of what he termed “intermedia,” or the merging of two or more art forms. Ray Johnson's embraces of text, drawing, collage, and

the act of mailing them appealed to Dick, and when he founded *Something Else Press* in 1963, *THE PAPER SNAKE* was its second title, immediately following a volume of his own writings. Having produced books which are now recognized as classics, the press went bankrupt in 1974, though Higgins continued to perform and to create, and later to self-publish, his written work until his death of a sudden heart attack.

**William S. Wilson** (born 1932) Raised outside of Baltimore, he studied English literature first at University of Virginia and earned his PhD at Yale. He has taught at New York's Queens College, The Cooper Union, the School of Visual Arts, and Columbia University. BMC alum Norman Solomon introduced Bill Wilson to Ray Johnson in 1956, and the two began a lifelong correspondence and friendship. Ray subsequently struck up another close friendship with Bill's mother, a largely self-taught artist who later moved to New York. A writer of art criticism, Bill, in 1966, penned the first published magazine article mentioning the NYCS, and later was the author of the novel *BIRTHPLACE: MOVING INTO NEARNESS* (1982). Meanwhile, he was periodically given boxloads of NYCS miscellanea by Johnson himself, who correctly assumed this material would be preserved. Today Bill Wilson's archive is vast, and his knowledge of, and deep insight into, its contents lure visitors from around the world. Bill is one of the major lenders to *SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY*, and, the reason why there is any *PAPER SNAKE* production material to exhibit.

All of us at the Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center are pleased to help bring forth a new exhibition connected to one of BMC's most gifted and enigmatic artists. This exhibition of Ray Johnson's work is significant for its introduction of rarely seen (and in some cases never before seen) material connected to his early New York period. The scope of the show includes rare audio, video, collages, photographs, correspondence, and, of course, the recently rediscovered production materials related to *The Paper Snake*. This program booklet serves as a guide to help explain, amplify, and illuminate *The Paper Snake* and the production process of Ray Johnson and Dick Higgins.

This project would never have been possible without the dedication and commitment of exhibition curator Michael von Uchtrup. He dreamed the idea and then made it happen. We are grateful for the extraordinary support for this project shown by William S. Wilson, scholar, author, and friend of Ray. It wouldn't have happened without his blessing. And deep appreciation to The Ray Johnson Estate, Frances Beatty, Rachel Graham and Diana Bowers at Richard L. Feigen & Co. for lending important work to the exhibition. Julie J. Thomson has been helpful at every turn, including the design of this program booklet and participating with Michael von Uchtrup in a public discussion about Ray Johnson. Additional and enthusiastic thanks to Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center staff Erin Dickey and Sarah Bonner, and board members Brian E. Butler and Connie Bostic, and Susan Rhew Design for their important assistance with this project, and to Will Rice and Henco Reprographics for their generous printing expertise.

Alice Sebrell  
Program Director  
Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center



# TO DICK FROM RAY: Dick Higgins's *Something Else Press*, Ray Johnson, and *The Paper Snake*

"There is no doubt in my mind that Ray Johnson was one of the most valuable artists I've ever known."

—Dick Higgins, 1995 interview<sup>1</sup>

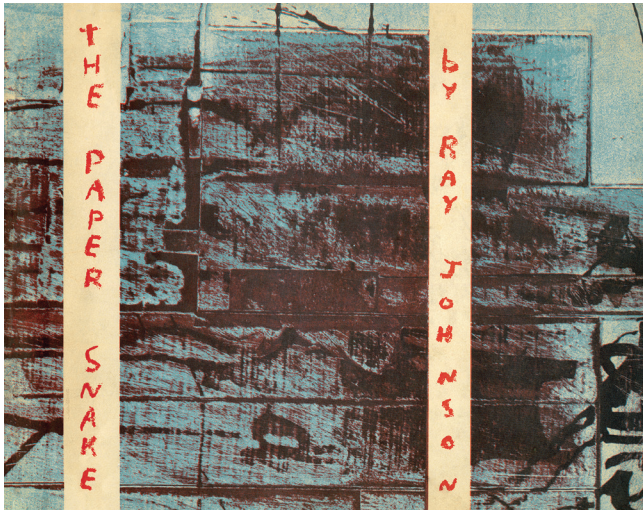


Fig. 1 Cover of *The Paper Snake*, © The Ray Johnson Estate, Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. and Siglio Press.

One could say that *The Paper Snake* (fig. 1) is a forty-nine-page book, but then there's the issue of counting the drawing on the last endpaper page, so if you include that, it's fifty pages. One could say that it's a book with two lists of neckties but then it also includes four plays, one soap opera, and one slop-era. An inventory approach could be helpful for engaging with this book, but the lines between categories blur. *The Paper Snake* is a collection of mailings that Ray Johnson sent to Dick Higgins, but it's not typical letters; it's collages, drawings, lists, plays, tid-bits, and more.<sup>2</sup> As soon as you try to describe it, it writhes and resists easy grasp; *The Paper Snake* is best when experienced firsthand. As William S. Wilson writes in the essay that appears on the cover flaps for this book, "reading these is like reading over Dick Higgins's shoulder, or hearing him read them aloud." To some degree it is, but we are not Dick Higgins and a large piece of the picture is missing since we don't know what Dick sent Ray that led to these mailings and correspondence from Ray.<sup>3</sup>

The easiest response to *The Paper Snake* is to ignore it, the next to dismiss it, or to stop at the ways it chal-

lenges your understanding of it, as some reviewers did. Many of those reviewers also turned to Wilson's essay for answers. While Wilson illuminates points about Ray's work and practice, he doesn't explain *The Paper Snake*. What becomes understood, or what meanings emerge, are up to the reader—keeping in mind that originally this was Dick, but is now us. The format of a book allows each of us to read these mailings from our own point of view, to connect (or not) with them as we can, and to absorb (or not) them into our thoughts and minds. I also will not explain *The Paper Snake*, but instead provide an account of how Ray and Dick met, recover details surrounding the publication of this book, discuss selected pages from it, and examine the reception of this book.

From Dick's accounts he and Ray met in 1959, though Dick had been aware of Ray since the previous year.<sup>4</sup> Soon after they met, Ray started sending mailings to Dick. After asking Ray if he was Jasper Johns, Dick later recalled that he:

received in the mail a small wooden construction that suggested a Japanese flag with the caption, "Are you angry? Jasper Johns"... 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.<sup>5</sup>

In 1958, the year before he met Ray, Dick enrolled in John Cage's Advanced Composition class at The New School, where he was the youngest student at the age of twenty.<sup>6</sup> He took the class in hopes of learning more about composition, and he was already experimenting with happenings-type performances. Trained as a printer, in the 1960s Dick also learned more about book design and production through jobs he held in publishing.<sup>7</sup> In 1963 he founded *Something Else Press* to publish artists' books, starting with his own book titled *Jefferson's Birthday/Postface* (fig. 2).<sup>8</sup> This book has a unique format with these two books being bound back to back. *Postface* is a book-length essay about

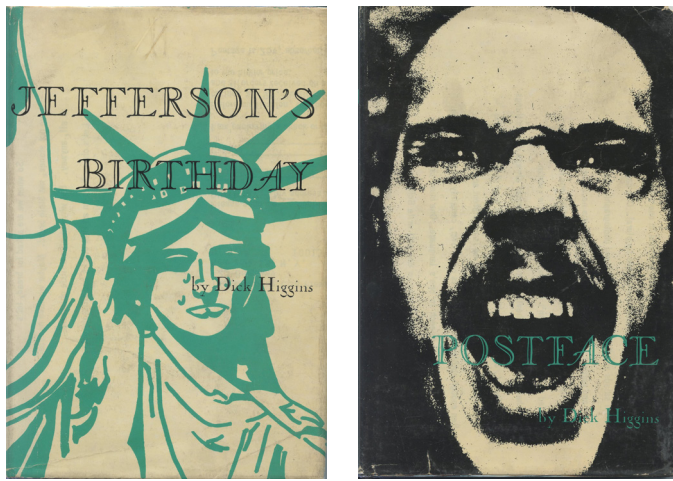


Fig. 2 Dick Higgins, Covers of *Jefferson's Birthday*/*Postface*, reproduced by kind permission of the Estate of Dick Higgins, images courtesy of Passages Bookshop.

what Higgins saw currently happening in the arts, including a lengthy discussion of Happenings. *Jefferson's Birthday* is a compendium of Dick's work, which included plays, event scores, and other writings, that he made from April 13, 1962 to April 13, 1963 (April 13th being the birthday of Thomas Jefferson).

When Dick founded Something Else Press, he says that he envisioned publishing a selection of mailings from Ray as his second book. As Dick later explained:

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. ... 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's AG Gallery and most of us Fluxus artists considered him somehow one of us, he did not work closely with Maciunas. ... I did not want to compete directly with Maciunas's Fluxus publications, [but] 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 [*sic*] in their moment and their context and yet somehow they seemed to acquire new and larger meaning as time went along.<sup>9</sup>

*The Paper Snake* should also be considered alongside *A Something Else Manifesto* since Dick says that he wrote it on the same day that he decided to publish a book of Ray's mailings.<sup>10</sup> At just a single page, this is a fairly concise statement from the often verbose Dick Higgins. The opening sentences emphasize the open nature of something else: "When asked what one is doing, one can only explain it as 'something else.' Now one does something big, now one does something small, now another big thing, now another little thing. Always it is something else."<sup>11</sup> These statements are accepting and embrace the change of scale in an artist's work. The sixth sentence is particularly democratic, and inviting, yet it also positions it as unavoidable: "Actually, everybody might be in on this Something Else, whether he wants it or not. Everyman is." Dick continues to encourage variety and "plural commitments" and an embrace of the multitudes of what can happen in a day, and a place for ideas interacting with daily life. He boldly concludes, "Let's chase down an art that clucks and fills our guts."<sup>12</sup>

Fluxus became a term applied to the work of Dick and other artists. Dick describes interests of Fluxus and its approach quite wonderfully in his essay *A Child's History of Fluxus*:

It is simple things, taking things for themselves and not just as part of bigger things. It is something that many of us must do, at least part of the time. So Fluxus is inside you, is part of how you are. It isn't just a bunch of things and dramas but is part of how you live. It is beyond words.<sup>13</sup>

While Johnson's activities were occasionally included in Fluxus publications or performance programs, what Ray did was uncategorizable. However Ray's practice resonated with many of the Fluxus artists. As Dick said, "The process of interrelationship of art and life, which we in Fluxus referred to as the 'art/life dichotomy,' found its own form in Ray's sendings and those whom he stimulated to act in a parallel manner."<sup>14</sup> At the basis of Ray's work was experience, his own experience of the world, the things he encountered and the ways in which this connected to other people. As Wilson writes, "he is an artist representing his life; it happens that his life is a collage."<sup>15</sup>

The attention that Ray paid to conversations, daily occurrences, words, and other correspondences is possible in every one of us, yet few of us think to pay



attention to such details, to devote time to it as Ray did, and to elevate it to an art form.

Indeed it seems to be “something else” and not easily contained. Sometimes it began with an image, object, or a word; that would bring to mind a certain person or exchange; Ray would mail it to that person, transforming and connecting it in the process. Many of Ray’s Lucky Strike collages were sent to Gerry Ayres, a writer and film producer. He sent Ray a poem with the words Lucky Strike in it, a phrase that Ayres said reminded him of the Lucky Strike cigarettes that Ray smoked. To display Ray’s mailings and collages in a gallery removes them from the flow of daily life. To reproduce Ray’s correspondences in a book, like *The Paper Snake*, also changes them and compresses time—the years over which they were received—but it’s a format that remains closer to the one-to-one relationship between the reader and the sender that was part of the original mailed exchange.<sup>16</sup>

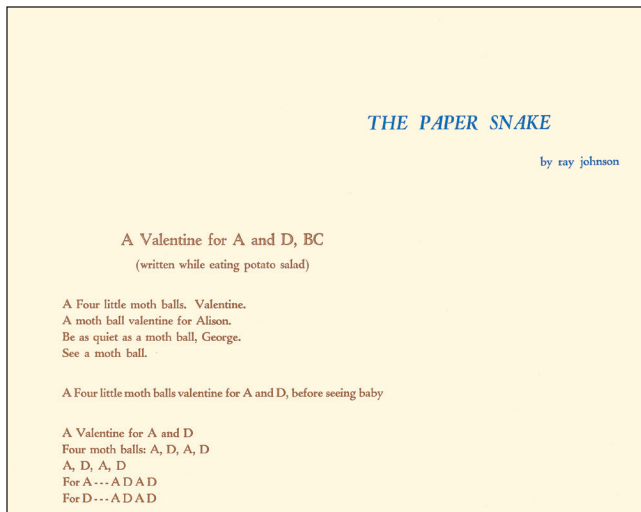


Fig. 3 Page from *The Paper Snake*, © The Ray Johnson Estate, image courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. and Siglio Press.

*The Paper Snake* consists of a selection of mailings that Dick chose from the many that he received from Ray between 1959 to 1964.<sup>17</sup> The book begins and ends (not counting the title, copyright, or endpaper pages) with texts containing the word Valentine in their titles, connecting them to the book’s release on Valentine’s Day in 1965.<sup>18</sup> The first (fig. 3) is “A Valentine for A and D, BC” which includes the parenthetical statement “(written while eating potato salad).” Whether it happened this way or not, the addition of this phrase evokes a food-filled image of the moment surrounding its creation. It seems likely that A would be Alison Knowles, Dick’s wife, and D would be Dick. I wouldn’t

be surprised if Ray added in BC as an acknowledgement of the letters that come between A and D in the alphabet, but there could easily be other explanations as well. The sentences that follow mention moth balls, George (likely the artist and mutual friend George Brecht), and baby, while also offering playful repetitions that emphasize how meaning can change with even small rearrangements. It continues on the next page; the first line says “Final version, A Valentine for A and D,” and the lines that follow offer an edited and pared-down version of the text from the previous page while also adding “a kitten.” Then the next four sentences change all that’s been set up previously. With mailings like these, there could have been additional meanings and correspondences that Dick would have understood, but for as eavesdroppers we can accept what Ray presents, perhaps admire the possibilities of what words and letters can do, and the images they can create in our minds. These are Valentines but they are also something else.

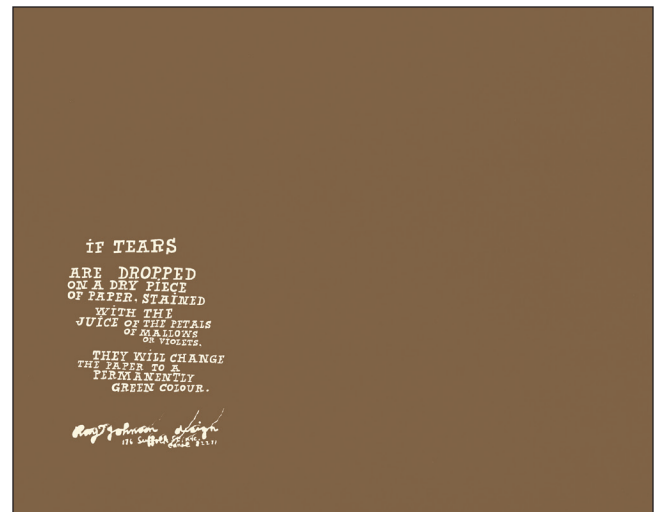


Fig. 4 Page from *The Paper Snake*, © The Ray Johnson Estate, image courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. and Siglio Press.

Page twenty-six (fig. 4), the “If tears are dropped” page, was one in a series of fliers (fig. 5) that Ray created to promote his design services. It displays the versatility of his lettering, particularly with the different approaches he uses in the main text and then in his name and contact information. The words, and their design, and the choice of green paper (in the original), also create an idea for this design and a psychological effect, an approach emphasized by Alvin Lustig, who Ray met at Black Mountain College.<sup>19</sup> Dick’s reproduction of this work changes the idea some, but its placement in the left corner of a two-page spread uses the space to demand the reader’s attention and have a big impact.<sup>20</sup>

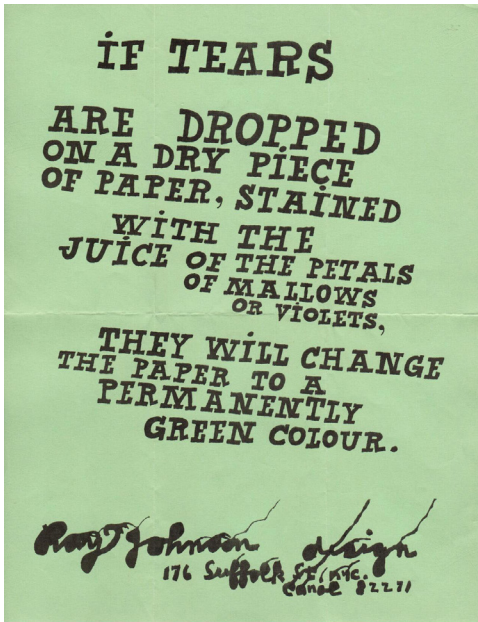


Fig. 5 Ray Johnson, *Untitled [If Tears are Dropped]*. ca. 1961 © The Ray Johnson Estate, image courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. and William S. Wilson.

At first I thought this was a text written by Ray, but further research reveals it to be an excerpt from the *Boy's Own Book Extended: A Complete Encyclopedia of all Athletic, Scientific, Recreative, Outdoor and Indoor Exercises and Diversions*, which was written by William Clarke and published in 1857.<sup>21</sup> Ray's reuse of this text introduces it to the world again and allows us to focus on the beauty of this activity with new attention. His use of green paper in the original leaves the reader wondering if tears really will have this effect on a surface prepared like this. An element of sadness is also introduced; the possibility that this green paper is the result of many tears falling onto it. Ray's original design is powerful, emotional, and distinctive. However Dick's transformation of it to a brown page with white writing causes it to lose this important relationship between the surface, the action, and the color.

On the next page (fig. 6) of *The Paper Snake* is a text with the heading "back for envelope." It reads:

1. I am interested  
in the art  
of greatest simplicity.  
Ray Johnson
2. I never save anything.  
Ray Johnson
3. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha.  
Ray Johnson
4. I *am* interested in the art of greatest simplicity.  
Ray Johnson

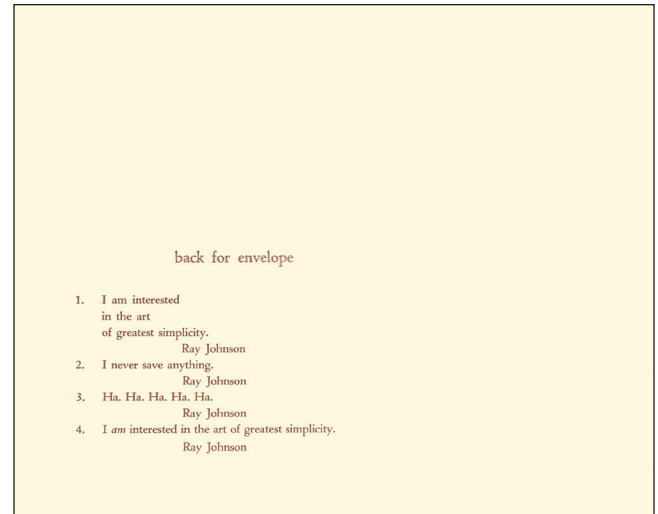


Fig. 6 Page from *The Paper Snake*, © The Ray Johnson Estate, image courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. and Siglio Press.

When pages of *The Paper Snake* are read aloud, it feels like one is reading a children's book to an audience.<sup>22</sup> The format of *The Paper Snake* was intentionally chosen to resemble a children's book though it's unclear whether this idea came from Dick, Ray, or both.<sup>23</sup> The way children relate to the world was something Ray felt an affinity with. In a 1968 interview he commented, "I think I'm very close to the child's world in my creative process...I respond completely to all my instincts and channel them into the work."<sup>24</sup>



Fig. 7 Page from *The Paper Snake*, © The Ray Johnson Estate, image courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. and Siglio Press.

A few pages later (fig. 7) Dick type-set a letter from Ray that begins, "Dear Dick, P.S. I enclose four booms. Boom, boom, boom, boom. They can be re-arranged, thus: boom, boom, Boom, boom." The P.S. could stand for post script, but it could also refer to *Paper Snake*. Ray's awareness and attentiveness to position and

meaning is evident here. Five pages later more booms appear in a letter with the word DRUMS at the top. Here Ray has drawn 15 booms over a letter to Dick. The positioning of these booms also creates a memory of the earlier ones and a connection between them that spans the pages that separate them. One might also go as far as to note that a boom can become a book by dropping the m and adding a k.

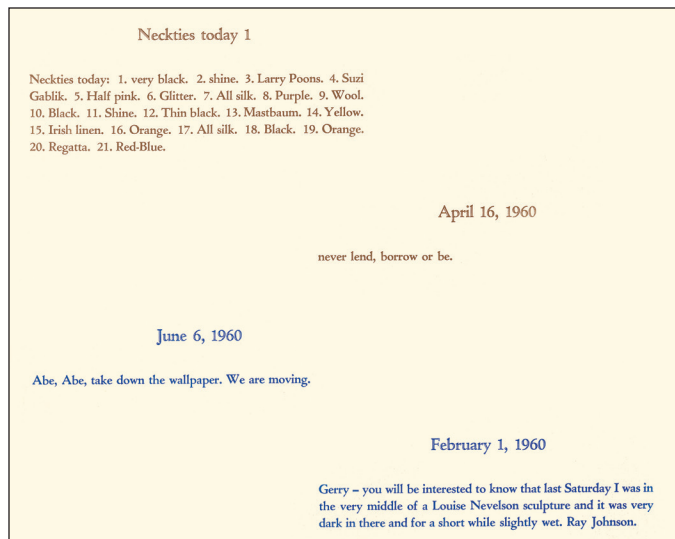


Fig. 8 Page from *The Paper Snake*, © The Ray Johnson Estate, image courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. and Siglio Press.

Further in, a page (fig. 8) contains multiple texts from Johnson including one titled “Neckties today 1.”<sup>25</sup> A list follows that includes colors (very black, purple), visual qualities (shine, glitter), people (Larry Poons, Suzi Gablik), fabrics (all silk, wood, Irish linen), and some unknowns to me (Mastbaum, Regatta). Is this an inventory of neckties that Johnson saw? I like to think of this as a tallying of neckties from a certain period of time, but I also realize that this may not be at all about the article clothing . . . I even wonder if the concept of a necktie changes or gets expanded upon within this list? A list introduces an element of ordering and can create relationships between what’s listed.<sup>26</sup> A few pages later there is another list titled “Neckties today 2.”

There are plays, letters, art, and other texts that I haven’t even addressed here. Even this curated time capsule shows the ways Ray was a prolific creator who cannot be contained by descriptions. His texts, even sometimes with few words, are dense with the possibilities that they evoke. Each reader will also be drawn to things in different ways and spend more or less time with them as a result. Due to the vast sea of material

and references that Ray includes and introduces, one is likely to find his or her own correspondences within his texts. I wrote most of this essay on Saturday afternoons, and Ray’s mailing to Dick that begins “Saturday Quiet Day Julies in General” is a correspondence he couldn’t have anticipated.<sup>27</sup>

Dick’s choice to typeset various mailings from Ray in *The Paper Snake* changes them. He saw this book as a collaboration with Ray, but his involvement definitely altered the appearance of Ray’s original mailings.<sup>28</sup> As Wilson writes on the cover flaps, “Since a change in style is a change in meaning, this book is a translation of Ray Johnson into Dick Higgins.” As a student of Josef Albers, color was important to Ray, and Dick’s use of two-color printing also changed many of the mailings, some quite drastically.<sup>29</sup> In addition to page twenty-six, another insensitive change can be seen in Dick’s reproduction of a collage with a Lucky Strike logo (fig. 9). In the printed book the colors are quite different from the original and the Lucky Strike logo along with the words BETTER, BETT, N, NEVER are reversed, making them nearly impossible to read.<sup>30</sup>

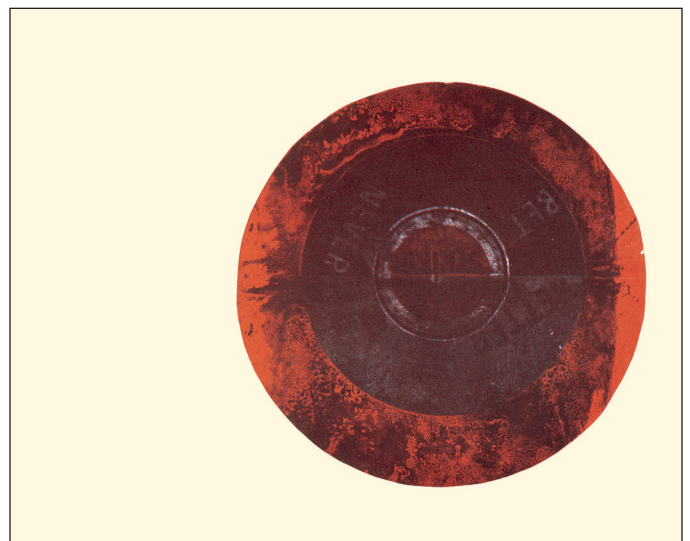


Fig. 9 Page from *The Paper Snake*, © The Ray Johnson Estate, image courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. and Siglio Press.

On the final page (fig. 10), the book’s endpapers, is a reproduction of one the pages from Ray’s *The Book About Death*.<sup>31</sup> This page includes an advertisement for that book, which, with its loose pages and unbound structure, and different pages being sent to various people in many ways challenged the traditional form of a book in many ways. This page also contains a snake advertisement by Ray Johnson as well as a postcard for an 8 *Man Show* at the Robin Gallery, a gallery that





Fig. 10 Endpapers page from *The Paper Snake*, © The Ray Johnson Estate, image courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co. and Siglio Press.

existed in advertisements but without a physical location.<sup>32</sup> The words “A Brick Snake for Anne Wilson” accompanying a drawing of a snake made out of bricks. What does it mean for a snake to go from paper, a more ephemeral vulnerable material, to brick, a sturdier heavier one? This question about meaning brings to mind the following statement by Ray, “Well, it might be its function to not have meaning. I mean people might be grasping for meaning but meaning is not grasping for the people, or grasping for the meaning.”<sup>33</sup>

When *The Paper Snake* was published it was not understood by traditional book reviewers. One said, “I tried to find out what the subject of *The Paper Snake* is, but I’m still mystified. Somewhere along the line I missed the point or lost the thread of the argument and was unable to retrieve it.”<sup>34</sup> This reviewer turned to Wilson’s essay on the cover flaps but remains perplexed. However these sorts of comments were not the feedback or audience Dick was seeking. As he wrote later, “the artists seemed to understand and they have used it as a paradigm ever since.”<sup>35</sup>

By the first December after its release, 168 copies of the regular edition and 29 copies of the special edition had been sold.<sup>36</sup> A little over two years later sales of the regular edition had reached 504 copies.<sup>37</sup> Dick had originally considered a print run of 700, but since those costs were similar to printing 1,700. Dick chose the higher number, deciding to print 1,840 copies of the regular edition and 197 copies of the special edition.<sup>38</sup> Years later Dick said that he had about 700 copies

remaining, which, combining both editions, might mean that about 1,300 copies of *The Paper Snake* were sold.<sup>39</sup>

Some people perceived *The Paper Snake* as poetry. Ray commented about this in a 1976 interview:

I’m an artist and a...well, I shouldn’t call myself a poet but other people have. What I do is classify the words as poetry. Something Else Press published a book in 1965 called *The Paper Snake* which is all my writings, rubbings, plays, things that I had given to the publisher, Dick Higgins, ...He saved all these things and designed and published a book, and I simply as an artist did what I did without classification. So when the book appeared the book stated, “Ray Johnson is a poet,” but I never said, ‘this is a poem,’ I simply wrote what I wrote and it later became classified.<sup>40</sup>

In a 1984 interview he emphasized his relation to poetry again, “...but I don’t write poems. I don’t speak poems. I perhaps imagine them, or move [*sic*], or wish to write poems. But I don’t actually get poems published or written. I don’t even like to use the word.”<sup>41</sup>

There are many people one could look to here for thoughts about poetry, but when I read this passage in *The Life of Poetry* by Muriel Rukeyser, it made me think of Ray’s work. As Rukeyser writes:

Poetry depends on the moving relations within itself. It is an art that lives in time, expressing and evoking the moving relation between individual consciousness and the world. The work that a poem does is a transfer of human energy and I think human energy may be defined as consciousness, the capacity to make change in existing conditions...To accept poetry in these meanings would make it possible for people to use it as an ‘exercise,’ an enjoyment of the possibility of dealing with the meanings in the world and in their lives.<sup>42</sup>

Returning to *The Paper Snake*, it seems that, following Rukeyser, we could call it and some of Ray’s work poetry, but it probably makes most sense to just accept it as it is, or perhaps to call it something else.

-Julie J. Thomson



**Julie J. Thomson** is an Independent Scholar and Curator who lives in Durham, NC. She has been writing about Ray Johnson since 2006. Her writing about Johnson and other artists has appeared in the *Black Mountain College Studies* journal, the *Believer* *Logger*, *Raw Vision*, *Art Lies*, ...*might be good*, and *Indy Week*. [www.juliejthomson.blogspot.com](http://www.juliejthomson.blogspot.com)

## NOTES for To Dick from Ray

Thank you to Bill (William S.) Wilson for the many exchanges and conversations that he has had with me over the years about Ray Johnson. Thank you to Michael von Uchtrup for his help finding Ray Johnson materials over the years, for curating *SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY*, and for including my essay in this exhibit. Thank you to Charlton Burch for sharing details about Dick Higgins's essay "The Hatching of The Paper Snake." Also thank you to Alice Sebrell, Brian Butler, and the staff, Board, and volunteers at the Black Mountain College Museum + Art Center for hosting this exhibition and all their work to create spaces for people to engage with the work and ideas of Black Mountain College alumni. Thank you to The Ray Johnson Estate, Lisa Pearson at Siglio Press, the Estate of Dick Higgins, and Passages Bookshop for their help providing these images and permissions. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the ReVIEWING Black Mountain College 6 conference, Asheville, North Carolina on September 27, 2014.

1 This quote from Dick about Ray is from an exchange that occurred on October, 27, 1995, which is after Ray's suicide on January 13, 1995. Ruud Janssen and Dick Higgins, "Mail-Interview with Dick Higgins," (April 6—December 16, 1995), [http://www.academia.edu/6764964/Mail-Interview\\_Project\\_by\\_Ruud\\_Janssen\\_-\\_Part\\_1](http://www.academia.edu/6764964/Mail-Interview_Project_by_Ruud_Janssen_-_Part_1).

2 "What he had sent me, or what he had other people send me in his name, or on copies of things he had sent other people over the course of seven years." Dick Higgins letter to Marcia Tucker, July 3, 1970, collection of the Ray Johnson Estate, Richard L. Feigen & Co.

3 Ray used two spellings interchangeably: correspondence and correspondence. One must keep in mind that this is a representation of only one side of the exchange between Dick and Ray, we're just getting what Ray sent Dick, not what Dick sent Ray, which may have prompted references and replies. For a further discussion of correspondences and references see William S. Wilson, "Ray Johnson The Comedian as the Letter," in *Correspondence: An Exhibition of the Letters of Ray Johnson* (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1976).

4 Dick makes various statements about meeting Ray in a variety of sources including: Higgins, Dick "The Hatching of the Paper Snake" in *Lightworks Magazine* 22 (2000), 26-28, [http://images.rayjohnsonestate.com/www\\_rayjohnsonestate\\_com/hatching\\_snake\\_higgins.pdf](http://images.rayjohnsonestate.com/www_rayjohnsonestate_com/hatching_snake_higgins.pdf); Janssen, "Mail-Interview with Dick Higgins"; and Higgins to Tucker, July 3, 1970. For all references to "The Hatching of the Paper Snake" one must keep in mind that Dick wrote this after Ray's death. Dick contacted Charlton Burch, editor of *Lightworks*, saying that he could write this essay for a Ray Johnson issue of *Lightworks* that Burch was planning. Dick wrote it in May 1995. Charlton Burch, email with the author, December 15, 2014.

5 An image of this flag work by Ray is reproduced on this page. Higgins, "The Hatching of the Paper Snake," 26.

6 Ray met John Cage during the summer session in 1948 at Black Mountain College and in the early 1950s he lived across the hall from Cage at 326 Monroe St in New York City. Ray is often credited for introducing Dick and Alison Knowles; they married in 1960. For accounts of this see Hannah B. Higgins, "Love's Labor's Lost and Found: A Meditation on Fluxus, Family, and Somethings Else," *Art Journal*, Vol. 69, No. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 2010), 13; and *Oral history interview with Alison Knowles*, June 1-2, 2010, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-alison-knowles-15822>.

7 Dick did design and production for a Book Press, a book manufacturer, and Russell and Russell, a scholarly reprint publisher. Higgins, "The Hatching of the Paper Snake," 27.

8 George Maciunas was supposed to publish this book. For a discussion of Something Else Press see Peter Frank, *Something Else Press: An Annotated Bibliography* (New Paltz, NY: McPherson & Co., 1983).

9 Higgins, "The Hatching of the Paper Snake," 26.

10 Dick's writing of this text may also have been a response to Allan Kaprow's "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" which was a call to action for artists to create Happenings, and published in *Art News* in 1958. Dick and Kaprow knew each other from Cage's Advanced Composition class. Dick later recalled about the *A Something Else Manifesto*, "The day after I decided to start the press, I wrote that Something Else Manifesto which I am still quite happy with. Then the next book was Ray Johnson's *The Paper Snake*, which I decided to do the day I wrote the manifesto." "Call It 'Something Else'" Dick Higgins in conversation with Eric Mottram, *Spanner* Nine, February 14, 1973, 166.

11 Dick Higgins, "A Something Else Manifesto," in *Manifestos, A Great Bear Pamphlet* (New York: Something Else Press, 1966), <http://ubu.com/historical/gb/manifestos.pdf>.

12 Dick's reference to a cluck brings to mind a chicken. Again he may obliquely be referencing Kaprow here since Kaprow presented *Chicken* (Happening) on November 7, 1962. Geoffrey Hendricks, *Critical Mass: Happenings, Fluxus, Performance, Intermedia and Rutgers University 1958-1972*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 186.

13 Dick Higgins, "A Child's History of Fluxus" (Ubu Editions, 2007), 91, [http://www.ubu.com/ubu/higgins\\_horizons.html](http://www.ubu.com/ubu/higgins_horizons.html). Originally published as *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of Intermedia* (Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1984) 93.

14 Higgins, "The Hatching of The Paper Snake," 27.

15 William S. Wilson, "Ray Johnson" in *The Paper Snake* (New York: Something Else Press, 1965).

16 When asked about the correspondence school Ray said, "Well, the idea is that it's a way to convey a message or a kind of idea to someone which is not verbal; it is not a confrontation of two people It's an object which is opened in privacy probably and the message is looked at. There are incredible degrees of subtlety of the possibility of interpretation because two people speaking, such as we are doing here, we can say something; I can say something, you can disagree. I cannot agree with something you say; we can bicker; we can argue; we can try to make our point. But you can't do that." *Oral history interview with Ray Johnson*, April 17, 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-ray-johnson-13236>

17 As the proofs show, a typeset version of *The Paper Snake* existed by October 29, 1964. Evidence suggests that once Dick asked Ray for permission to make this book that Ray also sent additional materials to him, knowing they could become part of this book.

18 The choice of Valentine's Day and beginning and ending with valentine mailings could also be a mischievous play upon the dates of Jefferson's Birthday framing Dick's first book that was published by Something Else Press.

19 For a discussion of Ray's and Lustig's exchanges see my essay, "The Art of Graphic Design: Alvin Lustig, Josef Albers, Ray Johnson, and the 1945 Summer Session," *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies*, Vol. 6, Summer 2014, [http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/wp/?page\\_id=2985](http://www.blackmountainstudiesjournal.org/wp/?page_id=2985)

20 The two-color printing process eliminates a crucial part—the color green—of this original work. For production details including Dick's choice of two-color printing see Higgins, "The Hatching of the Paper Snake," 27.

21 The first edition was published in 1829, but it seems that this passage appears in the 1857 extended edition. William Clarke, "Singular Effect of Tears" in *Boy's Own Book, Extended: a Complete Encyclopedia of All Athletic, Scientific, Recreative, Outdoor And Indoor Exercises And Diversions, Including The Boy's Own Book, The Book of Gymnastics, And Parlor Magic*, (New York: C.S. Francis, 1857), 365, <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015035026130;view=1up;seq=373>

22 There is a photograph thought to have been taken by Dick of Ray reading *The Paper Snake* to Dick's and Alison's twin daughters (Hannah Higgins and Jessica Higgins), collection of William S. Wilson.

23 "*The Paper Snake* was designed to resemble a juvenile, with large format and heavy materials." Higgins, "The Hatching of The Paper Snake," 27.

24 *Oral history interview with Ray Johnson*, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

25 "From 1959 to 1964 Johnson inventories and otherwise used the theme of neckties for a number of works." Dick Higgins letter to Dorothy B. Rennie, December 29, 1975, collection of the North Carolina Museum of Art.

26 There are other examples of lists in Johnson's work such as his *102 Moticos* (reproduced in Elizabeth Zuba, ed., *Not Nothing: Selected Writings by Ray Johnson 1954-1994* (Siglio: Los Angeles, 2014), 4) and his list of people who have posed for silhouette portraits (<http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/images/detail/ray-johnson-note-to-ellen-h-johnson-9813>).

27 This brings to mind a quote that Ray sent as a sample of his thinking in response to a set of questions from the artist Nam June Paik: "I wait, not for time to finish my work, but for time to indicate something one would not have expected to occur." See William S. Wilson, "Ray Johnson: The One and the Other" in *Ray Johnson: Correspondences* (Flammarion and Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 1999), 167. The original source for this seems to have been from an essay by Suzi Gablik: "It is a question of waiting, not for time to finish the work, but for time to indicate something one would not have expected to occur." Suzi Gablik, "700 Collages by Ray Johnson," *Location 1* (Summer 1964) edited by Thomas B. Hess and Harold Rosenberg, 55-58, [http://images.rayjohnsonestate.com/www\\_rayjohnsonestate\\_com/1964\\_summer\\_locations\\_magazine.PDF](http://images.rayjohnsonestate.com/www_rayjohnsonestate_com/1964_summer_locations_magazine.PDF)

28 See Higgins, "The Hatching of The Paper Snake," 27-28.

29 For a discussion of Ray Johnson and Josef Albers see my essay, "How to Make an Artist: Josef Albers's Teaching and the Art of Ray Johnson," in *From BMC to NYC: The Tutelary Years of Ray Johnson 1943-1967* (Asheville: Black Mountain College Museum + Art Center, 2010), 17-21.

30 A reproduction of this original work can be found in Carsten Ahrens, Ingo Clauß, Ray Johnson, and Walter Schnepel, *Ray Johnson—I like funny stories: Sammlung Maria und Walter Schnepel*, (Weserburg, Museum für Moderne Kunst, 2012), 30. Thank you to Michael von Uchtrup for alerting me to this publication. Walter Schnepel bought these works from the art collector Hermann Braun. In the 1980s Dick sold a number of Ray Johnson works, including those reproduced in *The Paper Snake*, to Braun. Ray was not pleased with this and wrote Dick, "I opened my front door and looked out. On my front lawn were sitting three cats in different places. Maybe you could sell those three cats to a German art collector." Ray Johnson to Dick Higgins, Thanksgiving 1987, collection of William S. Wilson.

31 For a detailed discussion of this see William S. Wilson and Ray Johnson. *A Book About a Book About Death*. (Amsterdam: Kunstverein Publishing, 2009).

32 David Bourdon, "The Robin Gallery," *The Village Voice*, April 8, 1965, 14 and 19, collection of William S. Wilson.

33 *Oral history interview with Ray Johnson*, Archives of American Art.

34 M.B., "[Review of The Paper Snake]" in *ONE* magazine, February 1966 or later, 29-30, collection of the Ray Johnson Estate, Richard L. Feigen & Co.

35 Higgins, "The Hatching of The Paper Snake," 28.

36 Letter from Marilyn at Something Else Press to Ray Johnson, December 19, 1966, collection of the Ray Johnson Estate, Richard L. Feigen & Co.

37 Letter from Marilyn at Something Else Press to Ray Johnson, January 31, 1968, collection of the Ray Johnson Estate, Richard L. Feigen & Co.

38 Dick Higgins to Ray Johnson, November 17, 1964, collection of the Ray Johnson Estate, Richard L. Feigen & Co. The final print run number comes from Higgins, "The Hatching of The Paper Snake," 28. There were two editions of *The Paper Snake*: a regular edition and a special edition

bound in book cloth with a small original Ray Johnson work enclosed. Ray commented that he didn't like this enclosure: "It has an envelope in front with one of my small collages in it. That upsets me very much. Because the magic wears off. It gets out of my hands into someone else's hands and I can't really get . . . You know, it's part of me and I can't get that back without my doing something illegal." *Oral history interview with Ray Johnson*, Archives of American Art.

39 Higgins, "The Hatching of The Paper Snake," 28.

40 Diane Spodarek and Randy Delbeke interview with Ray Johnson, September 26, 1977 published in *Detroit Artists Monthly* (February 1978), <http://www.jpallas.com/hh/rj/DAMintervw-RayJ.html>.

41 Shirley Samberg, "Ray Johnson Radio Interview" for "That's Interesting, WCWP 88.1 FM," September 13, 1984.

42 Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Ashfield, Massachusetts: Paris Press, 1996), xi.

# HIGHLIGHTS OF THE EXHIBITION



Front page of *Voice Books*, a supplement to the *Village Voice*, March 18, 1965. Photo by Fred W. McDarragh.

## THE PAPER SNAKE: “AUTOGRAPHED” VERSION

“There are two editions [of PAPER SNAKE]: the Regular Edition has a printed cover which matches the jacket; The Autographed Edition (...limited to 200 unnumbered copies—numbering’s vulgar) is bound in Johanna Lacqroid, costs \$12, and is sold only by the PVI Gallery ... New York.”—Something Else Press Newscard # 1, late 1964 or January 1965

“THE PAPER SNAKE is ... available in The Autographed Edition ... handsomely bound in a 3X Joanna Lacqroid and with a top stain. The author’s signature is stamped in imitation gold on the front cover; this edition comes with an original work by Ray Johnson.”—text from PAPER SNAKE prospectus

The decision to include “an original work by Ray Johnson” in “The Autographed Edition” may have been an afterthought, since it was not mentioned until the book’s prospectus appeared, apparently after the first Newscard. For this edition, bits of Johnsonalia were tucked into envelopes, echoing Ray’s own act of mailing snippets of texts and collages to Something Else Press founder and proprietor Dick Higgins and his wife, Alison Knowles. The envelopes were rubber-cemented by hand to the books’ front endpapers.

Copies of this edition of THE PAPER SNAKE are now very rare, and only a handful of inscribed examples are

known to exist. The one exhibited here is adorned with Ray’s ink drawing of a two-headed snake, and signed by Ray Johnson for his friend, artist May Wilson (1905–1986, mother of Williams S. Wilson). “A Slop-era [rhymes with opera] for Dick Higgins” in Johnson’s handwriting was added to this copy after having been reproduced as is in THE PAPER SNAKE.

The additions to two other copies of THE PAPER SNAKE special edition are also on display here along with the book. One is a note which hints at Ray’s rivalry with another BMC alum: “Dear Robert Rauschenberg [*sic*], Anything I can do you can do better, you can do anything better than me.” The other is Ray’s typed message to Alison Knowles: “Alison, No opening—No closing—Nothing. Ray”

## THE PAPER SNAKE’S DUST JACKET

The dust jacket in this exhibit appears to be a test version, since it is slightly too big for the book. This allows for more of the portrait of Ray to be seen than on the standard dust jacket. This photo, “Ray Johnson among his collages”, was taken by Dick Higgins at Ray’s Dover Street apartment near the beginning of Ray’s and Dick’s tumultuous friendship, in the second half of 1959. The imagery on the dust jacket was converted to two false colors by Dick during the printing process, just as all the reproductions inside were. But a seldom seen true-color version of this photo has been graciously provided for this exhibition, courtesy of Maria and Walter Schnepel, Bremen, Germany.

The short essay on the flaps of THE PAPER SNAKE dust jacket—perceptive, poetic and a perfect match for the book—was written by William S. Wilson. No earlier draft of the text has been found, so it exists only in its printed form, wrapped around THE PAPER SNAKE and on the prospectus for THE PAPER SNAKE that Something Else Press prepared, where, in this exhibition, Bill’s essay can be read most easily.

## THE TYPESCRIPT

Before it was a book, THE PAPER SNAKE was a typescript. “Miss Wormser, the stenographer down the hall [from the Something Else Press office] dutifully transcribed our tapes and typed manuscripts for the printer,” recalled Barbara Moore, who was hired as Dick’s editorial director while THE PAPER SNAKE was in production. But THE PAPER SNAKE’s typescript predates the Something Else Press office and



Miss Wormser (whose first name has been lost to the passage of time) and so the typescript, with its spelling errors, was prepared by someone else, who presumably had to turn scores of Ray Johnson mini-texts into one document. Perhaps that person was Dick Higgins; the font matches that of many typewriters, including the one used by Ray Johnson. The title *THE PAPER SNAKE* appears already on the typescript, though both Higgins and Johnson would later hint that there was some contention over that name.

### **OTHER PRODUCTION MATERIALS**

The “lost” envelope concealing the *PAPER SNAKE* production materials held the typescript and proof galleys, positive and negative photostatic prints of Ray’s various missives, mockups of the cover, and much else, some of it with Dick Higgins’ handwritten notes.

Although lost for 50 years, its contents have wasted no time in divulging much about why the book looks like it does. As Bill Wilson states on *THE PAPER SNAKE*’s dust jacket, “This book is a translation of Ray Johnson into Dick Higgins.” Some texts appear in Ray’s handwriting, others were typeset in one of two different fonts; texts are superimposed over each other, and, of course, the colors of Ray’s collages have been radically altered. It is hard to imagine the unfailingly deliberating, deliberate Ray Johnson allowing even a friend to make such radical changes to the presentation, and ultimately the meaning, of such a large quantity of his work, and yet, though it is said to have upset Ray, there is no written evidence of any unease about it on his part.

To back up a little: the typeset portions of Ray’s text appear in two different typefaces: “I had most of the texts for *THE PAPER SNAKE* type-set using Morris F. Benton’s “Cloister” typeface,” Dick explained later, but other parts of the text are in a tight, sans-serif face looking like that used in telephone books (in one place in *THE PAPER SNAKE*, that’s just what it is supposed to look like).

*THE PAPER SNAKE* proof galleys—“printouts” of the book’s typeset text for proofreading purposes, on display on the museum’s wall—bear a date of October 29, 1964. Comparisons between the typescript, the proof galleys prepared from the typescript, the camera-ready repro art and the finished book raise several questions. Among them: the text which appears first in the

typescript and proof galleys was pulled from *THE PAPER SNAKE* for unknown reasons, and the second text became, in the finished book, the last: why the sudden, late shift?

That first text—the short, haiku-like “Fuyuhiko Kitagawa”, named for the Japanese modernist poet (1900–1990)—is not the only of the selections to appear in the typescript and galleys and not in *THE PAPER SNAKE*. The other is a sentimental, un-Ray-Johnson-like bit of prose, presumably excised from the book because it is not by Ray, but by one of his contemporaries, poet Kenneth Patchen. Conversely, in the jacket notes for Russell Edson’s *WHAT A MAN CAN SEE* with drawings by Ray Johnson (Jargon Society, 1969), Jonathan Williams tells us that “a few lines from “The Road” [one of Edson’s poems] appeared in Ray Johnson’s *PAPER SNAKE*”—though no one yet has been able to find them.

### **THE PAPER SNAKE’S CONTENTS**

The original manuscripts and artworks reproduced in the book remained in Dick’s possession until 1987, when Higgins sold his Ray Johnson archive to Hermann Braun (now deceased), a noted art collector then living in western Germany. They were acquired from Braun by Maria and Walter Schnepel, and have been exhibited only in Europe. But some examples of Ray’s printed ephemera, also reproduced in *THE PAPER SNAKE*, have been brought together for this exhibition.

Ray began his long-running series of seldom-seen Ray Johnson Design flyers in autumn 1956, using the same printer as his friend, Andy Warhol. Two flyers seen in *THE PAPER SNAKE*, and in this exhibition, date from just after that (Ray kept the receipts), and “If Tears are Dropped...” probably appeared in 1961.

In the early 1960s, Ray created his six enigmatic “phantom postcards” announcing non-existent shows at non-existent galleries, with references to colleagues and, in one case, their unsuspecting mothers. The first of these, *RAY / JOHNSON / REUBEN / GALLERY*, was mailed to Alison Knowles with a typed message and later inserted into a copy of the special edition of *THE PAPER SNAKE*: see *THE AUTOGRAPHED VERSION*, previous page.

The text of one of the later “phantom postcards” made

its way into the second of Ray's newspaper advertisements: Ray placed two cryptic display ads in New York's *Village Voice*, on June 18<sup>th</sup> and July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1964. The former featured a snake drawing which is either by Ray or by his friend, Hairy Who artist Karl Wirsum, who did supply the signed snake drawing for the second of the two ads.

Ray printed the thirteen known unbound pages of *A BOOK ABOUT DEATH* in 1963–65. Page 10, printed on October 1, 1964, featured the June 18<sup>th</sup> *Village Voice* ad with its snake drawing, the “phantom postcard” with its text used in the July 30 ad, and the July 30 ad itself. It was reproduced in *THE PAPER SNAKE*.

On view in *SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY* is camera-ready art for page 10 of *A BOOK ABOUT DEATH*, and some of its components including that original snake drawing, the June 18 ad, the “phantom postcard”, and camera-ready art for the July 30 ad based on it.

One also sees reproduced among *THE PAPER SNAKE*'s pages a number of figure drawings of Ray Johnson's dating from his high school years, when he took classes at The Detroit Institute of Arts. These had apparently been given by Ray to Dick Higgins, but Ray had also given a selection of similar drawings to a high school classmate, who saved them for over half a century, not knowing what had become of Ray after graduation, until Bill Wilson serendipitously found a way to contact him. Thus one of these forgotten drawings from Ray's high school years is on display for the first time in this exhibition. The model in this drawing looks like, and is attired identically to, the model in some of the 1940s drawings reproduced in *THE PAPER SNAKE*.

A final note about *THE PAPER SNAKE*'S contents: a long selection (by *PAPER SNAKE* standards) is one entitled “Mysterious Disappearances.” Part or all of this text is from a unique artist's book by that title, given by Ray Johnson to Dick Higgins for Christmas of 1960. Many years ago, *MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCES*—one of fewer than a dozen such artist's books by Ray known to exist—became part of a private collection in Italy. The link between that book and *THE PAPER SNAKE* is not widely known. A reproduction of the book's cover can be seen in *SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY*.

## **SOMETHING ELSE PRESS NEWSCARDS**

The first and third of these, issued in early 1965, mailed out to Higgins' and Johnson's mailing lists, seek, in part, to promote *THE PAPER SNAKE*. They give no indication as to who had decided what they would say, but Newscard #1 does introduce Camille Gordon (who “says that red will absolutely not be worn this spring”). Her updates of Something Else Press activities, her social notes and fashion tips evolved later from the Newscard format into a much more elaborate newsletter.

Camille had the curious distinction of not existing. “Dick wrote all the blurbs, newsletters, and jacket copy, which sometimes put him in the awkward position of referring to his own work in the third person. To avoid this unseemly posture and no doubt to make the Press seem more populated, he created an alter ego, Camille Gordon ... Camille was killed off once, then mysteriously reappeared in Afghanistan and picked up her career where it left off.”—Barbara Moore in “Some Things Else About Something Else Press” from the brochure accompanying an exhibition at Granary Books, New York, 1991.

## **JOKE REVIEWS OF THE PAPER SNAKE**

Whoever Lucia Burneson is or was, she had strong opinions about *THE PAPER SNAKE* which belied her obvious but sarcastically expressed high regard for Ray Johnson. She seems to have been an occasional correspondent of Ray's, living—in 1965 and perhaps still—in Lima, Ohio. No reply was received from Lucia Burneson to a note mailed to her 50 years to the day after she wrote the first of the two elaborately crafted, irreverently tongue-in-cheek “reviews” of *THE PAPER SNAKE*, dated March, 1965, from which these excerpts were drawn:

*“... Destiny's tot, the irrepressible Ray Johnson, under the dubious aegis of Nonesuch Press (a subsidiary of Haphazard House), has permitted to be published a slender volume called “The Brick Finger Bowl”. Hearsaid is the rumor that this venture has been jointly underwritten by the Black Mountain Institute for Advanced Studies in Invertebrate Paleontology, The Crown-Zellerbach Fund for Outrageous Uses of Paper Pulp, and the legendary Knolls-O'Higgins Foundation (a tax write-off). ... Professor Wilson's jacket blurb should be sufficient warning to the wary that O'Higgins has yet again contrived another advertisement for himself—coals to*

*Newcastle, as far as we're concerned. ... The irony here is that this tawdry megalomania has been insinuated into an otherwise scholarly work by Dr. Johnson—truly among the world's most dedicated herpetologists. ..."*

*"Johnson's opus is trenchant, ambiguous, yeasty, profoundly dishonest, chock full of pizzazz, and choked with ambition of the meaner sort. ... One may hope for greater selectivity in any further publications Johnson may essay—and yet, as it stands, the present none-too-slender volume ... is truly a work which every man, woman, and child in the Western world can afford to overlook."*

### **COLLAGES BY RAY JOHNSON**

The collages in this exhibition from the mid-to-late 1950s are examples of the earliest works by Ray that you are likely to see, since little remains of Ray's art from before 1956. Ray is said to have burned the paintings, and the collages he mailed away, sold on New York's sidewalks, or incorporated into later works. Those that were given as gifts by Ray to Bill Wilson have survived. While they are not directly related to THE PAPER SNAKE, they show what Johnson's collages from Ray's early career looked like when not converted by Dick Higgins into the false-color versions we see in THE PAPER SNAKE. Several of the collages from Bill's collection on loan to SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY have never been publicly shown before.

### **AUDIO-VISUAL**

Three late-1950s performance works by Ray Johnson, recorded onto an audiocassette by Dick Higgins, found in the collection of the Estate of Ray Johnson. If these are from public performances, it is unknown where or when they took place. One of the pieces is not known to have been presented publicly by Ray; the only evidence of another is this recording and the 1983 note from Higgins which accompanied it. The contents of this tape have never been played publicly before this exhibition.

Dick Higgins reciting his poem "Sow Among the Tombstones", from an undated reel-to-reel tape apparently given by Dick to William S. Wilson. It is not known why or by whom it was recorded, and not yet clear if this poem was ever published. The contents of this tape have never been played publicly before this exhibition.

William S. Wilson's September 1965 8mm films of Ray Johnson. One shows Ray Johnson on Tilghman Island, Maryland, on a visit to the summer home of Bill's parents, William S. Wilson Sr. and artist and Ray Johnson friend May Wilson. The other—newly discovered, and never before presented publicly—shows Ray en route to or from Maryland in Odessa, Delaware.

- Michael von Uchtrup, curator,  
**SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY**

**Michael von Uchtrup** is an archivist based in New York who has been working since 1999 on various collections of material relating to Ray Johnson, primarily the "official" NYCS archive of William S. Wilson. Ray Johnson's biography has been writing itself on his hard drive, encouraged by a residence at the Emily Harvey Foundation in Venice in 2012 and correspondences with some of Ray's closest friends spanning the last quarter century.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to reiterate BMCM+AC Program Director Alice Sebrell's expression of gratitude to Bill Wilson, who has contributed to this show in countless ways, not least of which is the loan of a large number of papers and correspondence from his archive. I remain indebted to Bill for his unfailing support and encouragement of my projects within and beyond the world of Ray Johnson.

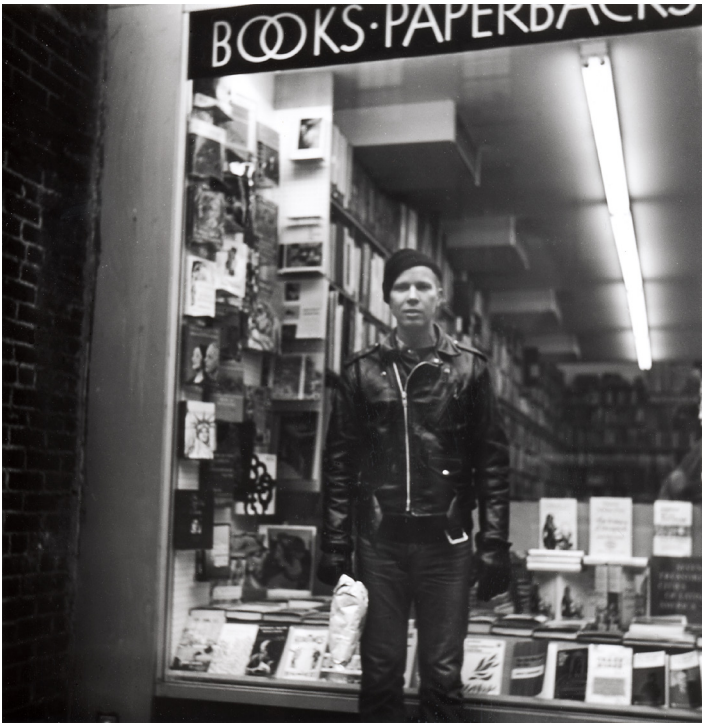
I, too, would like to acknowledge colleagues at the Estate of Ray Johnson at Richard L. Feigen & Co.: Diana Bowers, in particular, for her fine hard work and astute observations, and RLF & Co. president Frances Beatty, for her generous cooperation on several fronts.

A number of others contributed in a variety of ways to this exhibition and its printed guide, and are also owed a big thank you: Mark Bloch, Charlton Burch, Rachel Graham, Hannah Higgins, Alison Knowles, Sophia Kofodimos, Andrew Moore, Barbara Moore, Lisa Pearson, David Price, Susan Rhew, Walter Schnepel, Marie Tavroges Stilkind, John Walter, Ken Ward, and Elizabeth Zuba.

Thanks, too, to BMCM+AC staff and board members, especially Connie Bostic, Brian Butler—and Alice Sebrell. Alice, and my fellow Ray Johnson scholar Julie J. Thomson, both believed in show from the start, and have enthusiastically given of their time and considerable expertise. Julie also designed and contributed an important essay to this printed guide. They both have my deep appreciation.



# "REMEMBERING RAY"



Ray Johnson by Marie Tavroges Stilkind, 1965. The covers of *THE PAPER SNAKE* and Dick Higgins's *Jefferson's Birthday* appear on Ray's right. Collection of BMCM+AC.

## Marie Tavroges Stilkind

"When I met Ray Johnson [in New York, in autumn of 1960] ... it seems to me that the NY Correspondence School was already in operation. I had heard about Ray Johnson when I was at BMC [1952–54] and then when I moved into [composer] Philip Glass' old apartment, I met Albert M. Fine [mentioned in *PAPER SNAKE*]. Soon Albert ... brought Ray Johnson over to meet me at Juilliard School of Music. At that time, I was working at Juilliard ... Ray would drop in with letters for me to mail."—letter, Marie Tavroges Stilkind to William S. Wilson, April 3, 1995. Born and raised in England, Marie spent time in Kingston, Ontario, and Montreal before going to Black Mountain College in the 1950s and then to New York City where she befriended Ray Johnson. She now resides in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

I came to New York in late spring in 1965 along with my son, Teddy Stilkind, called Rumpel by Ray Johnson, and we stayed with Bill and Anne Marie Wilson and their twin daughters, Ara and Kate. Teddy spent most of his time in the twins' rooms where they did their 3-A-Baby dance. They were very mysterious.

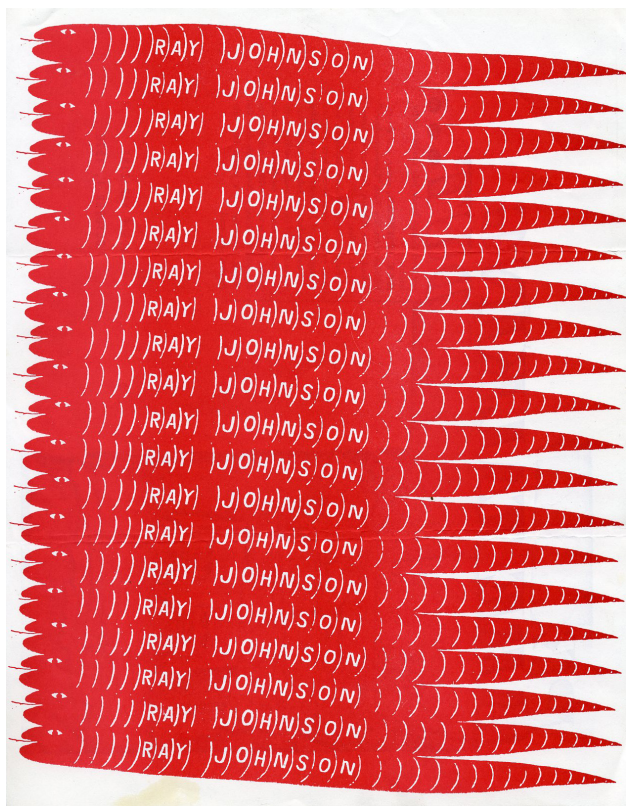
The Wilsons baby-sat two-year-old Teddy one day when Ray came over to get me to visit his apartment at 176 Suffolk Street where he gave me tea and a collage inscribed to me, which I still have up on my wall. I took photos while we were in Ray's neat, tidy and empty home.

He took me out to a bookshop which had his *PAPER SNAKE* for sale on a top shelf which could be seen through their front window. I took two photos. One of him standing outside in front of the shop window and another of him on the inside gazing at the cover of a book entitled *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH* and looking wicked. It was printed for me by Alice Sebrell and is now hanging outside my computer room.

After our visit to the bookshop, we went back to Bill Wilson's large tall house where later Ray introduced me to the artist and then box-wrapper called Christo. Christo could not speak English but knew some French. Ray had studied French at Black Mountain College so he told Christo I was his wife and he should give me a wrapped box. Then he told me in English to open up the wrapping, that Christo was giving me a gift. So I unwrapped the gift box but it was empty and Christo giggled nervously while I sat there stunned holding the unwrapped box. I don't remember what happened after that. Maybe I retired to Bill's kitchen and washed the dishes.

My copy of *THE PAPER SNAKE* is a little damaged from Hurricane Wilma ... But it has survived and is now on a top shelf in my living room.

Love from Marie



Ray Johnson, "Red Snakes", ca. 1980s. © The Ray Johnson Estate, Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co.

This publication was made possible by a generous donation by Camille Gordon. It is dedicated to the memory of Jonathan Williams (1929–2008), BMC alum, poet, publisher, photographer, and self-proclaimed "curmudgeon to the stars."

## Black Mountain College MUSEUM ARTS CENTER



This booklet was printed in June 2015 in conjunction with the exhibit *SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY: Ray Johnson, Dick Higgins + the making of THE PAPER SNAKE* June 5–August 22, 2015  
Curated by Michael Von Uchtrup

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### RELATED PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE AT BMCM+AC:

**THE PAPER SNAKE** by Ray Johnson, reprinted by Siglio Press, 2014. Hardback with dust jacket, 48 pages, ISBN: 978-1-938221-03-3. In the spirit of the original, the print run is the same (1,840 copies). An introductory essay written by Frances F. L. Beatty PhD, director of the Ray Johnson Estate, with poet and editor Elizabeth Zuba, is included as a separate insert. It is available for \$34.70 per copy at the BMCM+AC or via Siglio Press: [www.sigliopress.com/book/the-paper-snake/](http://www.sigliopress.com/book/the-paper-snake/)

### LIGHTWORKS #22–THE RAY JOHNSON ISSUE, 2000.

A special issue devoted to Ray's life and art, with contributions by former BMC students Norman Solomon and Marie Tavroges Stilkind, and dozens of other Ray Johnson friends. 96 pages plus an audio CD of Nick Maravell's documentation of Ray. *Lightworks* #22 is available for \$13 per copy at the BMCM+AC or from editor Charlton Burch at *Lightworks* magazine, PO Box 1202, Birmingham, MI 48012-1202. 248-626-8026. If ordering by mail, please add \$3 postage per copy. Info: [lightworks\\_mag@hotmail.com](mailto:lightworks_mag@hotmail.com)

**RAY JOHNSON RAY JOHNSON.** This 24-page pamphlet was issued by William S. Wilson in honor of his friend Ray's 50th birthday in 1977. In it are reproductions of collages, letters, and photos by/of Johnson, plus an assortment of Wilson's early articles on the New York Correspondence School. In the original "Birthday Card for Ray Johnson" mailing envelope. A rarity, it is available for \$20 per copy at the BMCM+AC.

### FILM SCREENING–HOW TO DRAW A BUNNY

Thursday, August 20, 7:30 p.m. John Walter and Andrew Moore's award-winning feature-length documentary tells the story of Ray Johnson, whose life and art remain enigmatic and whose death was cloaked in mystery. Includes interview footage of Richard Lippold (BMC visiting lecturer) and Norman Solomon (BMC student), as well as Frances Beatty, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Chuck Close, Roy Lichtenstein, Judith Malina, Billy Name, James Rosenquist, and others.

### JOURNAL OF BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE STUDIES PAPER SNAKE EDITION

Currently in production for release in late summer or early fall, volume #8 of JBMCS will include contributions by four people who knew Ray in the PAPER SNAKE years: Alison Knowles, Barbara Moore, Marie Tavroges Stilkind, and Bill Wilson; and essays by Frances Beatty, Clive Phillpot, Julie J. Thomson, and Elizabeth Zuba. Several selections were written especially for this issue. Editor: Blake Hobby, guest editor: Michael von Uchtrup, curator, *SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY*. [www.blackmountaincollegestudies.org/wp/](http://www.blackmountaincollegestudies.org/wp/)