



Dust Jacket Copy for *The Paper Snake* by William S. Wilson

What is beautiful in the work of Ray Johnson is what he sees in the way he sees it. What is meaningful is not so much the content as the parallels and intersections of the style. And what is real to Ray Johnson is not *what* so much as *how*. For him, a thing is attractive when it resembles something else. These resemblances constitute the incidents of his world and form the coincidences in his design. These designs, from intimate fragments of our lives, point out unsuspected resemblances of form or line or color; design, based on such accidental similarities, stops the ticking clock. His works are surely not eternal, but they are moments without time. They are to time as echo is to sound.

The meaning in Ray Johnson's work is not logical, like an Aristotelian syllogism, but counterlogical, like a psalm. All art represents reality, there is no non-representational art. It just depends on what the artist thinks is real, and on what he can prove to be real. For Ray Johnson reality is in coincidental resemblances. When one thing resembles something else, design is possible for beauty, and metaphor is possible for meaning. Fact is freed into image.

Ray Johnson tells parables. He finds a use for coincidence. He pounces on and proclaims a day-by-day order and meaning in events; the order is design, the meaning is coincidence. This orderly coincidence—this coincidental design—is sufficient meaning. Ray Johnson picks up crumbs and hands back bread.

In an age when people live allegorically, allegory is naturalistic. In an age when people live symbolically, symbolism is naturalistic. Realism could not depict Ray Johnson realistically. Since Ray Johnson lives a life that is a continuous revelation of pure and radiant design, the image of that life is art. Since the life itself is designed of coincidences, like a walk taking a line, the aesthetic reciprocal of that life is a Ray Johnson collage. Ray Johnson is not neo-dada or abstract or extract: he is an artist representing the reality of his life; it happens that his life is a collage. At least it happens that he works at his life until it is a work of art, and he works at his art until life catches up with it.

The first principle of Ray Johnson's art is that anything isolated is beautiful, albeit opaque. The second principle is that meaning awakens in that isolated beautiful thing when it is juxtaposed to something like it (counterparts, like rhymes, for the romantic; counterpoints, like puns, for the ironic). Ray Johnson said, "I deal in invisibilities and anonymities." He said, "Andy Warhol says my snakes aren't snakes—they are worms because they aren't lifesize. But some of my snakes are imaginary and inarticulate snakes, and what is lifesize about inarticulateness?" To Dick Higgins he has written, "I want to live and die like an egg." Ray Johnson's art is always *see and say, show and tell*; it is also imaginary, inarticulate and eggshaped.

Ray Johnson is the master of the form or line or color that corresponds with another form or line or color: hence the New York Correspondence School of Art, in which he mails to friends and strangers his correspondences. Ray Johnson plays the U.S. mails like a harp. His art is not of social comment, but of sociability. The equations in this intimate algebra cannot always be explained; they usually seem self-evident at the time, although Ray Johnson likes to make sure people catch on. Since a change in style is a change in meaning, this book is a translation of Ray Johnson into Dick Higgins; reading these is like reading over Dick Higgins' shoulder, or hearing him read them aloud. Ray Johnson makes eggs out of omelets and Dick Higgins eats them.

This short essay on the flaps of The Paper Snake's dust jacket was written by William S. Wilson, then 32, at the request of Dick Higgins. 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 issued. 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. He was periodically given boxloads of NYCS miscellanea by Johnson himself, who correctly assumed this material would be preserved. Fifty years after The Paper Snake's release, Bill revisits the book in "Ray Johnson and Dick Higgins: Reciprocities."

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