

## RAY JOHNSON (1927-1995)

Ray Johnson was born in 1927. By the time he was 27, he had become an artist expressing his commitments in confident and trustworthy collages. Until then, he had been living in the tense field between an alien idealism and his own private immanences. His early experiences included transcendentalism, with both faith in a transcendental God outside creation, and faithful use of eternal ideal forms such as rectangles, triangles, circles, and even manhood. Such timeless forms as "ideal man" get imposed on imperfect people, so Ray, when judged by ideals of masculinity, was imperfect. However, the imperfect became his paradise as he constructed his constructivist art and his constructivist life. He taught himself to use imperfections, errors and accidents to inspire him to improvise in moments so vivid for him because they were out of the reach of old rules.

By 1954, Ray's philosophy and his religion were in the mood of American Zen Buddhism. So he set aside transcendental forms to undertake a critique of the rectangle, shaping the irregular collages and home-made rectangles he called "MOTICOS." Later he returned to Euclidian geometric forms, not as intimidating ideals, but as art-supplies found within the temporal world. His working philosophies were that the concrete was not answerable to the abstract; that his actual was not answerable to anyone else's ideal; and that his surfaces were not answerable to anything behind them.

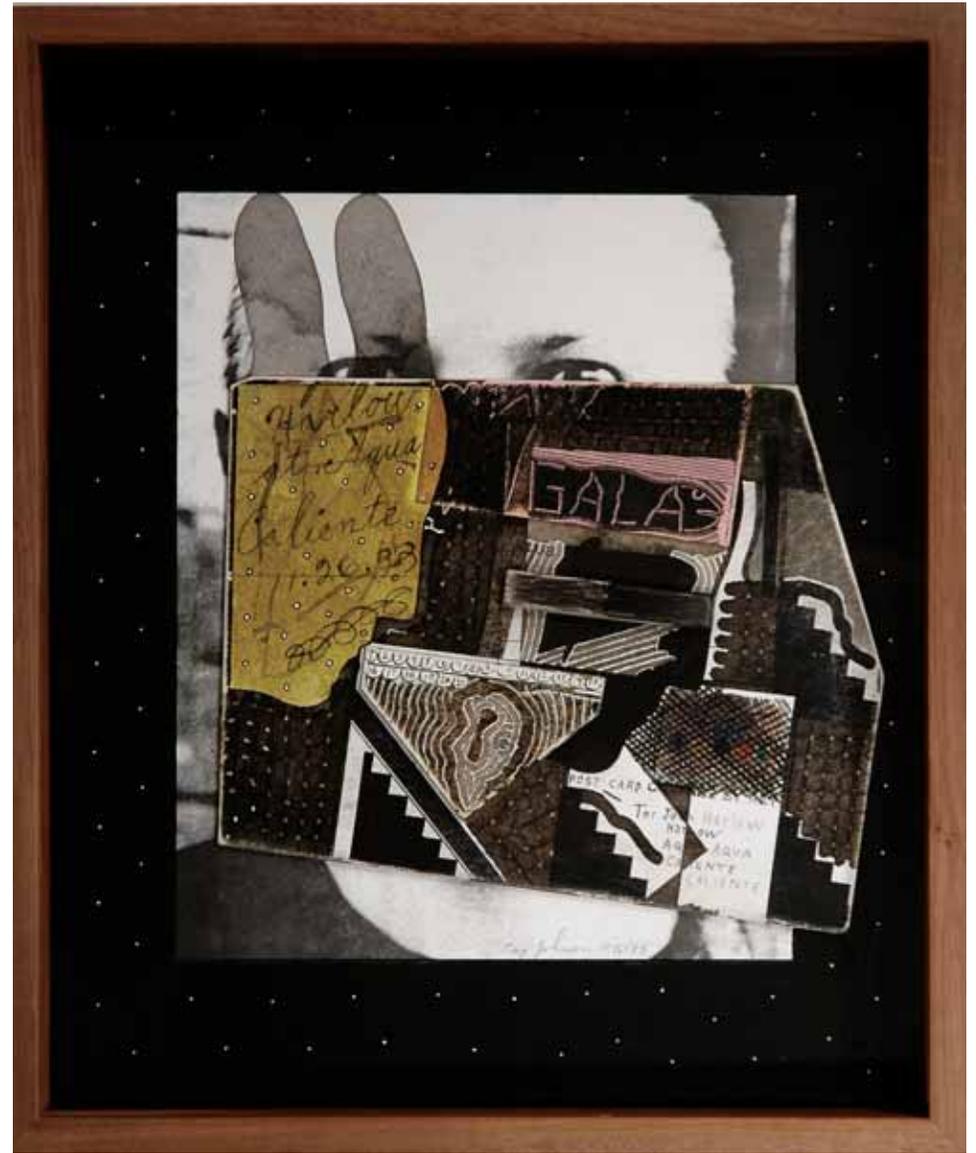
As Ray turned toward the here-and-now moment, he called attention to the surface, as surface, by focusing attention on visible layers of paper and cardboard; on splashes of ink or paint; and on sandpapered fragments. After years of not dating his art, he began to record the dates of his revisions, layering days, months and years. Thus he flattened dimensional historical time to the surface of the immediate moment.

The spatial and temporal flatness in Ray's work was his participation in surface as the limit of that which can be known. In his philosophy, while we can know the exterior, the exterior is all that we can know, or should want to know. His images were not to be psychoanalyzed any more than he was himself to be investigated and diagnosed. He composed, not to enclose meanings in images, but to open images by juxtaposing them with other images. Then attention would not penetrate surfaces, it would move laterally, from image to image, as Ray moved among pivoting planes. His visual and verbal images were often illegible, because while the legible can be read through toward an immaterial meaning, the illegible flattens, widens and obscures the surfaces.

An effect of emphasizing the surface is to experience immediacy, with a viewer being encouraged to improvise responses. However, collages receded with the passage of months and years. As early collages became old collages, Ray cut them up and reused sections in newer works. He scratched old surfaces with sandpaper; and splashed them with ink or paint. He left edges exposed, because visible edges make the top surface and sides visible qua surface. So the collages thickened temporally by including earlier and later fragments, sometimes with specific dates. The collages also thickened spatially, with both thinner and thicker layers. Thus these constructions became both temporally layered and physically layered, shifting attention among older and newer planes, and among lower and higher surfaces. Scars and stains brought these works entirely out of idealist transcendence into full-blown immanence.

Ray's motive was to startle himself into apprehending the moment he dwelt in. He wrote a note, June 9, 1991: "I just did something so brilliant I gasped." That gasp, a brief interruption of his breathing, combined with other experiences in both loving and dying. He had written to Nam June Paik, about 1964, "I wait, not for time to finish my work, but for time to indicate something one would not have expected to occur." The unexpected surfaces of these collages convey that desire to be astonished. The collages have nothing eternal behind their surfaces, which are constructed by using other surfaces that have nothing behind them. But for Ray, that very Nothing was his mystery: "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (Wallace Stevens).

*William S. Wilson*



*Untitled (Gala 3), 1976-85*  
Collage on illustration board  
14½ x 12 inches