

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's book on contemporary art 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.¹⁷ 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*, states that Arakawa and I are impossible to include or write about as conceptual artists because of the bizarre nature of what we do.¹⁸ 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."¹⁹ 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 fiftieth birthday party at William Wilson's house, had a meeting of the—are you ready for this—Michael Cooper, Michael Cooper, Michael

Cooper Club.²⁰ 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 Artists Space Gallery 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.²¹ 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* said I was the "master of the throwaway gesture") by streaking the Walker Art Center.²² 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?

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 Artists 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 Marseille, 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.