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RAY JOHNSON: Conversation with R. Pieper

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HOW TO DRAW A B

A number of incidents relating to, and correspondences with, Ray Johnson over the past nine years have occurred in R. Pieper's life, though the two of them had never met. The following is a record of a phone conversation which took place on July 11, 1979 between Ray and Pieper. This conversation was recorded, with Ray's permission, through a phone tap mike at that time.

RP: I first became aware of you through an article by Rosalind Constable in *New York* magazine about nine years ago. I was only 20 at the time, but I remember feeling thoroughly edified. My conceptions of art had been expanded, or I was at least excited, just by that small piece, but it was obvious that you had already been sending mail as art for quite a while. When did you first start?

RJ: I'll have to answer your question in two ways: there are a lot of different versions, and there are a lot of different concepts as to either when I began this activity or when it was called "The New York Correspondence School". Mike Crane of San Diego is writing a book called *A Brief History of Correspondence Art*², and in the *Lightworks Envelope Catalogue*³ from Ann Arbor, he has some paragraphs in which he states that I began The New York Correspondence School in 1962, which is probably an inaccurate date.

RP: Isn't that a little late?

RJ: Well, it was probably created in the 1950s. *Art Journal*⁴ has an essay by Ed Plunkett in an article with 12 other essays about it. I don't know if you can get the date for the naming of The New York Correspondence School, but it was in operation long before it ever achieved a title. I had an exhibition of my letters at the Raleigh, North Carolina Museum⁵, and there were letters included in that exhibition from 1945, when I was a student—long before I was 20 years old.

Now, I think I'm 51 years old (a perennial teenager), and I have simply gained a reputation for having done this for a very long time. One of my last press releases states that I am the "grandfather" of correspondence art. Up until a few weeks ago, I was called the "father" of correspondence art. *File Magazine* used to call me "Dada Daddy".

Also, Mike Crane mentions the document⁶ in the North Carolina catalogue which announces the official death of the New York Correspondence School. But he does not mention its instant rebirth and metamorphosis as "Buddha University"⁷. So, it's still functioning, with all sorts of subdivisions and fan club titles, and it doesn't really matter what it's called; but, I was ripped off by the Canadians of "The New York Correspondence-Darice School"⁸, so it depends on how seriously and accurately one's pursuit of what it all means is.

RP: That brings me to another question, about the Image Bank and the Western Front⁹ and the various people around Mr. Peanut¹⁰ and the rest in the west. There seems to have been an extraordinary proliferation of mail artists in the early '70s. . .

RJ: . . . in Canada. And on an international scale, yes. That came about through the first few issues of *File Magazine*¹¹, and their request lists, and their sending out of mailing lists. It became a kind of organ for people everywhere to connect. Historically, that was very interesting. But they have now gone in another direction.

RP: It seems ironic that it was they who brought a sense of acceptance to mail art, simply by the quantity of missives that they sent out, yet you had already been working for over 20 years.

RJ: I have always been a single-person, non-funded, organization. *File Magazine* was set up and staffed through Canadian government funding to publish a magazine. Do you have a copy of the *Detroit Artists Monthly*¹²?

RP: No, I don't.

RJ: You see? That's the whole problem. All of the activities of correspondence art have only been documented in isolated magazine articles, or catalogues, or whatever, and there is no way of knowing who did what when, or said what about what when. In contrast to *File Magazine*, I, of necessity, had to publish invisible books, and do "Nothings"¹³, and, you know, deal in things that don't exist. But that's documented in the *Detroit Artists Monthly*.

RP: A year or two ago, I noticed an exhibition of collages of yours.

RJ: Yes, I'm a writer and a painter. I have two activities, which are interesting economically; you can buy my work in a gallery, and see it in many museums' famous collections as artworks in frames. My last show of portraits sells from \$800 to \$3000. Or, you can get all this material from me by mail for free, if I decide to send it to you. There was talk at one time of my undermining the whole art economy by my "giving away". As David Bourdon said, you "got the stuff whether you wanted it or not. . ." That is, you got a very beautiful collage or drawing just mailed to you. So, I decree whether I give this to you, or that I sell it to you.

RP: Are your collages or your other graphic work considered to be more "serious" than your mail work? Or do you consider it more "serious" or less "serious"?

RJ: I simply think of the correspondence as a writing activity. The incorporation of collage embellishments, either by myself or others, that I showed at the Whitney Museum¹⁵ was one of the first mail art shows. It incorporated the work of 106 people, so it's conceptual in that my work wasn't there, but everybody else's work was there because I simply asked them to submit. That was curated by Marcia Tucker. I don't know what you know about me. Have you ever corresponded with me?

RP: Yes, I have.

RJ: You have. I thought I remembered your name.

RP: Long ago, I was in Ithaca, and my first missive to you played on that article by Rosalind Constable that associated yours with Joseph Cornell's work. I didn't understand the kinship, but I sent you a missive based upon paper which had "Cornell" printed on it. I was a student there at the time.

RJ: Well, Nicholas Calas' book on contemporary art¹⁶ states in one sentence that I am the "Joseph Cornell of the mailbox", so there is some association of what I do in mailboxes with Cornell boxes. Actually, I have done a portrait of Cornell and his sister, who is alive.

RP: I remember reading, years ago, that you did a piece which involved taking a taxi from Barbara Bar to Harbor Bar to get the conjunction in sounds—just to pun. I have related that anecdote many times, which is the reason I remember it. So, were you, or are you now, a purer conceptualist? Did you come to mail art from there?

RJ: No. The *New York Times* did an article on conceptual art, and it said that Joseph Beuys and I were "unclassifiable". And Lucy Lippard, in her introduction to her book *Six Years*,¹⁷ states that Arakawa and I are impossible to include or write about as conceptual artists because of the bizarre nature of what we do. I don't document or classify, or associate. I simply live from day to day, and write letters.

When people like Mike Crane say I am a "naive draftsman," I use that as a vehicle to state that Mike Crane says that I am a "Navy draftsman" because of The Village People singing "In The Navy"¹⁸. Also, one of my poems is addressed to the Canadians, asking them if Canada has a Navy, and are all people from Canada "knaves"? So, I do a kind of Gertrude Stein twist and turn of words and meanings. But "Harbor Bar and Barbara Bar" was an action, which was also recorded by William Wilson, in which we went from the Lower East Side to New York's West Side by taxi, just to go from one place to another with a similar-sounding name. We subsequently, at my 50th birthday¹⁹ party at William Wilson's house, had a meeting of the—are you ready for

this—"Michael Cooper, Michael Cooper, Michael Cooper Club". There are two Michael Coopers who knew each other, and we had a third Michael Cooper meet, and all these Michael Coopers met the other Michael Coopers. Now, there might have been four of them, for all I know, I can't even, at this point, remember, because there was a possibility that there would be five at the next meeting. At the last Correspondence School meeting at the Artist's Space Gallery²⁰ here in New York, somebody mentioned that a Michael Cooper had committed suicide, so I made a lot of phone calls to find out which one, and it turned out to be another Michael Cooper in London who we didn't even know about. So I said well, we're not interested in that one. Which brings us up to the Ray Johnson who streaked the Vatican and was kicked out of Italy and had to go back to Trinity College in Hartford.

I had an exhibition of drawings at the Walker Art Center last year, and I mention this because of the Ray Johnson who streaked the Vatican. I began my lecture (since *Art In America*²¹ said I was the "master of the throwaway gesture") by streaking the Walker Art Center. As I was being introduced, I appeared naked, and ran across the stage and down the aisle, which was a reference to the other Ray Johnson, who I met in Hartford at the Wadsworth Atheneum. It was a meeting of Ray Johnson and Ray Johnson. Someone in Utica or Ithaca wanted me to appear on the Johnny Carson show with another Ray Johnson who wrote a book on solitary confinement. He spent half of his life in jail, and he appeared rather frequently on the Johnny Carson show; so, they thought it would be something to have two Ray Johnsons . . .

RP: . . . on the Johnny Carson show at once?



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RJ: Yes. Did you ever meet Buster Cleveland?

RP: No.

RJ: Oh.

But, the "Harbor Bar and Barbara Bar" is not conceptual, and it's not an artwork. It's a participatory action. I keep saying to people who want to find out about the Correspondence School that the only way to truly understand it is through participation, because what I do is made for each person. When I'm speaking to you, I am creating this composition for you by telephone, on the spot. If you are in New York, we should meet sometime. I'm sorry that you couldn't get to that Artist's Space meeting a couple of weeks ago. It was one of my favorite meetings. The last one, two years ago, was a Shelley Duvall Fan Club meeting. This was the second Shelley Duvall Fan Club Meeting, and it was a pretty good one. I enjoyed it immensely. If you had gotten me a few weeks ago, I would have made a special point of inviting you. We could have met, and you could have participated by walking through all these legs.

RP: Actually, I should meet you, if only to . . . well, I'll tell you a story now—not, I hope, to be embarrassing. About nine months after starting corresponding with you, after an extraordinarily long hiatus without receiving any notes from you, I sent you, from Marseilles, France, a penis I had sculpted out of the stale ends of French breads that I had partially eaten while staying in a youth hostel. I grew very attached to it, so I took it to the train station with me, intending to

keep it. At the train station I found a discarded shoebox that smelled of sausage, and I became so enamored with the box that I wrapped the French bread in the newspaper that had previously held the sausage and put it into the box and mailed it from a neighboring post office. I never received a response about that either.

However, the next fall, I accidentally met Alan Lindenfeld, whose name I recognized from something you had sent me, and when he invited me to his home, and he started showing me the mail he had received from you, I realized that you had felt that I was a fictional person created by him, and had sent a number of responses, including a "thank-you" note for the French bread penis, to Alan.

RJ: I had sent it to Alan? You see, that's one of the interesting problems—it's not that I'm that old, and it's not that I'm senile, I don't think; but, due to the constant attention over the years to the material that has either come in here or gone out, there are whole areas of memory-breakdown brain damage. People say, "Did you receive the postcard I sent you with this on it?", and I have received so many postcards that I do not have immediate recall. And I get a lot of very cryptic things that are unrememberable. I mean, the bread would certainly be a memory, but I don't remember it, nor do I remember detecting the sausage odor.

RP: Well, the sausage odor, at this point, may be a figment of my imagination. However, it seems very vivid.

RJ: No, no. It was there. If you say it was there, it was there. But, if it was a bread penis, it might have been just bread crumbs by the time it got here.

RP: True. I remember your note to Alan. It said: "Juicy tomatoes: Italian bread penis arrived here today slightly crushed." More than slightly crushed, I'm sure.

RJ: Somebody named Ohio Bloomfield sent me something once. He got V.D., and he apparently had a canker on the tip of his penis, and he made a rubber mold cast. It's sort of a grey metallic penis, which I still have here. It's in a special cow-udder-from-Illinois-and-milk-bottle box. That was a rather unusual thing to get in the mail.

And, another thing: over the years I have attempted to recycle. Everything that has been sent to me, I have attempted to send to somebody else. I get requests from people who want things back, or do I still have that thing. It's difficult. If you sent me a bread penis, and somebody else sent me a plaster penis, it might become filed or classified under "P", and cross-referenced. I mean, your name alone: "Pieper", "Peeper". Now that you mention Alan, I do remember those envelopes, but I don't remember the confusion as to who you were.

RP: I had hoped to ask you this from the beginning: Why the New York Correspondance School? As opposed to the Correspondence School.

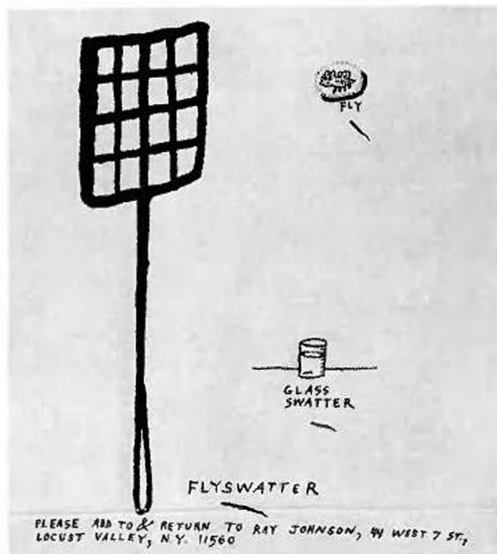
RJ: Oh, yes, there are a lot of playful variations in spelling, because in 1965 or so, I began the first meetings of people. For example, you would be invited to a meeting to meet me formally, or to meet other people that you, perhaps, had corresponded with, or for you to meet a Michael Cooper, or a Yoko Ono, or a whoever. And then, these meetings began to have specific themes. The first one²² took place in a historic Quaker Church on Rutherford Place. It was like a Quaker Meeting, and it was just a meeting of friends, which was a pun on Quaker meetings. I had sort of hoped that people would have religious convulsions and writhe on the floor and do Quaker Shaking—I mean, Shaker dancing. So we had subsequent meetings at Finch College, where Toby Spiselman rented foot massage machines, and I would do things like carrying people physically, and group-encounter-type things. The last meeting, just a few weeks ago, involved my asking people to crawl through other people's legs across a Canadian painting on the floor, and involved audience participation in a very child-like action.

RP: So, a performance, in effect?

RJ: Well, a participation.

RP: I'm not trying to label things. I'm trying to, perhaps, facilitate some understanding.

RJ: Well, I keep coming back to non-categories, non-labeling, because of this being a non-art activity. I don't only deal with artists. I deal mostly with people who correspond. They could be trained in the art of dancing or writing or whatever. But it is open to everyone and anyone. There is a wide range of activities from love to hate to disgust



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to whatever. It's very different from what the Canadians have gone into, mostly because my strange personality determines the whole activity of the Correspondence or dance School. But the dance idea was just emphasis on dancing, which was before disco dancing came in—getting together and dancing and moving, jumping or whatever. This subsequently led to New York Correspondence School Street Meetings, which I think is the best way for these things to happen, because it involves people on the street who aren't even at the meeting, and automobile traffic and weather, and no one even knows that the whole thing is happening or going on. So I, as the director of this activity, get to work with a different bunch of possible things, rather than being confined to a gallery or museum space. Right now, I'm just trying to keep the whole thing going. It's an intriguing puzzle to keep the whole thing going right now, and to finance it.

RP: Are you struggling financially?

RJ: My last statement was that the New York Correspondence School does not have fifteen cents. So, I'm running an international correspondence school. . . .

RP: Well, then, send a postcard, which is only ten cents.

RJ: Well, that is one postcard to one person. To you. Only you²³.

RP: Obviously, every gallery or every critic loves an artist whose work fits within neat boundaries, or appreciates that, at least, if not loves that. Do you find that eclecticism on your part makes you financially or commercially less attractive?

RJ: Well, that's a funny question, but to answer it, I always have struggled for survival. I've never at all been in a comfortable situation involving my artwork, except for last year when I got the top NEA grant. Nam June Paik and I both got \$10,000, so that helped last year to maintain the Correspondence School.

RP: But are you struggling again now?

RJ: Oh yes, definitely.

RP: I wanted to ask you about the origin of your schmo-like creature—the one with two fat ears, like a bunny.

RJ: Well, it's derivative of Mickey Mouse or Mickey Rat, or it's a mouse or, at times, an elephant with a long proboscis. It's always expressive of who I feel I am at that moment I make that drawing. I asked you about Buster Cleveland before. He is an artist who has taken my head, and calls himself Buster Johnson. He wants to go on the Gong Show doing a thing called "How to Draw a Ray Johnson Rabbit", because one of my printings explains how to do that head—how you draw the circle on the ears, the eyes, the nose and the mouth and so forth. It shows you all the various steps of how to make that drawing.

