Much Ado About "Nothings" : Ray Johnson and Fluxus

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MUCH ADO ABOUT "NOTHINGS": RAY JOHNSON AND FLUXUS

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History

by

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Ray Johnson was a performance and collage artist who had a career that spanned six decades, yet there is relatively little known or written about him. After interviewing his friends and acquaintances I will bring to light new information and insights on Johnson’s work. In this thesis I discuss the performance art of Johnson and compare it to pieces by Fluxus and Happenings artists. I also address the influences that Zen Buddhism had on his life and work as well as his rejection of the established art world. I argue that Johnson was possibly the only artist to date who made a work of art out of his entire life.
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"The goal is serious, the way humorous. Or sarcastic. Or a game. Everybody's life is wholly like that, when lived without external coercion. We play until death takes us away."

-Kurt Schwitters, in a 1946 letter to Christof Spengemann

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I. Introduction:

Ray Johnson had a prolific career that spanned six decades yet there is little written about him and his work. His ideas on art and life were shaped in the 1940s through the 1950s and came to fruition during the 1960s. He continued to work into the 1990s and then at age sixty-seven his life ended abruptly by his own hand. In this paper I will discuss the life and performance art of Ray Johnson, how it was affected by his associations with Fluxus and the Happenings artists as well as the historical setting of America in the late 1950s through the 1960s. I will focus on the performances by Johnson which he called Nothings. Johnson started these performances in the early 1960s when performance art was becoming the trend among young artists. They used performance as a way to protest the authority of museums and art galleries and as a way of rebelling against the aesthetic formalism of the Abstract Expressionists.

I have done extensive interviewing with many friends and acquaintances of Johnson. This has enabled me to bring to light new information and insights on Johnson that have never been published, such as how his love of privacy affected his work and descriptions of intimate performances done for his friends. I will trace the history of artists as the outsiders/boheminians from Courbet, the Symbolists, the Futurists and the Dada Movement through to Johnson and the breaks from the academic norms that made them possible. I will also discuss the influences and concepts that shaped the career and life of Johnson. I will especially look into the impact that Zen and other Buddhist philosophy had on Johnson’s work and his life.
II. Ray Johnson's Life

"Ray wasn't a person; he was a collage or a sculpture, a living sculpture. He was Ray Johnson's creation." - Billy Name

Ray Johnson was an intensely private person so there is not a great deal known about his childhood or early career. Even his close friends felt that they did not truly know him. The following is what is known and documented about Johnson's life. Ray Johnson was born in Detroit, Michigan on October 16, 1927 to Eino and Lorraine Johnson. He had no siblings. He kept extensive scrapbooks and these give a small glimpse into his youth. While we can get an idea of Johnson's academic and social activities through his scrapbooks there is no known record of his personal thoughts or feelings.

He attended Loren M. Post Intermediate School in Detroit and kept his certificate of admission to high school. He then continued on to Cass Technical High School and kept his admission ticket to the commencement exercises, dated January 31, 1945 as well as his certificates of winning first and second place in various poster contests. He kept information on taking summer art classes at Oxbow art school in Saugatuck, Michigan, being a high school member of the Red Cross and doing work at the Civilian Defense Volunteer Office in Detroit during the war years. He painted animals on the wall of the

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4 Photocopies of Ray Johnson's original scrapbooks from the collection of William Wilson, December 2007.
children's wing of the Kiefer Hospital in Detroit. In addition to this he was vice president of his school's Advertising Art Club and a member of the Junior Art Club. (figs.1&2) It seems he had much going on for a teenager, whether prodded by his parents or done on his own is not known. Although considering the vast amount of artwork he would turn out in his life it would seem that he was on the ambitious side.

Johnson attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina sometime between 1945 and 1948. Black Mountain College can best described as an experiment in art education that combined all areas of the arts such as music, dance, poetry and studio arts. It was an incredible feat that such a place was able to exist at all in the conservative American south at that time in history. In the documentary, *Fully Awake, Black Mountain College*, it was said that, “An influx of artists and intellectuals came through not only to teach, but also to work collaboratively on their own projects.” The faculty consisted of a number of the most respected artists in the twentieth century, such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Josef and Anni Albers, Willem De Kooning, Jacob Lawrence and Robert Motherwell.

Black Mountain differed from other colleges in that the faculty owned and operated the school. Another difference that set Black Mountain College apart from others can only be described as an experiment in communal living as students and faculty worked together on everything from farming their own food to constructing the

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6 Cass Technical High School 1945 yearbook, Detroit, Michigan.
7 William S. Wilson’s collection of images of Ray Johnson’s scrapbook and yearbook.
Black Mountain College had only 1,200 students during the time it was open from 1933 to 1956. An important aspect of the teaching philosophy there was the emphasis on making no distinction between work and play and learning was to constantly take place in and out of the classroom. This notion of the student being in a perpetual state of learning had significant meaning to Johnson and introduced him to the concept of the lack of a distinct line between art and life for an artist. Johnson would soon come to believe that art should always be taking place, even throughout mundane day to day activities. It was to be the ruling philosophy throughout his entire life.

During his time at Black Mountain College, Johnson took classes taught by Josef Albers and met artist Richard Lippold, with whom he would have a twenty-five year intimate relationship. John Cage, who would have a powerful influence over Johnson and the Fluxus movement, was teaching at Black Mountain while Johnson was there. Cage's ideas of Zen Buddhism applied to music affected the way Johnson thought about life and he would eventually apply Zen Buddhist philosophies to his own art.

When Ray Johnson came to New York in 1948 it was possibly one of the very few places in America for the nurturing of a young avant-garde artist. There was an immense amount of pressure in the United States at that time to conform to society which was in large part due to the Cold War and fear of Communism. In the late 1940s the American government started their blacklisting of anyone that they considered part of or

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Fully Awake, Black Mountain College, DVD, a film by Cathryn Davis Zommer and Neeley House, (Elon, NC: Elondocs Production, 2007).
14 Ibid.
15 Frederick A. Horowitz, Brenda Danilowitz, Josef Albers, the Bauhaus, Black Montain College and Yale, (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2006), 34.
sympathetic towards Communism. A majority of those on the list were in the movie industry and included actors, writers, directors and musicians. Whether their involvement was real or imagined did not matter as once someone’s name appeared on the list it became next to impossible for them to find work. People were being threatened with incarceration and were socially shunned for the political beliefs they held or were thought to hold. In the 1950s Senator Joseph McCarthy stoked the fires of Communist fears and began accusing any politically left leaning public figures of being Communists. When this type of oppressiveness is put in effect in a “free” country there will be a complete inability to contain the inevitable counter-movement. It was against this social background that Fluxus, Happenings and Johnson’s Nothings were born.

When Johnson came to New York City he moved into a tenement on the Lower East Side.16 John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Richard Lippold also lived in the same building.17 They not only lived in the same building but they also socialized with each other. The combination of talents and ideas exchanged between these men certainly benefited them all. Although Cage seemed to be the driving influence for Johnson and many Fluxus artists, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg and Lippold all likely affected each others’ works. Some of Cunningham’s dances had certain Zen, yoga-like qualities to them. Lippold’s sculptures had elements of spirituality. The golden wires in his works looked like rays of light. The works of

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16 Ibid.
17 Jones, 2001, 32.
Johns and Rauschenberg included humor and used mixed media combinations. These aspects all have a place in Johnson's art.\(^{18}\)

In addition to those living in his building Johnson also corresponded, performed and exhibited with other known artists of the day such as Andy Warhol, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Joseph Cornell, Cy Twombly, Willem de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt and more. Certainly, they were stimulated by each other creatively and by the energy of the city. In an interview Johnson stated, "...you're not just influenced by artists. You're influenced by places and years and other people and irritations and problems."\(^{19}\) The combination of artists, dancers, musicians and writers and the concentration of them in New York City at that time in history created a fertile ground for the next avant-garde movement.

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III. The Avant-Garde

"An exclusively modern discovery, born only when art began to contemplate itself from a historical view."\(^{20}\)

- Italian writer and critic, Massimo Bontempelli, on the avant-garde.

The term avant-garde is usually used to describe artists since the mid nineteenth century who have considered themselves as ahead of their time. Originally a French military term, today it is generally associated with the artists and writers who were the “vanguard” of artistic movements and ideas as well as instigators for political change. Aside from the Futurists, avant-garde artists were associated with leftist politics such as Communism, nihilism and anarchism. Tracing history one can see that avant-garde movements always arose out of political turmoil and a need for societal change.

Today it is generally accepted by art historians that the artistic avant-garde began with Gustave Courbet, born in Ornans, France in 1819.\(^{21}\) Courbet lived a life that set a standard for all future generations of artists. The artist, with behavior set by Courbet, would come to be known as a bohemian, a radical, a questioner of society, a mad genius. The unorthodox behavior of the artists would become tolerated and even expected as it was considered part of their genius. Courbet was part of the Parisian bohemian life in the mid nineteenth century and associated with many of his contemporary writers and artists. He was good friends with anarchist and philosopher Pierre Joseph Proudhon.\(^{22}\) He became involved in French politics and was part of the short lived Paris Commune


government arts committee in 1871. When the Commune collapsed Courbet was
imprisoned and eventually voluntarily exiled to Switzerland.

What is important about Courbet is his rejection of the previous academic artistic
movements such as Romanticism. When the Paris Salon turned down his painting for
display at the Exposition Universalle, due to his bitter relationship with the
superintendent of fine arts, Courbet audaciously exhibited his own work by himself
nearby. He displayed The Painter's Studio, at his own exhibition called the 'Pavillon
du Réalisme' which competed with the government sponsored exhibition in which he
also had paintings shown. This pivotal defiant act was the break in the art world that
created the avant-garde. No longer was it necessary for the artist to blindly conform to
what the Paris Academie des Beaux-Arts dictated good art was. It was at this point that
the artists started to decide what constituted good art and began to refuse dictation from
others. Courbet set a precedent that split the art world in two – the established academic
French Salon and the avant-garde.

In the second half of the nineteenth century other artists immediately picked up on
the trend set by Courbet of deciding for themselves what art should be despite what the
Salon proclaimed. For instance, Édouard Manet's, Déjeuner sur l'herbe, of 1863 was
considered an outrage in the Paris art world. The manner in which he presented an
unidealized nude female who looked directly at the viewer was unprecedented. Manet, in
turn, had an influence on the Impressionists, who held their own exhibits separate from
the Salon. They had their own ideas on what they wanted their paintings to convey and it

25 Ibid.
was not what the Salon decreed. This line would continue on with Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, the Expressionists and so on.

Another group that formed in the later nineteenth century was the Symbolists. Symbolism was originally a literary movement associated with poets Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine and Stephan Mallarmé who reacted against accepted poetic conventions of the time. They also upheld the idea that artists and writers should be eccentric and act out irrationally in public and private life as it was part of their “genius.” Rimbaud perhaps has the best known quote on the subject, “The poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses.” There developed a belief that this unorthodox behavior and a “derangement of the senses” which would come to be done through alcohol and absinth, especially in the last decade of the nineteenth century, were conducive to creativity.

The ideas of the Symbolist poets soon reached into the art world. Symbolist painters did show at the Salon on occasion but were often rejected and some exhibited their works with the Impressionists. Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau are two of the best known Symbolist painters. They wanted to express ideas symbolically in paintings and thought that any image depicted in a painting should not be seen at face value but as something that was representative of an idea. The Symbolists wrote manifestoes on their beliefs; they were unhappy with the materialism of society and believed that they could change things through art and writing. They had an interest in occultism and

28 Ibid., 59.
brought in a new spiritual aspect to art that did not simply focus around the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{29} Spirituality would later play a significant role with the Abstract Expressionists.

It should be said that the Symbolist painters seemingly did less for the avant-garde movement than the Symbolist poets who opened the door, if only a crack, to a second break in the art world. Their emphasis on acting out and especially the antics of Rimbaud and Verlaine likely led to the artist acting out as part of his work and not just as part of the creative process. The Futurists would be the first group to truly incorporate this into a form of art.

IV. Futurists:

“We rang for room service and the year 1913 answered: it gave Planet Earth a valiant new race of people, the heroic Futurians.” – Velimir Khlebnikov

Futurism is a movement that originated in Italy and was led by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Futurists announced their existence in 1909 with the publication of Marinetti’s ‘The Futurist Manifesto,’ in the Paris newspaper La Figaro.30 No other previous group of artists had so aggressively and provocatively spoken out against tradition. In the Futurist Manifesto Marinetti called for the destruction of museums and libraries, the glorification of anarchism and the enrichment of, “the unfathomable reservoirs of the Absurd.” He wanted a complete break with tradition and history. He wanted no association with any art that had come before him and the other Futurists.

Today the Italian Futurists are often remembered only for their fascist political leanings, their paintings and sculptures and their fascination with movement and speed but what is so often ignored are their performances. Their performances are what set them apart from past artistic movements. Early Futurist performances consisted of readings of their manifestoes and poetry.31 There would also be Futurist painters who would carry their paintings out on stage to display to the audience and short plays performed.32 This combination of acting, painting and poetry set up in one venue would set the stage for Dada and Fluxus. However the truly revolutionary element of Futurist

32 Ibid. 16.
performance was the breaking down of the “fourth wall” to seek an involvement from the audience.

Marinetti wrote of ways to provoke the audience into action in his Variety Theatre Manifesto of 1913. Some of his suggestions included gluing people to their seats, selling the same ticket to ten different people and the offering of free tickets to, “gentlemen or ladies who are notoriously unbalanced, irritable or eccentric and likely to provoke uproars with obscene gestures, pinching women or other freakishness.” The involvement of the audience would be especially influential to Happenings and Fluxus artists and to Ray Johnson.

The Futurists did more than just rebel against tradition and history. They rebelled against acceptable aesthetics and even aesthetics in general. They rebelled against the established art world and all of its institutions. In a new and bold push towards the future they combined areas of arts in a way that had not truly been done before. They conceived of performance art in the way that we know it today. Their use of the audience in their performances not only broke down the fourth wall, it broke down all conceptions of what art was up until that point in time. The Futurists did what Courbet had done to the Salon, they made a break in the art world of the avant-garde. This break would lead to the attitude we have today of ‘anything goes’ in art.

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33 Ibid. 184.
34 Ibid.
V. Dada

“So DADA was born of a desire for independence, of a distrust of the community. Those who belong to us keep their freedom. We don’t recognize any theory. We have had enough of cubist and futurist academies: laboratories of formal ideas. Do you practice art to earn money and fondle the middle class?”

-Tristan Tzara

Dada started in Zurich, in the spring of 1916 during a time of great upheaval and turmoil in Europe. World War I was drastically changing the lives of everyone throughout the continent and it was hard for anyone to make any sense of the horrific accounts of violence that were being reported. Many artists, writers and intellectuals who were morally opposed to fighting in the war fled to neutral Switzerland. The congregation of these artists and writers in Zurich set the stage for nonconformist ideas to flourish. It was from this group that included Hugo Ball, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Marcel Janco and Richard Huelsenbeck that Dada emerged.

The Dada artists believed that a contributing factor in the war was bourgeois logic and reason. Therefore, Dada artists took the opposite route from socially accepted logic and reason; they sought nonsense, chaos and humor as an alternative ideology to what had existed up until then. They saw that society had striven for orderliness, seriousness and rigidly structured lifestyles and it had only led the world into a senseless and

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massively destructive war, so abandoning logic seemed to be the best alternative. Hans Richter described Dada in the following:

"Dada was not an artistic movement in the accepted sense; it broke over the world of art as the war did over the nations. It came without warning, out of a heavy brooding sky, and left behind it a new day in which the stored-up energies released by Dada were evidenced in new forms, new materials, new ideas, new directions, new people – and in which they addressed themselves to new people."  

Dada originated at the Cabaret Voltaire, a small bar set up by Hugo Ball and his wife, Emmy Hennings where artists, writers and poets could assemble to play music, recite poetry, show artworks and dance. Ball made requests to his artist friends for paintings, etchings and drawings to display at the Cabaret Voltaire. Tristan Tzara, poet and friend of Ball, organized poème simultané, where three or more people sang, spoke or made various noises at the same time to be performed at the cabaret. Ball stated, "When I started the Cabaret Voltaire, I was sure that there must be other young men in Switzerland who, like myself, wanted not only to enjoy their independence, but also to give proof of it." And he was right. The Cabaret Voltaire drew in artists and writers who wanted to put forth their ideas on the events of the day and create something new and independent. They wanted to distance themselves from the abominations that were occurring outside of Switzerland’s borders. As Jean Arp put it,

"We had no interest in the abattoirs of the World War and devoted ourselves to fine art. While the thunder of artillery rumbled away in the distance we were putting together

38 Ibid., 12.
39 Motherwell, xxv.
40 Richter, 30.
41 Motherwell, xxv.
collages, reciting, writing verse, and singing with all our hearts. We were looking for an elementary type of art that we thought would save mankind from the raging madness of those times."^{42}

Dada continued on with certain Futurist ideas and sought to combine all areas of fine art, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, music and dancing. However, Dada did not agree with the politics of the Futurists. They often used humor in place of the confrontational attitude of the Futurists. At the Cabaret Voltaire there were "cabaret shows" showcasing these arts and ideas. Ball described one of the early shows at Cabaret Voltaire, "Mme. Hennings and Mme. Leconte sang in French and Danish. Mr. Tristan Tzara read some of his Roumanian [sic] poetry. A balalaika orchestra played popular tunes and Russian dances."^{43} Dada was, as put by Huelsenbeck, "a rallying point for abstract energies and a lasting slingshot for the great international artistic movements."^{44}

The Dada movement flourished in several cities besides Zurich such as Berlin and Paris. Paris Dada focused more on the literary than on the visual arts. Berlin Dada was more political. In New York, Dada developed independently and differently from European Dada and centered on the circle of artists involved with Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery.^{45} America was not yet in the war when New York Dada formed in 1916 and New York did not have the geographical or personal closeness to the war that Europeans had. The New York Dadaists were rebelling against the established art world for different reasons than European Dadas. One reason for the latest artistic rebellion was photography. Stieglitz and fellow photographer Edward Steichen were seeking to

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43 Motherwel, xxv.
44 Ibid., 24.
45 Richter, 81.
establish photography as an accepted form of modern art. This was not an important aspect of European Dada. News from the European art scene was filtering through to America and was introduced at the Armory Show of 1913 which displayed over one thousand pieces of artwork by modern European artists. Included in this show was Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*. The Armory show introduced American artists to a new way of thinking about art. This new way of thinking would eventually open up the doors for everything from Abstract Expressionism to Pop Art to Fluxus and to Ray Johnson.

Since there were numerous groups of Dada artists spread across Europe and in New York, it is difficult to pinpoint one set of specific ideals that was incorporated into the Dada movement. There were often widely varying thoughts on what it should be depending on the city and group of artists involved at the moment. Generally, they were against the usual bourgeois lifestyle and way of thinking as well as the then accepted aesthetics and theories on art. Dada artists incorporated chance, humor and nonsense into their pieces. Tzara, perhaps, best defines the overall feel of the movement in his Dada Manifesto of 1918:

So DADA was born of a desire for independence, of a distrust of the community. Those who belong to us keep their freedom. We don't recognize any theory. We have had enough of cubist and futurist academies: laboratories of formal ideas. Do you practice art to earn money and fondle the middle class?46

Thus, the basic tenets of Dada were freedom, independence and nonconformity to theory and even to society. It was the continuation of the artistic revolution.

46 Tzara, 125.
The most significant contribution by Dada was the readymade. Anything and everything could be art according to the intention of the artist and the context in which the object was placed. Art could be made of anything; words, newspapers scraps, sounds, urinals, even entire houses and art should not have to conform to the established art world’s galleries and museums. Marcel Duchamp is the artist most associated with readymades today. Duchamp’s ideas that the concept is what is important in art put him in the position of being considered one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. His readymade pieces such as Fountain or In Advance of the Broken Arm were everyday objects, a urinal and a shovel respectively, but the naming of those objects and the placement of them in an exhibition transformed them into pieces of art based on the concept alone, not on the actual object.

Kurt Schwitters, another artist associated with Dada, was interested in blurring the boundaries between the arts. His ideas were as follows,

“My aim is the total work of art, which combines all branches of art into an artistic work... First I combined individual categories of art. I have pasted poems from words and sentences so as to produce a rhythmic design. I have on the other hand pasted up pictures and drawings so that sentences could be read in them. I have driven nails into pictures so as to produce a plastic relief apart from the pictorial quality of the paintings. I did so as to efface the boundaries between the arts.”

Schwitters put his ideas into play with his Merzbau. This was the transformation of Schwitters’ actual house into a piece of artwork and he described it as, “building an

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abstract sculpture into which people can go.” He used found objects and attached them to the existing architecture of his home as well as altering the existing architecture of the house. It was an ongoing installation piece that Schwitters actually lived in. A step into the realm of erasing the borders between art and life, he wanted to actually live in his artwork.

Another element of Dada that would be important to Fluxus artists and Johnson was the element of chance. Dadaists incorporated chance into their art and there would often be entire works with no aesthetic planning. In Marcel Duchamp’s *3 Standard Stoppages*, (fig. 4) he dropped three meter long threads onto three canvases and fixed them there. These canvases were then adhered to glass panels. Duchamp then placed these in an open wooden box along with three pieces of wood cut into the same shapes that the strings had made when they landed on the canvases. Artist Jean Arp used a similar method in his collages when he would drop paper shapes onto another paper and glue them down without planning out the composition. Arp would just let the chance of the way they fell decide the placement. (fig. 5)

Dada concepts such as the promotion of absurdity and humor, the use of chance to create art, the combination of arts and especially Duchamp’s ideas on conceptualism would be the catalyst for the formation of Fluxus and Happenings. They would also play major roles in performances composed by John Cage that were executed at Black Mountain College and in the performances of Ray Johnson.

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48 Schwitters, xvii.
VI. John Cage:

“One of the liveliest lectures I ever heard... was called *Zen Buddhism and Dada.*

It is possible to make a connection between the two, but neither dada nor Zen is

a fixed tangible.” - John Cage

John Cage was an experimental composer and as mentioned earlier he taught at
Black Mountain College. He is known for using everyday sounds that are not usually
thought of as music in his compositions. This idea was directly influenced by Marcel
Duchamp’s use of everyday objects as art. Cage was quite aware of Duchamp and his
ideas and the two met in the late 1940s. The second influence that dominated Cage’s
work was the teachings and philosophies of Zen Buddhism. He studied Zen in the mid
1940s and it deeply affected his outlook on life and music. Cage explained his beliefs,
"The attitude that I take is that everyday life is more interesting than forms of celebration
[art] when we become aware of it..." To him, art was everywhere, everyday life was art
and every sound we hear was music or had the potential to be and these daily sights and
sounds were more interesting to him than the accepted forms of art and music. Cage
thought that art should be concerned with equivalency of values instead of elevating
artistic experiences from everyday experiences - "in this way art becomes important as a
means to make one aware of one's actual environment." This comes directly from
Buddhist teachings on the importance of being aware of every moment and present in
every moment in life. Every second is significant and one should always have the

50 Owen Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude,* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998),
20.
51 Ibid. 21.
52 Ibid., 22.
53 Ibid., 21.
awareness of that. When this is applied to art or music then one is always aware that every object, act or sound can potentially be art. This also pertains to the teaching philosophy at Black Mountain of art and learning continuously taking place as part of everyday life. Cage undoubtedly played some part in implementing that concept.

Cage staged a performance at Black Mountain College in 1952 that is considered by some to be the first Happening. The piece held significant importance to Fluxus and Happenings artists. It was called, “Theatre Piece 1.” The piece included the reading of poetry by M.C. Richards, an exhibition of paintings by Robert Rauschenberg, piano playing by David Tudor and dancing by Merce Cunningham. It was a loosely outlined event that incorporated chance and was very similar to events that took place at the Cabaret Voltaire. After Cage’s involvement at Black Mountain College he taught at the New School for Social Research in New York in the late 1950s. Among his students were future Fluxus artists George Brecht, Jackson Mac Low and Dick Higgins.
VII. Fluxus

"The misunderstandings have seemed to come from comparing Fluxus with movements or groups whose individuals seem to have some principle in common, or an agreed upon program." – George Brecht

America in the 1950s was very conservative and there was pressure to conform to society's norms. There was a strong economy with vast consumer spending going on. There were also changes going on in the home and workplace as it became increasingly normal and even expected to have new technological conveniences such as refrigerators, vacuums, televisions, etc. Underneath all the consumerism and emphasis on projecting the ideal family image there were rising counter movements. Civil rights groups were forming and protesting racism and the feminist movement was beginning to take root. There was also the beat generation, a group of non-conformists, which originated in the late 1940s around the writers Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, who had taken up residence in New York City.

By this time New York had claimed the title of art capital of the world and had a clustering of artists, writers and intellectuals. The leading artistic movement, as well as the first internationally accepted American art movement, was Abstract Expressionism. Art critic Clement Greenberg led the way for the Abstract Expressionists and many were influenced by his famous essay, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, published in the Partisan Review in 1939. His essay discussed the avant-garde removing itself from society to raise art to a higher level. He went on to say that the uncultivated, middle class masses

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would not likely be able to understand this art and could only appreciate things on a superficial level such as mass produced popular culture “kitsch” items. Greenberg called for a “pure” art which should not refer to the outside world and should be art for art’s sake. By pigeonholing art in this way, Greenberg was actually bringing the avant-garde a step back from what the Futurists and Dadaists sought to do. He was actually calling for art to be elitist and his attitude appeared condescending and pretentious as he spoke of the masses not having the education or cultivation to understand ‘high art’. The art world would react just as society in general would react when there is pressure to conform, there would be a rebellion.

One manifestation of that rebellion came in the form of Fluxus. Fluxus was a loosely organized group of artists that spanned the globe but it had an especially strong presence in New York City. Their main focus was on performance art. George Maciunas is considered the primary founder and organizer of the movement. He was a Lithuanian born artist who immigrated to America in 1948.60 He aptly described Fluxus as “a fusion of Spike Jones, gags, games, vaudeville, Cage and Duchamp.”61 The recognition of the importance of Duchamp and Cage to Fluxus seemed to be a general consensus and was echoed in a statement by Ben Vautier, “Without Cage, Marcel Duchamp, and Dada, Fluxus would not exist.”62 The artists that were part of the initial formation of Fluxus were, Allan Kaprow, Walter de Maria, Robert Morris and Simone

62 Smith, 19.
Morris, all of whom were included in plans for an early Fluxus publication. Other artists that were associated with Fluxus at one time or another were, Claes Oldenberg, Dick Higgins, Jon Hendricks, Geoffrey Hendricks, Alison Knowles, Jim Dine, George Brecht, Jackson Mac Low, Henry Flynt, Al Hansen, Ben Vautier, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Charlotte Moorman and Ray Johnson, although some, including Johnson, never considered themselves part of Fluxus.

Fluxus artists opposed the ideals of Greenberg and the Abstract Expressionists. Like the Futurists and the Dadaists they did not agree with the authority of the established museums over the world of art nor did they believe that one must be educated to view and understand a piece of art. Maciunas wanted to tear down the elitist world of art critics, museums and galleries, literally. He had very definite ideas, which he recorded in manifestos, that fine art and, "at least its institutional forms," should be, "totally eliminated." He proposed the obstruction of traffic and subway systems in New York focusing on areas that would affect museums and galleries. Fluxus musician, Henry Flynt launched an anti-museum campaign and picketed outside of The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1963, with signs that read, "Demolish art museums," and, "Demolish serious culture." (fig. 6)

With art taken out of museums it would be part of everyday life, it would be everywhere and accessible to everyone, anyone could make it, it would be no more.

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63 Ibid., 129.
64 Smith, 25.
important than a trip to the supermarket, putting your socks on or taking out the trash. 
This descends from Cage's idea that everyday life is more interesting than celebrated 
forms of art as well as Duchamp's view on conceptualism. Fluxus would translate this 
into the use of everyday objects being presented as art as well as a person's actions and 
reactions also being considered art. Maciunas also wanted to remove the artist's ego from 
the works of art and even suggested that all works simply be signed - Fluxus - instead of 
being signed by the artist that created the work. That way the artist was not elevated 
from anyone else and any art created by anyone would be equal.

Fluxus events included audience participation as a way of involving the masses in 
the making of art. Such was the 1970 "Fluxfest Presentation of John Lennon and Yoko 
Ono," where Maciunas made paper masks of John Lennon and Yoko Ono for the 
audience to wear so they could impersonate Lennon and Ono. Maciunas involved the 
audience in the work and made them become the performers. The use of the audience 
and masking their real identities spoke about his ideas on taking the ego of the artist out 
of the piece as well as playing into the thoughts that, "anything can substitute for art and 
anyone can do it...the value of art-amusement must be lowered by making it unlimited, 
mass-produced, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all."

Maciunas wrote the Fluxus manifesto in 1963 with the proclamations to,

"Purge the world of bourgeoisie sickness, "intellectual," professional and commercialized 
culture, Purge the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, 
mathematical art, - PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPAWISM!" PROMOTE A

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68 Ibid., 12.
69 Smith, 206.
70 Phillpot, Hendricks, 13.
REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART, promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.\(^71\)

However, not all Fluxus artists agreed with Maciunas on everything. Artist Jackson Mac Low wrote the following in 1962 in response to some ideas Maciunas had put forth against culture and museums,

"I'm not opposed to serious culture – quite the contrary. I'm all for it & consider that my own work is a genuine contribution to it....I'm not against art or music or drama or literature, old or new. I'm against the overbalance of museum culture...as present-minded and presently "useful" cultural activities and would certainly like to see the balance tipped the other way, but I would not want to eliminate museums (I like museums)."\(^72\)

It was this type of dissent that caused Maciunas to invariably expel individuals from Fluxus. In 1963 Maciunas expelled Jackson Mac Low from Fluxus and the following year added Dick Higgins, Alison Knowles, and Nam June Paik to that list due to disagreements over what venues these artists were performing in.\(^73\)

There are other aspects to Fluxus, as Hannah Higgins, daughter of Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles, points out in an interview that Fluxus artists, "who came in through contact with John Cage....are going to have a more Zen or experiential sense of the group, which also has a place in Dada...."\(^74\) Therefore, although there was a group of artists who were all considered to be part of Fluxus they did not all agree on the

\(^{71}\) Phillpot, Hendricks, 2.  
\(^{72}\) Higgins, 77.  
\(^{73}\) Ibid., 78.  
same ideals and viewed Fluxus in different ways. As George Brecht put it, "In Fluxus there has never been any attempt to agree on aims or methods; individuals with something unnamable in common have simply coalesced to publish and perform their work."\(^{75}\)
VIII. Happenings:

Fluxus was not the only group staging performance pieces during the late 1950s to early 1960s, there were also other types of performances going on which came to be known as Happenings. Happenings emerged from the Rutgers University campus in New Jersey and included artists who would later be known as the ‘Rutgers Group’ such as Allan Kaprow, George Segal, Robert Watts and George Brecht. The first Happening was done by Kaprow at Rutgers University in 1958. Happenings differed slightly from Fluxus performances and generally were more complicated and scripted, like a theatrical work that involved the audience. Artist Allan Kaprow is credited with coining the term Happening. There were also performances and installation pieces that involved performance art called "events" or "situations" that today are often considered interchangeable with Happenings.

There was a cross-over effect with Fluxus and Happenings artists, they often participated in the same venues and they were certainly aware of each other. Maciunas’ Flux-Mass of 1970, which will be discussed later, took place at Voorhees Chapel on the Rutgers campus and Allan Kaprow and George Brecht flowed in between both movements. It is therefore difficult to definitively categorize them as two absolutely separate entities.

Happenings and Fluxus continued into the later sixties and seventies. Performance art became more accepted and even the preferred form of art for the time.

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77 Ibid., 8.
The art world paralleled the changing American society and became more rebellious and insistent upon change. The civil rights movement, feminists and the counterculture youth movement became more radical as the sixties went on and America headed into the Vietnam War and enforced the involuntary draft. The harder the government tried to crush the youth movement the stronger the counter movements fought back and even the chaplain of Yale University, William Sloane Coffin, encouraged students to dodge the draft. Art historians and critics followed slightly behind the discourse and by the seventies were caught up in a rebellion of their own against formalism and for a more sociological context in art criticism. It was against this background that there existed Fluxus, Happenings and Ray Johnson.

IX. Nothings

“Your work is to discover your work and then with all your heart give yourself to it.”

- Prince Gautama Siddharta, Buddha

Johnson did not align himself with any group. While he may have agreed with certain Fluxus ideas he went about things in his own way. His Nothings were generally less publicized than Fluxus events or Happenings. His work was more intimate yet more intellectual. He did not proclaim lofty ideas in manifestoes the way that George Maciunas did but he did have reservations about the way that the business of art was run. He had his own ideas on how to get his artwork out to the public while at the same time making a gibe towards galleries and art dealers. He spoke about it in a 1980 interview,

"...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 eight hundred to three thousand dollars, 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’ 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.”

80 “Ray Johnson (Conversation with R. Pieper)”, Mail, Etc. Art, (University of Colorado, Tyler School of Art) 1980.

This was Johnson’s way of making the existence of galleries and museums obsolete but he did it on his terms and without the attention-grabbing, ostentatious display of Maciunas. He quietly injected his little digs towards the artistic establishment of museums, critics, galleries and collectors. Johnson generally was not about loud protests, politics or strictly adhering to manifestos. His protests were more personal and they always involved humor.
In the documentary on Ray Johnson, *How to Draw a Bunny*, collector Morton Janklow tells the story of how Johnson offered to do his portrait, Johnson ended up doing twenty-six collage portraits from a profile tracing he took of Janklow. (figs. 7&8) Each collage was different but they all contained the profile tracing of Janklow which was sometimes not easily recognizable as it was completely incorporated in with various scraps of papers, sketched images and words. What follows is a typical example of the absurd conditions Johnson would put into play when he dealt with the possibility of a sale of his work. He offered to sell the portraits to Janklow for $42,400. Janklow refused and they bartered back and forth with Johnson discounting the price yet subtracting certain pieces from the series. Johnson would add to or remove certain parts of certain portraits and then send a letter to Janklow with new prices, all of which were refused. At one point he wrote a letter to Janklow saying he had added portraits of Paloma Picasso to Janklow's portraits but would now have to charge him double the original price which Janklow had already been unprepared to pay. He was playing with Janklow and this humorous negotiation process was as much a part of his artwork as the actual portraits were.

Johnson was known as, "The most famous unknown artist in New York," a name given to him in an article written by Grace Glueck in the *New York Times* in 1965. This was due to the fact that while he was no stranger to other New York artists of the time he was not well known among the public. His impressive oeuvre consists of innumerable collages, pieces of mail art, and performances. Performance art was what suited Johnson and his artistic ideals best. In the early 1960s Johnson started to call his performances

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"Nothings". His Nothings were about the ephemeral, the spiritual, transformation, the fact that everything is temporary and eventually there is nothing. He was interested in what went unseen or unsaid. In a 1968 interview he discussed his interests with Sevim Fesci. Fesci asked, “Wherever you go are you always on alert for visual stimulants, because in your works, you know, there are so many different things, and you must have taken them from so many different sources.” Johnson responded, "I'm interested in things and things that disintegrate or fall apart, things that grow or have additions, things that grow out of things and processes of the way things actually happen to me.”

The medium of performance emphasized the qualities of change, intangibility and impermanence and was well suited to express the perpetual transformation of life.

Early on, during his years as a student at Black Mountain, Johnson painted abstract Albers-inspired squares on canvas but he later shredded his early paintings and recycled the fragments in his collages. He also burned some of his early collages in Cy Twombly's fireplace as a performance. The act of burning things as performance was something Johnson did more than once; in the 1950s he had also burned all of the notes he took while attending classes taught by Josef Albers. These acts exemplify what interested Johnson as an artist and what his performances were about; the transformation of one thing to another, the ending of a piece of art, the turning of something into nothing. At the same time they seem a symbolic way of freeing himself from his immature artistic past and represented him truly finding his artistic self. These performances also involve his paintings and work on paper as part of the performance

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82 Fesci, 19.
83 De Salvo, 1999, 18.
84 Watson, 2001, 134.
85 De Salvo, 1999, 17.
which is important as Johnson considered all of his art as being interconnected. In other words, his work was not to be sectioned off as performance, collage, painting, it was all incorporated and connected as one and his art always referred back to itself in some way.

Johnson was an intensely private individual and this need for privacy and the unwillingness to allow people to ever truly know him spilled over into his work. In his performances he would often incorporate the viewer as part of his piece but he never handed control over to the viewer; he kept control and kept the viewer at arm’s length. He never let anyone have total access and there was no raw emotion in his work. It was always cerebral; people had to think when they were involved in a piece by Johnson. Things were always done on his terms.

Johnson’s Nothings were not as planned out or scripted as Happenings or many Fluxus performances and sometimes his pieces were completely unscripted with no planning at all. There was a minimalist quality to Johnson’s performances and he used the element of chance more often than Happenings or Fluxus artists did. He would sometimes perform spur of the moment for whoever was around, even if it was only one person.

In my email correspondence with Coco Gordon she recounted one of Johnson's intimate, spontaneous, performances. While she was on a ladder installing one of her pieces at the Central Hall Gallery in SOHO in 1982 for John Cage's 70th birthday celebration, Ray climbed up the ladder behind her and instructed her to not look right then but he had just put down her back his, "most important nothing." He then instructed her to look at it when she got off the ladder and to, "keep it, take care of it." When she
looked she discovered a, "hand torn piece of paper about six by seven inches that had the word Nothing scribbled in his writing, rearranged to read "noihntg." [sic] This small and intimate Nothing shows just how personal some pieces were with Johnson. He did not need large, publicized events in order to do a piece that he considered an important work. In this case it was a shared artistic experience that involved only the artist and one viewer, yet it is still a performance by Ray Johnson. It is just as relevant as any other one of his performances.

Johnson's Nothings were an answer to Happenings; however Johnson considered his art to be more of an "attitude as opposed to a happening." This is because Johnson's art never stopped and if he was performing a Nothing he was simply using a different attitude than he would in other areas of his art. His life was his art and he made no distinction between the two. Almost every friend or acquaintance of Johnson's to whom I spoke made it clear to me that there was no separation for Johnson between his art and his life. It was all one, everything he did was art. Every action, word or deed that made up his life made up his art as well. Johnson's intimate companion Richard Lippold said of him, "It would be very hard for me to separate him as a person from his work; I don't think I could do that." Johnson took the ideas of Duchamp, Cage and Fluxus a step further; anything and everything could be art including the entire life of a person. Coco Gordon, artist and close friend of Johnson, shared her feelings on him, "I honestly really felt he didn't, never ate food...one of these people that train themselves to live on

86 Email from Coco Gordon, May 29, 2007.
88 Walter, Moore, DVD.
nothing.\textsuperscript{89} It was as if he had reached such a state that he fused into one with art in such a spiritual way that food was no longer necessary. He had become art.

\textsuperscript{89} Walter, Moore, DVD.
X. Zen Philosophies and Buddhism:

Johnson had an avid interest in Eastern religion and philosophy. The ideas of Buddhism and other eastern religions were interwoven in his work. Nirvana, the goal of all Buddhists is sometimes translated as nothing-ness and this was certainly something that Johnson was aware of when he named his performances Nothings. Early on in New York, in 1949, Johnson worked at the Orientalia book store which specialized in books on Eastern religion.90 This cemented in the ideas introduced by Cage and others at Black Mountain College about the application of Zen philosophy to art and life. Basically, the Zen philosophy is that enlightenment can be attained through meditation and self-contemplation rather than through devotional acts. One cannot ignore that the interests Johnson had, such as transformation, rebirth and the concept of nothingness are all major parts of the Buddhist religion. In a 1984 interview with Henry Martin Johnson spoke about Zen as, “a point I often get to in my work.”91

The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism deal with the suffering of trying to hold onto something and say that impermanence is a part of life. Nothing is lasting and it is futile to try to hold onto anything in life. One has to let go of everything to be free.92 This was a substantial piece of what interested Johnson as an artist. Impermanence, change, transformation; all of these are discussed within the Four Noble Truths. All are present in Johnson’s work. The fact that he used performance to get his art out there prominently speaks of impermanence being an important issue that he wished to explore.

An example of how Johnson put the Buddhist lessons about futility to work is talked about in the following anecdote from his interview with Henry Martin:

"I did one of my most bizarre lectures up at the Rhode Island School of Design. It consisted of me trying to move a piano across the stage, and people kept coming up to ask if they could help, and I said, "Certainly not! I mean the point is that I can't move the piano, and I'm struggling to move it, and it's obviously not going to get moved across the stage, and I'm putting out a great exertion of energy, and I'm on a public platform, and you are all viewing me, which is the whole point of this thing." I said, "you figure it out." 93

Johnson's actions of trying to move the piano across the stage are done in vain. The piano will never get moved and the desire to move the piano is getting him nowhere, if he lets go of his desire to move the piano and simply walks away, he will be free of that act that was causing him suffering.

In Buddhist practice there is the theory that meditation can lead one to "right-mindedness." This means that you are always aware of what is going on, always aware of every action you take. A practitioner starts out by learning to meditate and the goal is to eventually perpetually obtain that mindset. This can be applied to Johnson's life/art. Johnson started out painting and collaging but then through his learning at Black Mountain and continued interest in Eastern religion he was able to apply that philosophy to art. So his painting and early education can be thought of as a beginner learning to meditate. Then as time went on he applied art to other areas of his life and at some point he reached the enlightened state of mind where he was always completely aware of art and perpetually in the state of making art.

93 Martin, 1.
There are other areas of the teachings of Buddha that are also applicable to Johnson’s work and life. When the Buddha became enlightened he realized the interconnectedness of all things and the links between life, death and rebirth. If we take a look at all of Johnson’s work as a whole picture we can see it as one large web of interconnections. Throughout all of his pieces, whether they are collage, mail art or performance, he is constantly referring back to his own work. One piece in some way has to do with another; they are all part of a web that makes a whole.

For instance, in 1969 Johnson participated in Charlotte Moorman's Avant-Garde festival on Wards Island. His idea was to drop sixty foot-long hotdogs out of a helicopter over the festival, which he did. Johnson said the relevance of the hotdogs had to do with their length, one foot, which tied into another work he was doing at the time called "feetings" where he would trace peoples' feet. This demonstrates how Johnson’s works were intricately tied into each other. Even when the viewer cannot see a connection, there is some connection to something else, even if it is only apparent to Johnson. That whole idea refers back to Buddhism and other eastern religions.

In seeming opposition to the solemnity of Buddhism the other principal domain of Johnson’s work was his incorporation of humor. He was able to combine serious, philosophical religious ideals with the absurd in a way that has yet to be matched by anyone else. In a conversation with art critic Amei Wallach Johnson said that he

94 Walter, Moore, DVD.
95 Ibid.
managed to, "...combine the tragic with the comic, the ridiculous with the sublime."\textsuperscript{97}

He managed to present serious issues with humor and find sober aspects in the absurd.

XI. Nothing Performances and Comparisons:

There are conflicting reports on when exactly Johnson’s first Nothing was. However, either the first or one of the first Nothings was in the spring of 1962 and performed at the Maidstone Gallery in New York, which was run by Maciunas.98 In a video taken by Nicholas Maravell Johnson described the performance himself and stated that this was one of his first performances as well as referring to it as a Nothing.99 He started the performance at 3:00 p.m. by throwing a box of wooden dowels down the stairs that led up to an empty gallery and that was it. It was over within half a minute. When more people showed up at 3:10 they asked him when the performance would start and he said it was done, so they asked if he would repeat it and he did. However, he pointed out that the repeat performance was not as, “interesting or good as the first,” some of the original intention had to have been taken away from the piece by repeating it.

Johnson’s choice of performance as his medium was central to the main concern in his work which was the ephemeral, that which fades away into nothing, that which ends and cannot be exactly duplicated ever again. A completed performance that is not recorded simply ends and all that is left is the memory of it and memory itself fades and changes as time passes. When he threw those dowels down the stairs that was an act that could only possibly last a matter of seconds. That is then accentuated by the fleeting sounds that were made by the wooden dowels hitting and rolling down the steps. Sound is always impermanent, it is there one second and gone the next as well as being changeable; it will fall upon each person’s ears in a different way depending on where

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98 Jones, 1999, 204.
99 *The Ray Johnson Videos*, DVD, directed by Nick Maravell.
someone is standing in relation to the point of sound. There is then the change caused by the people who walked up the stairs and stepped on or moved the dowels from their original landing spots after they had been thrown. The sound, placement of the dowels and the placement of the people are random and ephemeral.

When the performance was done a second time it emphasized the nature of the components that concerned Johnson. The second performance would be different from the first by nature. The first performance was only momentary and then gone, never to be seen in that same exact way again. The second piece was also momentarily finished and never reproduced in the same way again. This is a performance that incorporates the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and change. It is also refers to Dada with the heavy reliance upon chance. Johnson uses the viewer to contribute to the chance element by having them walk on the wooden dowels to get into the gallery.

If we look at the wooden dowel performance and compare it to a piece by Kaprow we can see how Johnson took a different path from his contemporaries. Johnson’s piece was small scale and over with quickly, it involved a small number of viewers and there is a kind of spirituality to it through the sounds of wooden dowels echoing down an empty stairwell in an empty gallery. Allan Kaprow’s *Eat*, (fig. 9) was performed in January 1964 and described and reviewed by Michael Kirby. It was termed as an "Environment," and took place over two weekends. Visitors could make one hour reservations through the Smolin Gallery. It took place in some caves in the Bronx which

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used to be part of an old brewery. When the viewer walked in he was confronted with a man's voice repeating, "Get 'em!" over and over. Next he would come upon two girls sitting on two wooden towers with their heads reaching the top of the cave, one holding a jug of red wine and one holding a jug of white wine, which they would pour and hand out in paper cups to the visitors if they were asked to. The piece also involved banana bunches wrapped in plastic and unwrapped apples tied to strings and hanging from the ceiling, a girl frying bananas on a hot plate, bread and jam in an enclosure that one could only get to by climbing a ladder, as well as the man who was repeating, "Get 'em!," handing out pieces of salted boiled potatoes. The viewer was free to eat any of the food in the exhibit according to Kirby.

Johnson’s wooden dowel piece was much simpler than Kaprow’s *Eat*. It involved a smaller number of people and it was only a few seconds long. The only other people involved besides Johnson were the viewers. Kaprow’s piece had several others involved besides the viewer and the viewer did not have as much of an effect on *Eat* as they did on the piece by Johnson. Kaprow’s piece had an earthiness that was not at all involved in Johnson’s piece which existed on more of a calm, incorporeal plane.

Johnson repeatedly returned to that Zen-like state in his work. In an interview I did through email correspondence with artist Alison Knowles, she recounted a Nothing at the Rene Block Gallery in New York though she does not remember the date,

“I arrived and there were two people in the room besides Ray. We stood and looked at each other for a bit and then Ray came up to me where I was standing by the Easterly wall and asked me to move my position in the room. I did so, stayed for a while as
This Nothing keeps with that enigmatic feel; four people in a room silently looking at each other brings to mind a spiritual or meditative state. There was nothing said and nothing was left when the piece was over.

The concept of nothingness was Johnson's predominant focus. Coco Gordon described a performance to me that Johnson did at the C.W. Post Campus of Long Island University. On a chalkboard Johnson wrote the word 'SEND' in chalk, then using ice cubes he wrote 'Ray,' backwards and drew a picture of a bunny head. He then put the ice cubes in envelopes and handed them out to people in the audience.102 (fig. 10) This piece contained all of the elements that were important to Johnson. There was humor, transformation, non-permanence and the final outcome of nothing. The ice cubes start out as solid objects; the images they make on the board are perfectly visible. As time goes on the images fade to nothing as the water evaporates. At the same time the ice is melting, changing into water which will eventually evaporate and disappear. Giving the ice out in envelopes as souvenirs to the audience is another symbol of impermanence as when the envelope is opened later it will contain nothing. Then there is the nonsensical, comic-book like bunny head drawn on the chalkboard which is a reminder not to take anything too seriously.

Johnson was not secretive about how people should not take him too seriously. A video taken by Nick Maravell shows Johnson at a barbeque discussing his performance art with two men he just met. This was their conversation,

101 Email from Alison Knowles, August 20, 2008.
102 Email from Coco Gordon, May, 25 2007.
"I am putting you both on, I am acting, I am performing....I am telling you, like, something that's true but I'm also playing a role of an artist who is, uh, talking about what, what he does, I'm, um, I'm playing with you both by talking to you...I'm having fun by talking about this...I have a Dead Pan club. I do this with a deadpan, you know, expression like I'm really very serious but underneath it all, it's a particular Dada joke."

Johnson often toyed with his viewers and kept them at arm's length. He never allowed them to be totally at ease and he always gave himself the upper hand. He left them wondering, about what just happened. Johnson was performing, yet to the people to whom he was speaking it seemed as if they were just having a conversation up to a point and then they became unsure. Johnson even had a “club” for his type of deadpan humor, the Dead Pan Club. He stated in an interview, "I'm a great put-on artist, I'm the Dead Pan Club and you really shouldn't take anything I say too seriously although I am soberly serious but I'm also a put-on person."

A later Nothing, done in 1987, demonstrated Johnson's sense of humor in his work. There is a video of this piece taken by Nicholas Maravell. In it Johnson stuffed several Reese's Peanut Butter Cups into his mouth at one time and then he began reading from Walt Whitman's *Camden Conversations*. At first his mouth was so full he could not open it and he was just grunting and humming sounds. As he chewed he started to make garbled sounds with his mouth open and eventually the sounds become understandable words as he finished eating the candy. Although, he seemed to purposely mumble through parts of it even after it looks as if he had finished chewing. At the end of the

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103 Maravell, DVD.
performance he took off his glasses looked at the camera and said, "Does this have sound?" and laughed.\(^{105}\) (fig. 11)

Although this piece involves the physical act of eating like Kaprow’s \textit{Eat} does, that is the only similarity between the pieces. The Peanut Butter Cup reading is small and done only for an audience of two, Nicholas Maravell and the camera. Johnson also involved his interest in the concepts of nothingness and transformation which is represented by the peanut butter cups. They started out as two whole, solid pieces of food then were transformed through his chewing and finally were gone after he swallowed them.

The piece is also full of interconnecting references such as location of the reading which was done in Huntington, Long Island which is the birthplace of Whitman. Through my correspondence with Nicholas Maravell, who took the video of the performance, he relayed to me that they were standing across the street from the Long Islander, the newspaper Whitman founded and for which he wrote.\(^{106}\) It was important for Johnson to establish connections within the elements of his work regardless whether it was between people, places, images, words or sounds. This network of connections is not always visible. The viewer of the video would not likely know where the performance was taking place but the location was important to Johnson’s concern with interconnectedness. This interconnection reflects the Zen philosophy of everyone and everything being a small part of the whole just like all parts of Johnson’s work and life were interconnected as a whole.

\(^{105}\) Maravell, DVD.
\(^{106}\) Email from Nicholas Maravell, July 7, 2008.
The Peanut Butter Cup reading typifies Johnson's signature humor. Although his mouth was stuffed full of candy he was none the less reading something non-humorous in a serious tone. He always juxtaposed the elements of seriousness with the humorous. When he so calmly and soberly takes his glasses off at the end and looks into the camera only to crack a smile and ask if it has sound it truly brings the piece together. This end statement reminds the viewer that this piece is serious and humorous together in one and reaffirms Johnson's description of his ability to "...combine the tragic with the comic, the ridiculous with the sublime."

The Peanut Butter Cup Nothing was in complete contrast to the large Fluxus events that went on such as the 1970 "Flux-mass." Flux-mass was organized by Maciunas and included several other artists. It was a meticulously planned, large event that took place at the Voorhees Chapel at Douglass College. It was described by Geoffrey Hendricks,

"The Priest's assistants wore gorilla costumes... Yoshimasa Wada was the priest. The sacrament wine was in a plasma tank with a hose. Wafers were laxative and blue urine cookies. The consecration of the bread, a giant loaf filled with sawdust, was done by a mechanical dove...which moved across overhead on a wire and dropped mud from a can onto the loaf. Antiphonal "chanting" consisted of sound effects such as barking dogs and locomotives...The lord's prayer was said in a dozen languages. Signal flags were used. An inflated Superman filled with wine was "Bled."

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107 Wallach, 2.
108 Smith, 204.
109 Ibid., 205.
In addition there was the burning of a statue of the Madonna, blanks shot out of a gun by Wada, the spraying of audience members' heads with perfumes and room deodorizers and the release of sneeze powder.\textsuperscript{110} The Flux-mass shows the difference, not only in scale and style between Johnson and Fluxus but the difference in their senses of humor. The Flux-mass involves a darker Futurist-inspired sense of humor. They sardonically mock the church while inside an actual chapel, courting a backlash of criticism. They provoke a hostile reaction from the audience.

Johnson did not hold any events this elaborate and while he often provoked people, it was in a non-derisive and non-confrontational manner. He may not have let everyone in on his "jokes" but he did not leave them feeling slighted either. His humor did not contain the contemptuous element that was portrayed in Fluxus works organized by Maciunas. Johnson did not directly and openly take on large institutions such as the church.

At another Fluxus event George Maciunas continued his quest to incite a reaction from his audience. During a 1970 Fluxus festival, Maciunas sold tickets to various events in which either no ticket was needed, the event had already taken place or the event was non-existent.\textsuperscript{111} The involvement of a trick being played on the audience is somewhat comparable to Johnson's pieces but there is a slightly cruel twist in the Fluxus event. Maciunas wanted a reaction while Johnson tended to be looking to leave his audience with a puzzling feeling of, "what just happened?" which gave them an opportunity to put some thought into what his pieces were about.

\textsuperscript{110} Hendricks, 148.
\textsuperscript{111} Smith, 207.
The tickets sold by Maciunas were similar to invitations and flyers that Johnson sent out for various fan clubs that he had created. Johnson had invented many different "fan clubs" and would mail out flyers announcing meetings for these fan clubs. Unlike the Fluxus tickets where the viewer showed up to find no event, Johnson was there to see the viewers' reactions to his invitations and there were specific reasons why he had organized a meeting of a group of people. For example, he held a Paloma Picasso Fan Club Meeting at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York in 1974.\textsuperscript{112} When he discussed it afterwards he said, "Lots of glamorous people came to the meeting.....They wanted to know why they were there. I told them I was trying to create a room with a certain number of people. But magically the right number of people did not come."\textsuperscript{113} This is typical for a Johnson event, to bring up the expectations of people and then present them with the unexpected. No one could assume anything as far as it related to Johnson. He reveled in deconstructing assumptions. In a correspondence with Nam June Paik in 1965 Johnson wrote, "I wait, not for time to finish my work, but for time to indicate something one would not have expected to occur."\textsuperscript{114}

\textsuperscript{112} Jones, 1999, 207.
\textsuperscript{113} Lippard, 1999, 145.
\textsuperscript{114} Wilson, 1999, 167.
XII. Mail Art:

I feel that Johnson’s mail art must be delved into slightly here as it ties into other areas of his work. While this area of his art may be considered a separate entity from his performances, what it may actually be is the longest lasting, largest performance piece ever, involving hundreds of people throughout the world and the global postal system. His mail art would come to be known as the New York Correspondence School, or NYCS, a term that was coined by artist Ed Plunkett. Johnson changed the spelling of correspondence to correspondance to suggest movement and play. His extensive network evolved into an ever expanding entity that always retained the one on one intimacy that was Johnson's signature. Artist James Rosenquist, who corresponded with Johnson, compared Johnson's work to that of his contemporaries, "Ray's work had a different kind of feeling than, say, Roy Lichtenstein's or Andy Warhol's or mine. It was a much more personal, private experience." What other way of viewing art could be more private and personal than viewing a piece that was made especially for you alone in your own home?

It is not only the intimacy that this method of distributing his art embraced; it also let in other elements that interested Johnson. Mail meant that Johnson could get his art out there and viewed by people of his choosing and this type of distribution of his work was making art a part of an everyday act. He described his process of opening and responding to his mail art as being, "like prayer, it's a ritual for me, a ceremony." The mail art really speaks to the importance that Johnson put on having art permeate every

115 Walter, Moore, DVD.
117 Wallach, 2.
118 Spodarek, 3.
part of life just as a religious devotee would have their beliefs as part of everything in
d\life. He brought art into areas of life where people generally do not think about art. Mail
art was able to successfully combine Johnson’s interests in control, the ephemeral,
interconnectedness, the involvement of art in everyday life and humor.

Many of Johnson’s mail pieces were collages or small drawings which he often
made with instructions to add something and send it on. For example, in the late 1960s
he sent out flyers requesting that people send slips to art critic and historian Lucy
Lippard, and included her address at the bottom of the page. (fig. 12) In an essay Lippard
wrote on Johnson she recalled how she did receive slips including a silk one, and was
unsure of why her name had been linked with the word slips by Johnson.119 She later
heard from a friend that it had been due to a time that he had seen her dancing although
she still was unsure if it was because she slipped or because she was not wearing a slip.120

Johnson was not the only artist who was working with mail art and it gained a bit
of celebrity after File Magazine publicized this form of art which led to some other
articles being published on the subject, especially one in Rolling Stone. This publicity led
Johnson to decide that the NYCS was dead. He sent an obituary in to the New York
Times in 1972 which read:

Dear Deaths,

The New York Correspondence [sic] School, described by critic Thomas Albright
in "Rolling Stone" as the "oldest and most influential" died this afternoon before sunset on
a beach where a large Canadian goose had settled down on it's [sic] Happy Hunting Ground,
was sitting there obviously very tired and ill and I said to it "Oh, you poor thing". It mustered

120 Ibid.
up whatever strength it had and waddled away from me. "How Beautiful!" I thought. "How like a bird- about to die and yet having some courage to try to go on". And then it lifted its wings and shit out some black shit it was a large heavy bird it flapped its [sic] wings and I studied the curve of the wings I thought Anne Wilson would like to see them. It just wanted to be alone to die without a human standing there talking to it. I felt so bad. So it flew off and soon I was aware I couldn't see it anymore it had gone. Maybe if I go back tomorrow, the tide will have washed up its [sic] feathery body.\textsuperscript{121}

After this Johnson referred to his mail art as Buddha University.\textsuperscript{122}

Johnson did not only send paper through the mail, he once sent Coco Gordon six cartons of correspondences along with various objects. Along with these he included instructions that she was to float all of the wooden objects from the cartons out onto Huntington Bay in Long Island. This was a performance piece directed off-site by Johnson and executed by Gordon. The wood would eventually float away and nothing would be left in sight.\textsuperscript{123} Floating objects were another recurring subject in Johnson's art but still coming back to his concern with change and transformation. Water is never completely still, anything floating on it is in constant motion and offers the possibilities of sinking or of floating off never to be seen again. Gordon recalled a time when Johnson spoke about reading a newspaper article on a man who committed suicide by floating out into the Harbor. Johnson had said that that image was so beautiful to him.\textsuperscript{124} Floating objects fascinated Johnson. Unknown to any of his friends at the time was how that fascination would later relate to his suicide by drowning.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 131.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid. 9.
\textsuperscript{123} Email from Coco Gordon, May 29, 2007.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
The instructions that Johnson sent out in his mail art are reminiscent of the wedding gift that Marcel Duchamp sent to his sister, *The Unhappy Readymade*. The gift was a letter with instructions on how to execute and display a Ready-made, which consisted of a geometry book that was to be hung up by strings on the balcony of the newly-weds’ apartment. The wind could then, "go through the book, choose its own problems, turn and tear out the pages." (fig. 13) It would eventually be destroyed by the elements which must have been appealing to Johnson’s love of the concepts of nothing and change.

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126 Ibid.
XIII. Conclusion:

"Life is not easy to live for a modest man with high values, free from attachment, humble
of right livelihood, and clear vision." – Buddha

Before Johnson's death on Friday, January 13, 1995 he had been in touch with
several people to whom he was close, including Frances Beatty of Richard Feigen and
Co. She had made attempts over the years to have Johnson exhibit his work with Richard
Feigen and Co. Beatty recalled, “He called me about five days before he died, and he
said: ‘You know, Frances, I think I’m finished doing this Nothing I’m involved in. I’m
going to do Something, and you’re going to be able to do the show.’ And then he laughed
this sweet Ray laugh, and then he jumped off the bridge. It was a complete
performance.” When Richard L. Feigen & Co. did get to do a Ray Johnson show it
would sadly be a memorial exhibition.

There were no witnesses to Johnson's leap from the bridge into the icy cold
January waters of Sag Harbor. However, there were two teenage girls near the bridge at
that time who heard a splash and then saw someone in the water doing what appeared to
be the backstroke. The girls went to the police station to report what they saw but the
station was closed for the night. Ray Johnson’s body was found by the police the next
day and they would eventually rule it a suicide. Was this the final and most important
performance in Johnson's career? It certainly contained all of the important elements of
his artwork. It was a final transformation of something to nothing. He transformed

128 Wallach, 4.
129 Wilson, 12.
130 Walter, Moore, DVD.
himself. Although Johnson’s suicide was shocking to his friends it fits perfectly with his philosophies on life and art being one. It seems certain that his suicide was the spectacular ending of the long performance that was his life. Author William S. Wilson, Johnson’s close friend, wrote, “Very few people can accept that Ray killed himself, but he was planning that when I met him in 1956. Ray lived on behalf of religio-philosophic meanings and he died on behalf of those meanings.”

There are provocative clues that lead one to believe that Johnson’s suicide was in fact a performance. As mentioned earlier it was a notion entertained by Frances Beatty and it was also a belief of William S. Wilson. Wilson stated, “He called me from Orient Point at 4’o’clock the day he died – collect, so the phone call is recorded on my phone bill.” Johnson had wanted the Orient Point to show up on Wilson’s phone bill as one of his last cryptic references to the connectedness of everything in his life and work. Johnson waited until Friday the thirteenth to kill himself and he was sixty-seven. Six plus seven equals thirteen. The river he jumped into was a possible symbol of the Buddha’s teachings on the constant change and transformation in life as well as a symbol of Johnson’s final transformation to death. It is almost unimaginable that his suicide was not a performance when one considers the way he lived his life. Marinetti seemed to be foretelling of Ray Johnson when he wrote, “Thanks to us, the time will come when life will no longer be a simple matter of bread and labour, nor a life of idleness either, but a work of art.” Ray Johnson was the realization of this statement.

131 Wallach, 2.
132 Ibid.
Johnson raised art to another level. He made it a part of his life as no other previous artist had. He was perpetually in performance mode. His dedication was unparalleled and allowed him to contribute the longest, most involved piece of art to the world: his life. From his time at Black Mountain College up until his final day he did not waver in his commitment to truly living his art. Even in death he left us with a puzzle to solve, the question of what exactly just happened. That is surely the way he wanted it.

Johnson’s secretive ways and self-protectiveness leave an unfortunate hole in his history that even his close friends cannot fill. Even those that were closest to him such as Richard Lippold stated, "You know, now that I think of him more, after his death, I don't really think I knew who he was. It's very hard for me to say that but who was this man? He kept so much of himself to himself."\textsuperscript{134} What he did leave us with was the knowledge of how he tenaciously adhered to his own philosophy in life and in death. Perhaps that was his final message to everyone. Even in his death he left us with a humorous performance, backstroking his way to Nirvana.

\textsuperscript{134} Walter, Moore, DVD.
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*Fully Awake, Black Mountain College*, Film by Cathryn Davis Zommer, Neeley House.
Elon, NC, ElonDocs Production, 2007. DVD.

_The Ray Johnson Videos_, Nicholas Maravell. 2007. DVD.
fig. 1, 1945 Cass Technical High School yearbook.

WINIFRED HAANES
Jackson: Advertising Art Club; Secretary of Horizon Club

RAYMOND JOHNSON
Post, Vice President of Advertising Art Club; Junior Art Club

JEAN KLEIN
Post; Advertising Art Club; Junior Art Club

fig. 2, 1945 Cass Technical High School yearbook.

fig. 3, Hugo Ball reciting poetry at the Café Voltaire, Zurich 1917.

fig. 4, Marcel Duchamp. *3 Standard Stoppages*. 1913-14. Wood box 11 1/8 x 50 7/8 x 9" (28.2 x 129.2 x 22.7 cm), with three threads 39 3/8" (100 cm), glued to three painted canvas strips 5 1/4 x 47 1/4" (13.3 x 120 cm), each mounted on a glass panel 7 1/4 x 49 3/8 x 1/4" (18.4 x 125.4 x 0.6 cm), three wood slats 2 1/2 x 43 x 1/8" (6.2 x 109.2 x 0.2 cm), shaped along one edge to match the curves of the threads. Katherine S. Dreier Bequest. Museum of Modern Art, New York, www.moma.org.

fig. 6, Jack Smith and Henry Flynt protesting outside MOMA, 1963. From *Conceptual Art*, Tony Godfrey.

figs. 7 and 8, Ray Johnson, from the series of portraits of Morton Janklow, ca. 1980.

fig. 10, Ray Johnson at C.W. Post Campus, picture by Coco Gordon from her personal collection.

fig. 11, Reeses Peanut Butter Cup Reading, Ray Johnson. Still from video by Nick Maravell.
fig. 12. Ray Johnson, Mail art. ca. 1970s.