



William S. Wilson, "Ray Johnson, September 1965, between the two O's of a highway sign."

© William S. Wilson Estate

**THAT  
WAS  
THE  
ANSWER:  
INTERVIEWS  
WITH  
RAY  
JOHNSON**

**EDITED BY JULIE J. THOMSON**

**SOBERSCOPE PRESS | CHICAGO**

## Editor's Note

Many of these interviews—either published in the early years of these magazines before copyediting standards were in place, or transcribed here for the first time—have been copyedited for consistency. I have, for the most part, retained Ray Johnson's pauses and occasionally unconventional syntax throughout the course of the interviews, but have corrected the use of proper names, venues, and exhibitions. In addition, I have lightly edited obvious punctuation errors and misspellings in English from even previously published transcriptions in the interest of intelligibility, but have retained misspellings when they were clearly the result of personal style on the part of Johnson or the interviewer.

I have tried to keep explanatory notes to a minimum, except in the interest of reprinting those previously attached to published interviews, but have added them on the occasion when I feel their inclusion would enhance textual references. Johnson sometimes spelled "correspondence" as "correspondance." Unless specifically published as "correspondance," I have used "correspondence" when referring to the New York Correspondence School, since Johnson expressed a preference for that spelling when working on the 1976 North Carolina Museum of Art exhibition. The table of contents lists the year in which each interview was conducted, which sometimes differs from the publication year.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH ИОЗИНОЛ ЯЯ

David Bourdon Jr.

*Artforum* 3 (September 1964): 28-29.<sup>1</sup>

**Q:** I seldom see any collages that are fresher and more contemporary than Schwitters's. I think it's impossible to say you "work in the tradition of Schwitters," because he indicated so clearly and exploited so fully the possibilities of collage. He is a terminal artist, a dead end. What future do you see in collage?

**Johnson:** Yes, I was born in Detroit in a log cabin and I attended Black Mountain Collage [*sic*] in North Carolina, where I once carried a log from the top of a mountain to the bottom of the mountain and then threw it in a stream.

**Q:** Rauschenberg had adroitly sidestepped the problem of following Schwitters in his silk-screen paintings, which enable him to paint a readymade image any size and as frequently as he wants, while avoiding the customary small scale of collage. For what reason have you seldom strayed beyond the bounds of the 7½-by-11-inch collage?

**Johnson:** I once had a job paying \$5 an hour as a designer in Ossining, New York, designing silk scarves for Vera and the train that took me to work passed Sing Sing. I did not like the work.

**Q:** Great artists are said to present a new way of seeing and experiencing things. For me, *papier collé* is a mirror [that] reflects the world around it, but is unable to offer a new image to the world. For you, have *papiers collés* ever offered more than a point of view?

**Johnson:** I was in a synagogue recently and I left as an offering a small wooden spoon in an envelope. I think that Schwitters collages and Rauschenberg silk screens should be put in envelopes and left as offerings in churches.

**Q:** It seems to me that collage as a medium lends itself to the expression of satire and social commentary. The torn posters of Rotella and Hains become commentary, because these “found objects” are presented in a state of decay which invites nostalgic reflection rather than evoking a response to new pictorial creation. Doesn’t it take a lot of “tasteful” selection to add up to a pictorial creation?

**Johnson:** I would suggest your question be presented to Vera, who might supply an interesting answer. Sorry to pass the buck.

**Q:** One of the more diverting “formal extensions” of collage is the “happening.” You have not been closely involved in “happenings,” but you have invented something like a closet-happening, which you call a “nothing.” I know you do not think of a “nothing” as mere emptiness or absence of any action and meaning. What then are you trying to convey in your “nothings?”

**Johnson:** I do not know before nor during nor after a *Nothing* what I am trying to convey. I am not trying to convey anything. Fibber McGee sometimes opened a closet and hundreds of objects fell out making sounds. A kind of Salinger household.

**Q:** For the past few years, you have concentrated on the creation and dissemination of your “mailings” (envelopes with miscellaneous clippings). This is, I know, a means of visual communication between members of your New York Correspondence School. Are these “mailings” breakdown collages in the form of do-it-yourself kits? Is this an art form?

**Johnson:** The contents is the contents; the stamp are the stamp; the address are the address. It is very clear. Your question, “Is this an art form?” is the art form.

**Q:** The items in your mailings are full of “references,” which—when forwarded—take on different meanings for different people. You have said that all your work