



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ray Johnson,
1968 Apr. 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ray Johnson on April 17, 1968. The interview was conducted by Sevim Fesci for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

SEVIM FESCI: I'd like to start with where you were born. I mean by that your birthplace, your family and religious background, and were your parents artists themselves? You know, just a few words about it.

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. Well, I find whenever one begins a tape like this that it doesn't get interesting until you're into it.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. It's always like that.

RAY JOHNSON: And your beginning questions prompt a certain silence.

SEVIM FESCI: I mean

RAY JOHNSON: Thinking of one's childhood as a tape, if one is born and begins to live the way this tape begins, things go very slowly. And in public libraries which I used to find myself in, the different kinds of books are in different sections . If you want biography to be . . . I'm interested in these things that work like tape machines and places like drug stores. I saw a marvelous movie last night that cost five cents.

SEVIM FESCI: That cost five cents, you mean?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. You put a nickel into it. It's an old nickelodeon. You look into it. And you're able to control the speed. I can go very slowly or very fast. You can make it stop and you can sort of go at it at your own rate of interest. So, in a certain way, my childhood was like that. Many years later

SEVIM FESCI: I was just interested in asking you these questions because I remember that the last time I saw you you told me that you were from Finland, I think.

RAY JOHNSON: No, my grandparents were from Finland. I was born in Michigan. I'm very much American.

SEVIM FESCI: I see. And when did you come to New York?

RAY JOHNSON: I'm inclined to think I'm not here.

SEVIM FESCI: You're not here? In which way do you mean?

RAY JOHNSON: No, you're pursuing a question-and-answer kind of way and . . . well, I mean . . .

[MACHINE TURNED OFF]

SEVIM FESCI: Okay.

RAY JOHNSON: I was saying that I'm not really very interested. Maybe it's just this time of day that I'm not at all interested in my childhood. I don't have any ideas about it or my ancestry. When I came to New York is of no interest to me because of my ideas of time and space. I think if I said 1912 or 1921 it doesn't really make any difference except for the fool who is going to start dissecting what the truth is, you know, exactly what year it was. I don't know whether you can do that.

SEVIM FESCI: I understand. But a question I would like to ask you is when you began to be really interested in art yourself? What year . . . was it very early, when you were very young that you wanted always to express yourself through different media?

RAY JOHNSON: I don't think there's any answer to the question.

SEVIM FESCI: No? I can't understand. But it's entirely up to you what you want to say. But if we talk of the creative process involved in your work, can you tell me a little bit about how you proceed in the creation of a new work? Do you have ideas or visions before you start to work? Or does it come by inspiration? Or how do you proceed in a new work, a new creation?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I have one painting now which interests me very much because it was interrupted near the

very end when it logically should be completed and it's related to another work which I will describe and which, of course, gets close to my creative process. I'm doing a portrait of Joan Kornblee and it has her first name in it and then I wanted to have the entire name but it was to be Bornklee rather than Kornblee. (There's a rearrangement like children's blocks.) But what I now have is "Jill Born." And the top half of the painting has nothing at all to do with the bottom. I went away for a week and when I returned I came back to the painting and it could very well . . . the way I'm completing it, it could very well have been completed by someone else.

SEVIM FESCI: What do you mean by completed by someone else?

RAY JOHNSON: Because the composition was very vacant in one section. And I've now put two things into it: a reproduction of the Magritte shoes which had toes where the shoes are; and I have added to that a leg going from one shoe; and next to that is a photograph of a young boy sitting in a chair and the arm of the chair looks like an animal's claw which relates to the toes of the feet. And these two elements have nothing at all to do with Joan Kornblee. And the title of the painting is "Jill Born." And it's thought of as Miss Kornblee. But I know other people named Jill who've been Born. So when you asked me about my being born . . . to receive in the mail the other day a listing of twenty-five people named Ray Johnson in Minneapolis, each of them having been born at a different time and each one having a different childhood, I'm not really that important. I mean all twenty-five Ray Johnsons should perhaps speak at the same time. I mean my ideas turn this way. I think we're inclined to think of things to be too important; there's so much unimportance among people.

SEVIM FESCI: Unimportant things you mean?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, theoretically everyone should be interviewed about everything they do. It's like Gertrude Stein said Americans big thick books about page after page after page have to say about everything.

SEVIM FESCI: But it seems to me that you have a very rich eye. Wherever you go are you always on the alert for visual stimuli? Because in your work, you know, there are so many different things and you must have taken them from so many different sources. I wonder how you perceive them.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, there are only so many things that can happen within the space of a day or an evening or a week. And I simply live the way I do. 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.

SEVIM FESCI: The way things happen?

RAY JOHNSON: The other work I want to describe in relationship to progress is another uncompleted work which is a portrait of Bruce Naumann who showed at the Castelli Gallery and who is a California artist. I once sent a Brillo box containing small treasures to a California artist -- and I received in reply . . .

SEVIM FESCI: You knew the artist?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes-s. Well, I knew of him through my friend Gerard Hendy and the exchange for the Brillo box was a photograph of the artist lying on the floor surrounded by the small treasures. He had been photographed after he'd opened the box and investigated the contents. And then quite some time later I found in a catalogue another photograph, a separate photograph of the artist except that the artist wasn't there, it was just the absence of the artist. And in doing the portrait of Bruce Naumann I found a small bamboo frame and in order to write the word "bamboo" I could only write a few of the letters. I could never complete the word. It was this inability to complete the statement. I mean it was like a baby's first words attempting to speak and not really having the experience to say what he wanted to say with the necessary words. So, for a very long time I felt that the word in this painting was "bamboo." And one evening in the subway waiting for a train I looked down and on the floor was a small package of cigarette paper with the trademark "bamboo" but it was spelled B-a-m-b-u, that is with one less letter. And I suddenly remembered my painting. I had considered all possibilities of the spelling of the word. So I think "b-a-m-b-u" is better than "b-a-m-b-o-o." So the whole point of this is that it has taken me a long time to get the balance of one word in the right place. And that is sort of how I make my works. And that is pretty much the way I live my life. It just takes a very long time to feel comfortable in the way things are composed.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. But, in referring to your work, I think there is a great sense of organization and it's very clear the way that everything is disposed.

RAY JOHNSON: But what makes it meaningful?

SEVIM FESCI: It's what makes it meaningful?

RAY JOHNSON: No, but I say what makes it meaningful?

SEVIM FESCI: I don't know. I'm asking you.

RAY JOHNSON: I'm sort of throwing the question back at you.

SEVIM FESCI: But I would like to ask you this question.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I don't know as it has to have any meaning.

SEVIM FESCI: You don't think so? You mean before you do a work you want it to express something?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, it might be its function to not have meaning. I mean people might be grasping for meaning but meaning is not grasping for the people, or grasping for the meaning. Well, there is order in the work, yes.

SEVIM FESCI: Very much order, yes, I think so.

RAY JOHNSON: There is a great amount of consideration and planning. And being collages, there are all sorts of possibilities of arrangement -- blocks of material get sorted and rearranged.

SEVIM FESCI: But I think you are much more interested in ideas. I was thinking now of your "school of correspondence," for instance. Or these Happenings that you call "nothings." All these things I think are much more

RAY JOHNSON: Well, the "nothings" are now pretty much in the past. I like the idea of nothingness but, having done "nothings," I don't have to re-do them. I've completed them.

SEVIM FESCI: But you can tell from your works that they are poetical nothingness because I feel there is some poetry in your work.

RAY JOHNSON: The only good poem that I've written lately is my poem to Jack Kerouac. And that was very involved with the process of how it happened to be made because it wasn't a decision to write a poem and I didn't take a piece of paper and sit down and compose it and write it. It came about through chopping up something that I had written because I didn't want it to be seen in the state that it was. And the residue was somehow the poem; it made great sense in the arrangement of the lines and what the words said.

SEVIM FESCI: The lines?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. It's a five-line poem. The poem simply being my next table had to knock. It's all very mysterious to me.

SEVIM FESCI: Very mysterious?

RAY JOHNSON: It might not be to others.

SEVIM FESCI: Now could you tell me a little bit about which artists have influenced you most?

RAY JOHNSON: Artists who've influenced me most?

SEVIM FESCI: I think you owe quite a lot to the technique of collage.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, there are so many influences I think are really so tenuous that . . . one is influenced . . . I think I'm probably against influences.

SEVIM FESCI: Against influences? You mean any kind of influence? What do you mean by "you are against influences?"

RAY JOHNSON: Well, you're not just influenced by artists. You're influenced by places and years and other people and irritations and problems. There's no direct threat to any one thing.

SEVIM FESCI: Do you find, for instance, that it's stimulating for your work to exchange ideas with other artists?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I don't know if it's the artist aspects of the artists that, you know, their personality and what not.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. Or what you say to each other. Is it . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: You mean artists who are one's friends?

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. Among friends, yes, of course.

RAY JOHNSON: Oh! I was going to mention J.M.G. LeClezlo because I mentioned him this morning.

SEVIM FESCI: Do you know him?

RAY JOHNSON: No. He interests me very much because of a photograph (I know him through photographs) and have never read him but the latest novel is what interests me very much; and especially a Time magazine caption reading "Fire and Ice" because the last three years of my work has been a long period of ice which was suddenly close to fire and produced a flow of water. And I can see that the flow of water is very difficult to handle and channel because and the ice was really very ideal because of its frozen state and it didn't take very much fire to melt the ice and there are all these forms of water to contend with.

SEVIM FESCI: You saw the book in poems or . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: In what?

SEVIM FESCI: Does it happen to you when you read a book, when you see his book in poems forms?

RAY JOHNSON: In poems forms?

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. What you mentioned to me last night, you know, about the gathering of the Quaker . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes.

SEVIM FESCI: And you said that all these people were looking at all these things are for you like forms And I was very, very surprised by this term.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I don't know how I'd feel about that today. I think it had very much to do with the position in which we were seated and the arrangement of the people because, in discussing them now away from the place, it's sort of difficult to recapture the vitality of the situation.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes, you were very much involved in any moment.

RAY JOHNSON: Back to the very beginning of the tape to not be logical every moment .

SEVIM FESCI: Every moment?

RAY JOHNSON: Should not really go back to one's immediate ancestry but back to the birth of ancestry which takes us right back to the present moment in time there is a relationship. It is of course of interesting to know people are

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. it helps to understand and especially for an artist to understand his work. Don't you think so?

RAY JOHNSON: I don't know if I really have time to understand my work. I think about it a great deal but

SEVIM FESCI: But you understand it while you are doing it? Is that it? Or is it more kind of, you know, you have a vision in your mind or you're under the spell of inspiration? And after you see it you are surprised at what you did? That can happen.

RAY JOHNSON: Well

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. I think that time for you is very important. You always speak of time. For you is it divided into moments and that you live in the present without your looking back to the past or looking forward to the future?

RAY JOHNSON: Can I have a cigarette?

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. I didn't know you smoked.

[INTERRUPTION TO HAVE A SMOKE]

RAY JOHNSON: By the way, that was the answer to your question about time. It wasn't just on the side; it was the answer to your question.

[MACHINE TURNED OFF]

RAY JOHNSON: You asked about creativity in the process of someone I think making drawings, paintings, collages or something like that. You are not working with language, or words or ideas. You're working with things.

SEVIM FESCI: With things, you mean?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, with paint or ink, you know. But I happen in my work to use words. And perhaps it's all incorrect that these be looked at in terms of painting or creativity or beauty or whatever. It might very well just be useful objects like an automobile or a chair. And these happen to be things hanging on the wall. And what I wish -- well, it would have to be a great interest -- would be to try to present what goes into the making of I never used to believe in a work of art being bought.

SEVIM FESCI: Why? What did you believe . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: I thought it should just be made and not cherished or sold. The things that I'm exhibiting now Of course someone comes in and looks at them in the space of five minutes and perhaps really that's all the time it should be.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

RAY JOHNSON: And then they should be just thrown away or not used any more. The thing is that one might want to come back a week later and look again.

SEVIM FESCI: But what happens when you look at your own paintings? Don't you like to see them on the walls? Or you don't want to see them any more?

RAY JOHNSON: Something that happened today is that a painting of mine was photographed in a magazine and there were two different Xerox techniques made of the photograph. The painting was never intended to be seen in relation to three other paintings by three other people on the page in the magazine. So seeing it gave it a change of scale, and its relation to these other things gave it a different meaning. If the three other things hadn't been there, if there had just been a blank, it would have been closer to the original work which existed by itself. And the Xerox process changed it; it disintegrated in that I saw it in a way that visually it was not

SEVIM FESCI: What you wanted it to be.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, in a way it didn't actually exist to me.

SEVIM FESCI: I don't understand.

RAY JOHNSON: Before you said "I understand now" when it was space in which nothing is said .

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

RAY JOHNSON: And I think there's great fear of that negation that the spaces in my work are as necessary as the collage elements of the drawings

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. But do you think that the space what you said and what I said I understand there was nothing in that space.

RAY JOHNSON: That's very interesting. I experienced (but this is a psychological situation) -- I experienced that space more pleasingly than the earlier spaces. In the creative process there are probably moments where something is happening, you have awareness that

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

RAY JOHNSON: At the beginning of this interview I felt and that sort of has the boredom of You have an idea. You see a sketch again

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

RAY JOHNSON: Strive to make this thing into -- somewhere along the way you have some glimpse of the ending, how this will look. It might fail or it might succeed.

SEVIM FESCI: Because I think that sometimes silence can be much more meaningful than words.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, incompleteness is also very difficult to comprehend.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes, that's right.

RAY JOHNSON: One is forever striving to finish, to have a whole experience. I guess it's just natural, but the aesthetic element is probably the realization of how the parts all fit in the composition.

SEVIM FESCI: It seems to me -- I don't know -- that any acts you do are very important (I was just thinking of that now), that whenever you do something you are in the process of doing it. Do you know what I mean? Now you are at the bottom but you feel you can do it? I don't think I make myself understood. You said that maybe what you create has no meaning for you. But don't you think that when you act in life there is? I mean you put yourself very much in what you are doing? And even the words you say when you mention about silence all these things you feel very strongly.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I have not myself invented these things I've heard other people speak I have read philosophers and seen other works of art this has been experienced by different people. But there are very personal moments in doing one's own work that no one else has I don't think done and historically I remember once I was quite delighted. I was doing very severely geometric paintings based on square units, rectangular and square units which I methodically filled in with color mosaics. And these paintings took me many, many months to complete. And one day, having this pencil drawing groundwork for a painting, I suddenly thought of putting straight pins through the back of the cardboard into my painting, into the picture. And John Cage was a neighbor of mine. When I was doing it I rushed over to show him what I was doing. "I have this terrific idea to put pins through the middle of every square from the back and the pins will all stick through." He was quite shocked because I had changed the idea of what it was I was doing. I had made this foundation that I was going to fill in all these colors and this was to be a painting. And I changed horses in midstream and I was suddenly going to do something else. And he disapproved. I don't know why.

SEVIM FESCI: But you are free to do it because it's your own work. Don't you think you can change whatever you want?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, perhaps I should not have told. Perhaps I should not have been enthusiastic. I mean maybe what the artist should do is just plow or just sit down and do what you're expected to do, and not come up with brilliant ideas. I thought it was quite terrific. I don't know what John would think of this now. Maybe he would agree that one would not have to just proceed by plans

SEVIM FESCI: Do you like what he's doing now in his music?

RAY JOHNSON: I don't know what he's doing now.

SEVIM FESCI:

RAY JOHNSON: I would say I like what he's doing.

SEVIM FESCI: You're not interested in calligraphy?

RAY JOHNSON: Not too much, no. I've never studied it. I haven't looked at it much. I'm more interested in handwriting. Well, I guess you would call it calligraphy but it was on a very small scale; I saw the signature on two different business letters of an administrator and he signed his name differently, depending on the two people that he was addressing. And the one I saw first interested me very much because the simplification of the name looked like a fishhook and very delicate strokes. If one looked very closely one could see the pressure into the paper of the pen and the very fine degrees of . . . well, it was a kind of engraving. It was quite expressive and mysterious. Did you mention my eyes earlier? Were you saying something about my vision, my eyes? The way I see?

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. I said it seems to me that you have a very rich eye. By that I mean that you are very alert to visual stimulants -- or maybe you wouldn't call it "stimulants" -- I don't know what you would call it. But I mean that you are very aware of things surrounding you.

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. Well, I guess that's natural protectiveness.

SEVIM FESCI: Protectiveness?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, like birds.

SEVIM FESCI: You mentioned also this book of philosophy that you read. Do you read very much? Or . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: No. Never.

SEVIM FESCI: Never?

RAY JOHNSON: Including the New York Times.

SEVIM FESCI: But you mentioned a book of Le Clezio. Do you read also other books?

RAY JOHNSON: I read only the section in the magazine. It was very difficult.

SEVIM FESCI: I think so, yes; actually you

RAY JOHNSON: Actually I'm not interested. That requires word-by-word dissection and close examination. I haven't the time. I'm not interested in words .

SEVIM FESCI: I'm sure you would be very interested in a new novel published in France where each word has a lot of meaning and they are related to each other and they don't tell a story. You know it's a little bit like the book of Le Clezio.

RAY JOHNSON: Yes.

SEVIM FESCI: But in the words that you put into your work they all mean something; the whole sentence. Or am I right? In the last show, for instance, you wrote a lot of lines. They all mean something with punch, you know.

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. The two punchboards.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes, the punchboards. That I liked very much. But are you interested in words for the sake of words?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I'm interested in words in the sense that -- as I mentioned before, it was "bambu," a four-letter word which is to a three-letter word in all possible meanings. I'm always rushing to my Webster's Third Dictionary. I told you the story of my show being called rude collages so I took the word "rude"

SEVIM FESCI: I don't understand.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, in The Village Voice they list shows that are current. And it said "Ray Johnson's might be called rude collages." And I have been criticized in the past that my work is over-refined, too sensitive, just too polished. And the "rude" must refer to something in the subject matter which I never thought I was being rude.

SEVIM FESCI: The subject matter?

RAY JOHNSON: So that was very mysterious to me, very mysterious.

SEVIM FESCI: So you rushed

RAY JOHNSON: The caption Because going back to my childhood I have an uncle who was a twin and his first name is Rudy (spelled R-u-d-y) and he's a very strange man who lives in the woods like a hermit and refuses to wear shoes and doesn't see people and is a very strange man. He's an outcast.

SEVIM FESCI: Does he live in America?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes, he lives in Northern Michigan where they have snow in the winter up this high. I don't know how he exists. I haven't seen him since I was a child.

SEVIM FESCI: And he still lives there?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. He's a very strange man. Very eccentric. So I had this association of his name to "rude." I thought perhaps since they mentioned my name and my and my work that possibly they were describing my social behavior as criticism of the artist

SEVIM FESCI: And not his work?

RAY JOHNSON: Maybe his rude social manners influence these very delicate collages, casting a rude look on them. So I did a mental inventory of the things, the rude actions in my previous history. I did find instances where things that I have done or said might be considered rude.

SEVIM FESCI: And do you think they were referring to that when they made the criticism?

RAY JOHNSON: I don't know. I have no way of knowing. It's very mysterious. I know it will find its way into my work. I was just describing one of my paintings in the show which is the true story ring globe Isa, and the second section where it is repeated. But where it would say "this is Isa," Isa is not there. And where the word "Is" is a kind of red blood stains so the person speaking is suddenly executed, assassinated. And in describing this work to someone, they didn't know that in my book The Paper Snake is the original true story and the person in that instance was named Isabel. So the original Isabel, which was simplified to "Isa." And then in the next instalment Isa is not there, so it's a diminishing, a chopping off.

SEVIM FESCI: I understand, yes.

RAY JOHNSON: So I think in my work I consider every possibility (if it's possible to consider it a possibility) forward and backward: should something be this size or should something be that size? And like Mondrian

SEVIM FESCI: You use one of his pictures?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. Mondrian reducing elements to straight lines. Even the very edge of the line is very important and the blue horizontal snake which is based on Patricia Johansen's horizontal line In my case it's wiggly, in hers it's straight.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

RAY JOHNSON: In mine it's light and curved but you'd have to look closely to see the degree of curvature.

SEVIM FESCI: the blue snake you mean . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: What I'm trying to say now is since I do use a lot of sandpaper each piece must appropriately I mean all the students' classic proportions I do work a great deal with rulers measuring; I don't quite calculate the positions. And in the "correspondence school" I spend a great deal of time filing and organizing material to be mailed which is more sketchy than the paintings I exhibit. They're apt to be stuck together with Scotch tape; the edges are quite glued down.

SEVIM FESCI: Now, I'm sorry, Ray, but I didn't really quite understand this "school of correspondence." What . . . ? No, I mean

RAY JOHNSON: I don't know if I believe you.

SEVIM FESCI: No, I mean what is the idea behind it?

RAY JOHNSON: What is the idea behind it?

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. I understand the process -- not very much; you explained it to me already.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, there's the possibility Well, the idea is that it's a way to convey a message or a kind of idea to someone which is not verbal; it is not a confrontation of two people It's an object which is opened in privacy probably and the message is looked at. There are incredible degrees of subtlety of the possibility of interpretation because two people speaking, such as we are doing here, we can say something; I can say something, you can disagree. I cannot agree with something you say; we can bicker; we can argue; we can try to make our point. But you can't do that

SEVIM FESCI: When you're confronted with an object.

RAY JOHNSON: No. You look at the object and, depending on your degree of interest, it very directly gets across to you what is there, be it visual or object. You know, the most interesting thing is the mouse's ear which I received in the mail.

SEVIM FESCI: The mouse's ear?!

RAY JOHNSON: A small mouse's ear.

SEVIM FESCI: And what was your reaction?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I mean if you were sitting on a bus and someone suddenly handed you a mouse's ear, you'd think that was very strange, wouldn't you?

SEVIM FESCI: Very strange.

RAY JOHNSON: You might find it offensive.

SEVIM FESCI: No, strange.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, it would depend on the manner, and who was handing you the mouse's ear.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

RAY JOHNSON: But to receive this in an envelope neatly packaged and holding it up to the light actually to see what's in it, you get this immediate feeling that there's no explanation. I mean I'm describing this object without

explanation.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. There is no explanation?

RAY JOHNSON: Now you cannot experience that in this kind of wall art painting .

SEVIM FESCI: You mean

RAY JOHNSON: Well, this cullen (?) which is here with the correspondence and everything like that. It doesn't have the psychology of the enclosure in a letter.

SEVIM FESCI: You mean that there is in a way more mystery?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, it isn't that there's more mystery. But I'm called "the master of the art of correspondence." that show in Nice of "correspondence art" he mentions the blue post cards of Yves Klein and his exhibiting of my imagined letters that I sent to him.

SEVIM FESCI: That you sent to him?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. And also a listing of other artists George Brecht Bibi Hendricks who lives in New York; and other artists who send objects through the mail. The Fluxus School.

SEVIM FESCI: The Fluxus School?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. You don't know the Fluxus School?

SEVIM FESCI: No.

RAY JOHNSON: They're a group of European and American artists who . . . well, it's like Multiples. They sell editions of things, objectsAnd, well, it isn't every day that one receives a mouse's ear. But a photograph that you would receive Well, it depends on the interest. I was going to say you'd think more of it than what you might happen to see in a collage. There's never been in New York an exhibition of correspondence art. I don't know how it could be organized because just to do it would kill it. It would be like involving this natural thing -- not that it's so natural

SEVIM FESCI: But, for instance, when you received this mouse's ear, did you send it to somebody else? Or did you keep it?

RAY JOHNSON: No, I still have it. I let my doctor take it but it's still

SEVIM FESCI: I was just thinking of something: Are you attracted by primitive societies, by the fetishist societies? I thought of that when I was looking at your ring, you know, with this dead hand . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes, I'm wearing this one because I misplaced my three ring which I wish . . . in fact, I wanted to wear all eight rings today but I misplaced these three. But I'm very interested to read . . . I think he's a French anthropologist, Levi-Strauss.

SEVIM FESCI: Oh, yes, yes. Did you read . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: I have not read his books, no. But I think I will read I want to re-read a not too interesting book on child psychology called which are experimental in teaching children. I did read one very interesting book on . . . well, this was

SEVIM FESCI: Why teaching children? Are you interested in that?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I'm interested in children and ideas.

SEVIM FESCI: In the children? Fetishism . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. I think I'm very close to the child's world in my creative process.

SEVIM FESCI: In which way . . . in the spontaneity?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I respond completely to all my instincts and channel them into the work. Never quite get out of childhood. It's very comfortable.

SEVIM FESCI:

RAY JOHNSON: Useful.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. And fetishism attracts you very much also?

RAY JOHNSON: I don't know because, if it does, it's probably

SEVIM FESCI: It's the mystery that lies behind all this mask and this

RAY JOHNSON: Well, it's probably very defined.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes. But there is something behind the thing which attracts you very much your imagination .

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I was accused recently of performing black magic. I think I told you the story of the man I met who was a witch doctor.

SEVIM FESCI: A witch doctor?!

RAY JOHNSON: Yes. Daniel Spoerri was ill and a friend brought in a witch doctor to exorcise his evil spirits and everything. He burned candles and incense and had bottles of sacred oil and took convulsions and rubbed on alcohol or something and did all sorts of things to cure him.

SEVIM FESCI: And you had this doctor?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I was there when this all happened.

SEVIM FESCI: Oh, you were there? There were a few people there?

RAY JOHNSON: Yes, there were about eight people for this ceremony with the witch doctor doing the ceremony. Afterwards, I was sitting on the floor with some colored yarn and was making some kind of an object which I attached to a doorknob and then I tried to attach it to this witch doctor's ankle. He was quite frightened. He thought I was trying to get power over him or something. And I don't know why I was doing this. It was purely instinctive to do this.

SEVIM FESCI: How did the witch doctor react?

RAY JOHNSON: Oh, he wouldn't allow this thing. He ran away. He wouldn't have anything to do with what I was doing. I don't think he understood what I was doing, why I would be tying something to his ankle and to the doorknob. It was completely illogical. And another time . . . I had so many marvelous times with Daniel when he was in New York. We were at a Christmas party and I was seated in a chair and there were many Christmas strings and wrappings. So Daniel began the way a child would do (in fact I saw a child in the park playing actually put a noose on another child and I'm sure that one child wanted to hang the other one from a limb, hang this kid by the neck). Well, Daniel began tying me to this chair with these strings and ropes. And I just sat there. There were other people in the room and they watched. It was sort of a joke. And he found some more strings and quite industriously and seriously was attaching me to this chair. And I couldn't move. I just sat there. And then he placed two candles on my hands, on the tops of my hands. I just sat there and the candles slowly burned down and the wax was dripping and -- well, it seemed to me to go on for a long time. And we were conversing. And there was a girl there and she suddenly said, "I can't stand it any more!" And she rushed over and blew out the two candles because she didn't want the flame to burn down to my skin. And I was very angry. And I said, "Damn you! You ruined my whole act. I could have got out of here any time I wanted to." And then finally I got cut out of this chair with all the strings tied around me. But part of me knew that I was trapped but another part of me knew that I could get out of that situation if I wanted to. My will is very strong.

SEVIM FESCI: You mean just by blowing out the candles?

RAY JOHNSON: But it wasn't that hostile a situation. I mean I wasn't really . . . it was just a playful attack on me, I suppose. Because we've had many wild drunken creation periods which involved children's dolls which he attacked and mutilated and pushed around in different ways in a very brutal way.

SEVIM FESCI: A kind of happening?

RAY JOHNSON: And he had dishes .

SEVIM FESCI: Where was it? Was it in Paris? Or . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: No, here in New York. And once he came to visit me with a friend and we sat around drinking rum. And I brought out a chair which was a (I always have these props that I find; I always have lots of subject matter, unusual things.) This was a child's school bench and it had one wooden arm for writing on. I had

painted it white or something. And he started doing something with that arm. Later that evening . . . he just ruined the whole thing. He turned it upside down and put it backwards. He destroyed the thing that day. And I was very angry. But I thought, well, since I got the idea to take this entire chair apart. So with a screwdriver I dismantled the whole thing. The structure of the chair was very, very complicated. So I put all the parts into a cardboard box. And I delivered it to him at the Chelsea [Hotel] where he was living. So he received this chair as a gift. Which was very funny because that very same evening the chair (which was a chair like this) suddenly was just all in parts, completely dismantled. So he made some objects out of this chair. And when the Christos first came to New York I presented them with a package of forks.

SEVIM FESCI: Of forks?! You mean all wrapped?

RAY JOHNSON: That's a "wrapped" story because . . . I've told it to you before.

SEVIM FESCI: No, I don't think so.

RAY JOHNSON: Oh. Well, then, that is what I would call a wrapped . . . it's the beginning of a story where the story suddenly got wrapped and you'll never know what the story is.

SEVIM FESCI: I don't understand.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I haven't finished the story of the three or four forks.

SEVIM FESCI: Oh, I see.

RAY JOHNSON: Because I thought I had told it to you before but since we have the tape here I didn't want to bore you by telling the story again, but I don't remember if I did.

SEVIM FESCI: No, no, you didn't. Sorry.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, then, I think I'll tell you the story some other time, that specific story about three or four forks.

SEVIM FESCI: Okay.

RAY JOHNSON: Not that I don't want it to be on tape but I'm keeping Christo's package this will be a story that suddenly wrapped. But that's an interesting idea of the Christo wrappings.

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

RAY JOHNSON: I myself for years have made wrappings but they were always pinned to the unwrappings because they were just wrappings . I had a marvelous idea today which is to eventually sell my meetings.

SEVIM FESCI: Sell your meetings?!

RAY JOHNSON: To sell the meetings as a product. You know, you attended the first meeting. We're planning a second one on May 1 which I hope will have dance aspects to it. I'd like to ask James Waring to do a special New York "correspondence school" dance. And I'd like to have related to the letters of the paintings. And not such a sober meeting as the one we just had church. It will be held somewhere else. A bit more expensive.

SEVIM FESCI: What do you mean by second meeting?

RAY JOHNSON: Oh, well, I had the idea today (I don't know if anyone is interested to buy this) but the first meeting was given freely, you know. I mean there was no

SEVIM FESCI: No charge.

RAY JOHNSON: No. That's how we wanted it to be given. And the second one will be done that way, too. But I would like to come up with some sum of money like for \$1,000 a person can buy a meeting, can buy Ray Johnson, you can buy you. Anyone who . . . you get to purchase one month of my organization and my time and my letters. I mean you don't actually get this but it's like a sponsor, a sponsorship. But the idea is I want to sell the phenomenon. It's like the Beatles. They'll just go out on a street corner and sing their songs to whoever is passing by. They are a packaged product. and I also want for the "correspondence school" for my letters to me just to be put into plastic boxes and sold as objects. Because I think there's a value placed on it which So that interested me as an experiment. And I always loved Yves Klein selling the empty gallery so much empty space.

SEVIM FESCI: You never did that?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I always wanted to have a show with David Herbert. He had the David Herbert Gallery which is an absolutely empty gallery. But it simply wouldn't pay the rent.

SEVIM FESCI: And who has to pay the ransom?

RAY JOHNSON: But I think that nothing interest historical. I don't think it's necessary now.

SEVIM FESCI: That's again the same idea of nothingness in a way; buy empty space. Or is it really empty?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, what I see is just a traditional People acquire my paintings and drawings. And so far the letters are . . . well, my letters were once put up to auction And they have been sold. I would have preferred they be returned to me or destroyed or something. The Paper Snake de luxe edition sells for twelve and a half dollars. It has original Ray Johnson enclosures in it.

SEVIM FESCI: There is a

RAY JOHNSON: It has an envelope in front with one of my small collages in it. That upsets me very much. Because the magic wears off. It gets out of my hands into someone else's hands and I can't really get You know, it's part of me and I can't get that back without my doing something illegal like So I can't have These meetings can be purchased. I can be hired to

SEVIM FESCI: Oh, through them? Or . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: No, it would have to be . . . you'd have to take me just as I am. But like in this interview in talking to me, which I'm very pleased to do, one can get even closer to the creative process through the meeting, the process of the meeting. (I mean this doesn't have anything to do with .

SEVIM FESCI: No, I understand.

RAY JOHNSON: Of course, I'm doing this as a joke but I should think someone would be very interested to know what the organization of this whole thing is and who you can get for \$1,000. I mean there are lots of very interesting people around that can be gotten together in one place if I will sell.

SEVIM FESCI: And are you going to . . . ?

RAY JOHNSON: This meeting the other night was just the most primitive waste of feeling very humble .

SEVIM FESCI: Yes.

RAY JOHNSON: But I can visualize all those people. They are very interested in art form artforum chronicle

SEVIM FESCI: But would you be interested yourself to buy somebody else?

RAY JOHNSON: I don't know.

SEVIM FESCI: You don't know? What do you mean by "buy" because I think the word "buy" is very ambiguous.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, by that I mean when you buy a dozen eggs, I think.

SEVIM FESCI: You eat them.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I think they candled eggs or something. Sometimes you get one with a double yolk or it's rotten or something. But I'll tell you something very interesting. When you buy something I had dinner in a Chinese restaurant; it was Wah-Kee's and behind that their kitchen they have a little room. And you can sit in the back and it's very charming. They have a waiter who shouts and screams and brings you the things to eat that you order. It's a very unusual place. But I was having dinner there the other evening. And there was a big tub on the floor and the waiter came back there to get -- he was sloshing out all this liquid which apparently was soup stock. But it looked like an old rain barrel. I mean the way it was sitting on the floor and then these flour bags -- well, it was a Chinese kitchen -- it wasn't a Greek kitchen and it wasn't a French kitchen or whatever. It was extraordinarily messy with bags of flour spilled and you expected to see a rat. But it was that Chinese style of scooping up the soup stock. And we had this marvelous soup. It was very good. But when you're in a restaurant, you know, you think of what's going on in the kitchen. So what is presented to you in a bowl on the table is very different from what's going on in the back. So the purchasing of a meeting -- you would get for about one month, if one is interested, the whole creative process of the creation, the necessity for the form that it eventually takes, like why did this first meeting have to be in that Quaker church? Sure in that place in the city. I think it's all very, very personal. I have my own secret about the whole thing. I mean I have my own very private jokes about this just incredible structure of puns and wit and very witty things of the people and what

they do, and who they are, and where they work, and so forth; which was all suggested but not clear because so many people didn't know the other people. And, although they did meet and converse, it was just the most basic introduction so they didn't . . . I as the artist of it had this palette and had gotten those people there, not really knowing what was going to happen. But each meeting would be a different kind of composition, using real live people and what they do. It's very dangerous.

SEVIM FESCI: It is very dangerous.

SEVIM FESCI: But let me come back to your idea of -- I think it's an interesting idea: If somebody were to buy you, does he have the right to come in whenever he likes and look at the way you work?

RAY JOHNSON: No. I have all kinds of rules.

SEVIM FESCI: Oh, you will have rules?

RAY JOHNSON: They would have to be coded request as to what -- I mean, you know, purchasing date in purchasing phenomenon. It's possible that no one could possibly be interested.

SEVIM FESCI: But the idea itself is interesting.

RAY JOHNSON: Well, something interesting that came up, the first one having been on April Fool's Day, and having the second one on May second, the fourth one will be on July 4, which is traditionally America's firecracker time. It's very exhausting to have to think about it.

SEVIM FESCI: I can't imagine Do you ever get involved with some happenings?

RAY JOHNSON: No.

SEVIM FESCI: Called Happenings.

RAY JOHNSON: Not very much, no.

SEVIM FESCI: Not really? I was thinking of the Happenings of Oldenburg and Kaprow.

RAY JOHNSON: No. It is mostly audience participation.

SEVIM FESCI: And you . . . or Happenings?

RAY JOHNSON: Well, I think just being there it depends on the nature or the Happening. Jim Dine presented at the Judson Gallery a very unknown work. I don't think maybe you ever saw it.

SEVIM FESCI: No.

RAY JOHNSON: "Rainbow Thoughts." Washington Gallery. A room construction with a door and you went through the door and found yourself in black space. And there was one very tiny light bulb which went off, on, off, on. And above the light bulb was a piece of cardboard with rainbow colors so that all that you saw was the light on the rainbow and the light bulb . You could stay there as long as you wanted to. And you left. That's all it was. I was with a friend of mine. We were in there for about half a minute. And as we were leaving -- the light bulb had that switch -- and she turned it off. So that the next person who walked in would walk into this little black room where nothing would be happening. I thought she was very witty to do that. Because, for the whole day, there was one girl sitting at the desk (she probably never went in there because it was very boring); she probably the light bulb. And it was probably purchased as a new light bulb so that it wasn't apt to burn out. But it implied the possibility of being turned off because any child would have had the impulse to do that. And if he had not had that switch there the girl might then have had the impulse to steal the rainbow cardboard two things. It's hard to know.

SEVIM FESCI: Well, I thank you. I think we'll stop here.

RAY JOHNSON: Is that it?

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *May 19, 2003*