

Daniel Spoerri and Ray Johnson: Intersections

Leda Cempellin

Introduction: Different attitudes towards correspondence

After visiting the archives of Daniel Spoerri¹ in Bern during the summers of 2013 to 2016 and those of Ray Johnson in New York City in early 2019, I realized that questions concerning the specific circumstances of Spoerri and Johnson's acquaintance would not be answered by the scarce and scattered documentation available. Exactly when and how did Spoerri meet Johnson? Was Spoerri ever officially part of Johnson's correspondence network? Why is the available correspondence concentrated in certain periods of Spoerri's professional life and not in others? Indeed, almost all the letters from Johnson to Spoerri preserved in the Spoerri archive are either from between 1964 and 1965, during Spoerri's stay in New York City (where Johnson had been living since the late 1940s), or 1968 and 1970, the time during which Spoerri founded the Restaurant Spoerri in Düsseldorf and subsequently the Eat Art movement. Some sketches dating from between 1988 and 1992 found in the Ray Johnson Estate archives confirm Johnson's obsession with Spoerri's Eat Art. Curiously, while the Spoerri archive houses about a dozen letters from Johnson to Spoerri, the Ray Johnson Estate contains no letters addressed to Johnson from Spoerri. Clearly, while Spoerri was a keeper, Johnson was a circulator.²

A closer look into the extraordinary evolutions of both artists reveals that they met at a time in their lives when their work had already begun to show significant signs of maturity. Despite their different geographical provenances—

1 My heartfelt gratitude goes to Rosario Batana for permission to publish this manuscript, which has grown out of my prior research published with Vernon Press; the editors of this anthology, Déborah Laks and Jill Carrick, for their transformative feedback; DFK Paris for supporting the October 2018 Spoerri Colloque, from which this study originated, and for this publication as well; Beat Scherrer and the Spoerri Archives at the Swiss National Library for their assistance; my copyeditor, Professor Katie O'Leary; copyeditor Hayley Haupt; Maria Ilario for her assistance in researching relevant materials for this paper during my visit to the Ray Johnson Estate and for image permissions; to Dr. Pat Crawford, Director of the School of Design, South Dakota State University, for her support. Last but not least, I wish to thank Daniel Spoerri for his crucial insights on his acquaintance with Ray Johnson and Barbara Räderscheidt for having facilitated our contact.

2 In our interview, Spoerri claimed that Johnson was always "busy moving people, letters, packages, all sorts of things." Daniel Spoerri, phone interview by the author, unpubl. recording, 8 February 2019.

Johnson having grown up in the United States and Spoerri in Europe—the thoughts behind their work present some important affinities stemming from their common foundation in Dadaism, Neo-Dadaism, and Fluxus.

Aspects of Spoerri's subsequent art seem to have been affected in part by his extraordinary encounter with Johnson. This contribution to the scholarship dedicated to Spoerri attempts to reconstruct the intersecting paths between these two artists at certain crucial moments in their careers. Of particular interest are the reciprocal influences as well as the different ways Spoerri and Johnson developed a relational component to their art-making process, released or retained control, and embraced a degree of chance.

Simultaneously and paradoxically, there were some deep and irreconcilable differences in these artists' approaches to mail art that made Spoerri ineligible for permanent inclusion in the New York Correspondance [*sic*] School.³ In particular, Spoerri's tendency to treat correspondence as a private matter worth keeping clashed with Johnson's view of mail art as an artistic joint venture progressively enriched through circulation. It is clear that the differing views held by Spoerri and Johnson on their correspondence are the major cause of the significant gaps in the holdings of both archives; this circumstance makes the reconstruction of interactions between these two artists largely a matter of intriguing speculation.

Before the encounter: Biographical anecdotes and early artistic identity

Spoerri's and Johnson's earlier biographies offer some key contextual elements that help explain the development of their artistic attitudes, which, on the surface, exhibit several commonalities but, on a deeper level, present some crucial differences.

To begin, their places of origin play an important role. Raymond Edward Johnson, the champion of distance communication, was born in Detroit, Michigan, located in the Midwestern United States. In this vast region, characterized by a low density of population and geographical isolation, reducing the sense of distance through the circulation of goods via mail holds great importance. Just a few decades before Johnson was born, Sears, Roebuck, and Co. had begun distributing its mail-order catalogs, extending its reach to even the smallest rural towns.

This context elucidates Johnson's highly developed capacity to break the barriers of geographical dislocation by building correspondence networks for material exchanges.

³ This is the technical term purposefully misspelled by Johnson and used to refer to mail art (see note 50).

Daniel Spoerri's upbringing was quite different: born Daniel Isaac Feinstein in Romania, he, along with his mother and siblings, escaped the Nazis, who had killed his father under unverified circumstances. Switzerland became his new home, and his adoptive uncle's surname, Spoerri, became his name. Spoerri has built his career around the table, which has a strong relational component. The true and deep friendship he shared with his fellow artists became a surrogate for familial intimacy; the table, as evidenced by *Topographie anecdotée du hazard*, emerged as a place where tales of private life and artistic life intersect. Spoerri's art and correspondence are authentic at a deeper, biographical level than the connections Johnson created with his correspondence, in which he mixed fact and fiction for artistic purposes to the point of making one indistinguishable from the other. Johnson was the vehicle for a fast-paced progression of ideas,⁴ while Spoerri strived for coherence in his art making, creating at a much slower pace and thinking in terms of durability concerning materials, themes, and approaches.

Along with their earlier biographies, the artistic formations of Johnson and Spoerri preceding Fluxus somewhat reveal the opposing attitudes these two artists would develop toward circulation and what made Spoerri ill-suited for the aims of the New York Correspondance School.

Johnson's enrollment in the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the summer of 1945 greatly impacted him during his formative years.⁵ One particularly influential figure was former Bauhaus professor Josef Albers, who initiated an approach in his color theory course based on the notion of the "formal relationships between the elements,"⁶ which can be observed in his series *Homage to the Square* created a few years later. Another key figure was graphic designer Paul Rand, whose bio was included in the Bulletin but

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- 4 "Johnson's mind was like a computer; it worked rapidly: he thought of a name, and then a word that rhymed with that name or is an anagram of it, then moves from there and draws an image, that then gets reproduced over and over again, and becomes the signifier for that person or name he began with.", "Maria Ilario on Ray Johnson", interview by Leda Cempellin, in *Juliet* 193, June-September 2019, p. 91. This modus operandi seems like an acceleration of the development of Fluxus *intermedia* parallel to the progressive speeding up of the pace of life since late modernism.
- 5 *Ray Johnson Estate 1927-1953*, URL: <http://www.rayjohnsonestate.com/timelines/1927-1953/> [accessed: 26.02.2019]. The Ray Johnson Estate preserves a few of the bulletins that were periodically issued by the school. Johnson signed the cover of the Summer 1945 bulletin, so it is safe to assume that this was his personal copy and that the highlighted portions inside, including the names of faculty teaching courses that semester, are those in which he was interested. *Black Mountain College Art Institute pamphlet*, Summer 1945, pp. 4-7, Ray Johnson Estate, box 138, drawer 3.
- 6 Frederick A. Horowitz, "What Josef Albers Taught at Black Mountain College, and What Black Mountain College Taught Albers", in *Black Mountain Studies Journal* 1, URL: <http://www.blackmountain-studiesjournal.org/volume1/1-9-frederick-a-horowitz/> [accessed: 01.09.2019]. Johnson's correlations between words, sentences, or thoughts are to be interpreted as more formal and symbolic in nature than biographical.

who was ultimately unable to teach that summer.⁷ His book *Thoughts on Design*, published in 1947 (though it is plausible that he began developing his ideas even earlier), considers collage as a means for the designer to put together “seemingly unrelated objects or ideas as a single picture.”⁸ Johnson found the combination of collage and mail correspondence to be the perfect tool with which to infuse his own life with art.⁹ It was the catalyst for the creation of a new network of ever-changing correlations between objects and the people with whom he interacted, in which even the most intimate biographical elements were to be read artistically.

In contrast to Johnson, Spoerri’s introduction to the visual arts did not happen in class. In April 1955, the young professional ballet dancer turned concrete poet and director of experimental theater visited the exhibition *Le Mouvement* at the Galerie Denise René in Paris, which featured the work of Marcel Duchamp along with that of various kinetic artists.¹⁰ He decided to apply his understanding of the notion of movement in the audiovisual experiment *Material*, a four-volume series of concrete poetry, as well as in the *Edition MAT*, a collection of multiples in sculpture presented in several editions.¹¹ In these early ventures, Spoerri was the orchestrator and leader of groups of artists brought together by his larger vision, who then responded on their own terms. While Johnson was relinquishing control over his work to constantly evolving networks, Spoerri remained the orchestrator of his collaborative ventures, in which individual contributions were clearly distinguishable, and simply shifted from one artistic domain to another.

Encounters with Dada, Neo-Dada, and Fluxus: Different ways of challenging the notion of authorship

In the early phases of their artistic careers in the United States and Europe, respectively, Johnson and Spoerri familiarized themselves with Dada and Neo-Dada artists, making their confluence in Fluxus a natural next step.

7 Paul Rand is one of the faculty names listed on page five of the Summer 1945 Black Mountain College Bulletin; a mark next to his name suggests that Ray Johnson may have been interested in taking his class. However, some publications mention the presence of Rand that summer; others do not. I contacted the Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center, and Program Director Alice Sebrell confirmed that “Paul Rand was scheduled to teach at the 1945 Summer Art Institute, but he had to cancel.” Alice Sebrell, e-mail communication, 6 October 2018.

8 Paul Rand, *Thoughts on Design* [1947], New York, 1951, p. 77.

9 A sentence highlighted in the December 1943 Black Mountain College Bulletin states that “learning is not confined to classrooms but pervades daily life.” It is, therefore, clear what attracted Johnson to this school. *Black Mountain College Bulletin* 2/3, December 1943, p. 4, Ray Johnson Estate, box 138, drawer 3. The highlights were presumably added by Johnson (see note 5).

10 K. G. Pontus Hultén, *Jean Tinguely “Meta”*, Boston, 1975, p. 28.

11 Leda Cempellin, “From theater to the visual arts: Spoerri’s debut into the art world through the *Edition MAT*”, chap. 1, in *The Ideas, Identity and Art of Daniel Spoerri: Contingencies and Encounters of an “Artistic Animator”*, Wilmington, DE, 2017.

By 1948, Johnson had moved to New York City and become acquainted with John Cage, who also lived in an apartment in the “Boza Mansion” (as they referred to it) “named after the building’s landlord.”¹² In 1952, Cage, who had introduced a groundbreaking pedagogical concept based on chance at Black Mountain College,¹³ created the musical performance 4’33,” consisting of three movements, in which the actual music is the chance sounds made by the audience. This proximity to Cage must have taught Johnson a great deal about releasing the control over one’s creative act to chance events. Johnson started to create irregularly shaped collages he later called “moticos” (an anagram of the word “osmotic,” meaning a kind of transfer),¹⁴ which he would send to his friends via mail in the mid-1950s.¹⁵

Both Cage’s 4’33” and Johnson’s mail-art collages furthered the questioning of notions of chance and authorship that had started with an incident involving Duchamp’s *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*: due to mishandling during transport, the glass composing the artwork cracked—a flaw Duchamp accepted as part of the piece.¹⁶ Cage’s and Johnson’s work systematically welcomed the active intervention of others: for Cage, the musical audience; for Johnson, the recipients of the mail he sent. Johnson’s Correspondance Art is comprised of two elements: one derived from Dada’s nonsensical approach, namely the mixing of truth and invention, which can peacefully coexist within the artistic space of the letter (see the Hotel Dixie’s letterhead in fig. 2); the other, inspired by Cage’s approach, the circulation within networks, which includes additive and subtractive qualities that escape the artist’s control. Sometimes Johnson called for the expansion of the collaboration beyond the original sender and recipient by requesting the letter be forwarded to other addressees. Since there were no formal restrictions, the last recipient may not have known what Johnson originally sent because others could have tampered with the envelope’s

12 Donna De Salvo, “Correspondences”, in id. and Catherine Gudis (eds.), *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, exh. cat., Columbus, OH, Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, Paris/New York, 1999, pp. 15–42, here p. 17.

13 “In all of his work with chance, Cage sought a balance between the rational and the irrational by allowing random events to function within the context of a controlled system.”, Marc G. Jensen, “John Cage, Chance Operations, and the Chaos Game: Cage and the ‘I ching’”, in *The Musical Times* 150/1907, Summer 2009, pp. 97–102, here p. 97, URL: www.jstor.org/stable/25597623 [accessed: 06.06.2020].

14 Selected biographical chronology from De Salvo, 1999 (note 12), p. 203. It is necessary to highlight that “moticos” was a term used by Johnson to indicate a broad spectrum of elements that were in flux.

15 “Cage’s influence on Johnson is suggested by his approach to collage as a performative act, and an awareness of the world itself as a collage in time and space.”, De Salvo, 1999 (note 12), p. 18.

16 Richard Hamilton, “The Large Glass”, in Anne D’Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (eds.), *Marcel Duchamp*, exh. cat., New York, Museum of Modern Art/Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1989, p. 67.

contents at some point.¹⁷ One of the major responsibilities of the postal service has always been to protect the secrecy of communication between sender and recipient through the postal seal; establishing a single communication channel between two people ensures that authorship is always clearly identifiable.¹⁸ Johnson chose to make the mail communication system part of the creative process by inviting a third party to disrupt both the two-way communication process and the notion of authorship, as it became impossible to identify individual contributions by the end of the chain.

At the other end of the spectrum, Spoerri approached the notion of authorship as a process of self-reaffirmation, enriched along the way by chance circumstances he identified and exploited. After seeing Duchamp's work at the aforementioned *Le Mouvement* exhibition, Spoerri visited the artist's Parisian studio and asked him to contribute work to his first *Edition MAT*. Duchamp was supportive of Spoerri's idea and sent him his *Rotoreliefs*¹⁹ and subsequently approximately 40 "original signatures" to be applied to the multiples.²⁰ The separation of Duchamp's signatures from his artworks in his contribution to the *Edition MAT*, though only momentary, inspired Spoerri to embrace an expanded notion of authorship. In 1962, Fluxus artist and gallerist Arthur "Addi" K pcke invited Spoerri and others to participate in the annual Danish art association exhibit *Majudstillingen*. Since there was very little time to prepare, K pcke volunteered to produce the works for the artists involved by imitating their styles, with which he was quite familiar. Spoerri printed and signed some *brevets de garantie* to be added to K pcke's trap pictures to authenticate them as licensed works.²¹ Taking the dissociation between author and work introduced by Duchamp a step further, Spoerri placed his signature on a work that was made using his process and resembled something he could have made but that had actually been made by another artist. In doing so, he affirmed his authorship of a collaborative venture.

17 "Some alter, some add, some subtract, some detract, some discard, some hoard, and others conscientiously forward the materials on their appointed rounds. Ray Johnson says he doesn't care what is done, that there are no rules, but he once circulated a list of people dropped from the NYCS for various offenses.", William S. Wilson, "Ray Johnson: NY Correspondance School", in *Art and Artists* 1/1, April 1966, pp. 54-57, here p. 55, URL: http://images.rayjohnsonestate.com/www_rayjohnsonestate_com/Wilson_NYCS.pdf [accessed: 26.02.2019].

18 Beginning in the post-World War II era, the Post Office Department began witnessing a steady increase of junk mail and even forms of unlawful or obscene communication. The postal seal was taken very seriously by the Postal Inspector, who could not break it even if he suspected that a particular letter contained such illegal communications. Arthur E. Summerfield and Charles Hurd, *U.S. Mail: The Story of the United States Postal Service*, New York, 1960, p. 130.

19 Katerina Vatsella, *Edition MAT: Daniel Spoerri, Karl Gerstner und das Multiple. Die Entstehung einer Kunstform*, Bremen, 1998, pp. 39 and 214-215.

20 Marcel Duchamp, letter to Daniel Spoerri, 1 December 1959, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri Archives, Afr. 585y.

21 Peter van der Meijden, "The Festum Fluxorum in Copenhagen, 23-28 November 1962", in Tania  rum (ed.), *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1950-1975*, Leiden, 2016, pp. 492-507, here p. 498.

In those years, while Johnson completely relinquished control of his creative work to others in a shared but secret exchange involving additive and/or subtractive components, Spoerri retained and expanded his authorship throughout the artistic process, even when it was collaborative in nature.

Spoerri and Johnson's encounter in New York City

Spoerri and Johnson must have at least been aware of each other prior to their first encounter: during the Fluxus Yam Festival, held in New York City from 11 to 12 May 1963, Johnson exhibited alongside Spoerri's earliest Fluxus friends: K pcke, Robert Filliou, Emmett Williams, and Dieter Roth.²² This fact suggests that, by then, Spoerri and Johnson had most likely at least heard of each other through mutual friends. Johnson's earliest dated correspondence in the Spoerri archive occurred on 10 July 1963, before they met in the United States. The letter is addressed to someone named George, not to Spoerri, even though the sender is Ray Johnson. It is not explicitly indicated whether he was referring to George Maciunas, George Brecht, or someone else. However, given that he writes, "I hope things are well, with you and [sic] that you continue to make major contributions [sic] to American Art,"²³ he was most likely writing to Maciunas, who had migrated to Europe. In the fall of 1961, Maciunas had indeed closed his AG Gallery in New York City after giving Johnson his first show and moved to Germany. There, he took advantage of the supplies at his day job working for the US Army and Air Force post office to form a complex network of multimedia artists from the United States, Europe, and Japan through correspondence; together they organized several Fluxus Festivals at various locations.²⁴ Spoerri soon became involved in Fluxus, and in October and November 1962, he organized the Festival of Misfits at the Gallery One in London.²⁵ Assuming the intended recipient of Johnson's 1963 letter was in fact Maciunas, it is possible that, at some point, Johnson chose to send or forward this letter to Spoerri, as Maciunas had become a common link between the two artists and their cultures. In our phone conversation, Spoerri claimed that it was a habit of Johnson's to send to a recipient someone else's materials,²⁶ which corroborates this hypothesis.

22 Ken Friedman (ed.), *The Fluxus Reader*, Hoboken, NJ, 1998, p. 259.

23 Ray Johnson, letter to George, 10 July 1963, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri Archives, AFr. 592.

24 Colby Chamberlain, "Design in Flux", in *Art in America* 102/9, October 2014, pp. 122–123, accessed on the EBSCOhost Research Platform.

25 Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, Berkeley/Los Angeles, 2002, p. 135.

26 Spoerri, 2019 (note 2).



1 Daniel Spoerri, *31 Variations on a Meal: Eaten by Ray Johnson*, 1964

Spoerri claims that it was Dorothy Podber who introduced him to Johnson, but the exact date and circumstances escape his memory²⁷ (they also cannot be reconstructed from the currently accessible records). Johnson maintained a friendly relationship with Podber. In his 1964 report of the New York Correspondance School, in which he surveyed existing members and those remaining in the network, he wrote: “Dorothy Podber we love you and will never drop you.”²⁸ One of Spoerri’s very few recollections of Johnson is that, at the time of their encounter, he asked to visit his apartment but Johnson refused, inviting him to come the following day. When Spoerri went to Johnson’s loft with Podber, he found it completely empty; upon opening the door to another room, however, they saw all of Johnson’s furniture and belongings inside. Spoerri defined this visit as a “performance”; he added that these types of happenings were part of Johnson’s art and aimed to put people “in a strange situation.”²⁹

Spoerri’s exploitation of the concept of interchangeability through the introduction of the aforementioned *brevet de garantie* also has interesting parallels with the attitude of the American Pop artist Andy Warhol. During an interview

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ray Johnson, *New York Correspondance School Report*, 1964, part II, Ray Johnson Estate, Box 48, 19c.

²⁹ “He was always astonishing people...I liked him very much.”: Spoerri, 2019 (note 2).

with Gene Swenson in *Art News* from November 1963, Warhol stated: “I think it would be so great if more people took up silk screens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else’s.”³⁰ Warhol combined the ideas of painting and graphic design in his approach to the notion of imperfections, considering them slight variations applied to the repeated treatment of a subject matter, each iteration exhibiting something unique, like an evolving logo design. Warhol’s work presented a reflection on the concept of variation that must have appealed to Spoerri, who had already begun working in that direction with his literary and artistic editions in the late 1950s. Johnson had known Warhol since at least 1956, when both were working “as graphic designers and [designing] book jackets for *New Directions*, New York and other publications.”³¹ Although not documented, it is logical to speculate that Johnson introduced Warhol to Spoerri, who then invited Johnson, Warhol, and Duchamp, among others, to participate in his *31 Variations on a Meal*, a series exhibited at the Allan Stone Gallery for three days in March 1964.³²

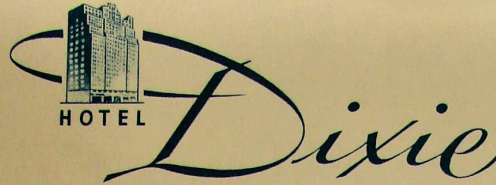
Eaten by Johnson (fig. 1) represents Johnson’s modifications to a standard table gestalt designed by Spoerri (with the same glasses, dishes, cutlery, and flowers placed in the same positions at the beginning of each artist’s meal). The *tableaux-piège* (trapped tables), captured after the meal was consumed, must be considered the ‘archaeological’ relic at the intersection of Spoerri’s staging of the performance and Johnson’s artistic intervention; the gap between art and life is closed by the actual meal consumed by the artist. The remains on the table that are extraneous to the original arrangement conjure possible explanations in the minds of the viewers. Mysteriously, there is a cork bottle stopper on the table, but the bottle has disappeared. It is reasonable to believe that once Spoerri had arranged the table for Johnson’s meal, he did not manipulate it while the performance was in progress by removing props. Is it then possible that Johnson—as the circulator—engaged in risky behavior by taking the bottle with him on his way home?³³ If so, this could have been the inspiration for Spoerri’s later reflections on cultural norms. Johnson was keenly aware of the cultural differences between him and Spoerri and explicitly exploited them, as

30 Andy Warhol, interview by Gene Swenson, “What is Pop Art? Answers from Eight Painters, Part I”, in *Art News* 62/7, November 1963, pp. 26, 60–61, here p. 26.

31 *Ray Johnson Estate 1954-1964*, URL: <http://www.rayjohnsonestate.com/timelines/1954-1964/> [accessed: 19.02.2019].

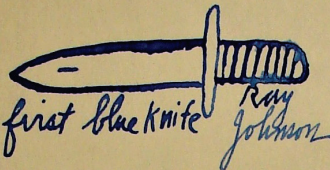
32 The original leaflet indicates 29 *Variations on a Meal*. Daniel Spoerri, *29 Variations on a Meal*, March 19–22, 1964, exhibition leaflet, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri Archives, AFr.58u.

33 The absence of the bottle in *Eaten by Ray Johnson* could represent a subtle reference to the restrictive American laws concerning the carrying and consumption of alcohol in public. Spoerri was introduced to American culture during his 1964–1965 stay in New York City. In our 2013 interview, Spoerri recalled that Johnson had lived ten blocks from him at the time, so he would drop by his hotel at night and leave things for him. One day, one of Johnson’s instructions sent Spoerri to the second floor of a specific address in Harlem (which, at the time, was a very dangerous area), where he risked being shot. Daniel Spoerri, interview by the author, Seggiano, Italy, 10 June 2013. This part of the interview is unpublished.



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first blue knife Ray Johnson

November 16, 1964

Daniel,

I tried to call you and Kichka yesterday afternoon at 3:30 to go to a tea party but you was not home. I am sorry I could not go to lunch with you when you called earlier but I was a sleep. I usually sleep until I am sure it is time to get up and I am not too depressed. But you was not there and I had thought possibly of asking if I could borrow Kichka for the tea party because that would have been funnier for her and I to go without you.

The reject story I found in my mail box today made me feel sad. My book about death is my own and perhaps there will be a Daniel Spoerri page.

At the tea party was a artist from Chili name Enrique Castro-Cid and his wife who is a thin fashion model for Richard Avedon and he told stories about Mexican abortions and remembered meeting me last summer when I was very drunk and pouring champagne on Anne Wilson's head I was wearing a bright green shirt and was sun burned and passing out green cards. That sure sounded like me.

Also at the tea party was Farley Granger, a Hollywood movie star of years ago aloof and wearing an interesting belt.

I have for Kichka an object with a hole in it made of bone for hanging around the neck it will not ti



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evidenced by some of their correspondence: in a letter dated 3 March, Johnson addresses Spoerri as “Dear Daniel, innocent Frenchy a broad [sic].”³⁴ Spoerri’s work after his return to Europe suggests the impact of his encounter with Johnson, visible in both an acute awareness of cultural norms and in the creation of distance communication networks. When Spoerri moved to the small island of Symi between 1966 and 1967, he started a diary to record his culinary explorations and revelations as an outlander about the correlations between food and cultural norms; this culminated in the *Itinéraire gastronomique pour un couple, sur une île grècque, dédié aux 23 abonnés du Petit Colosse de Simi*.³⁵ At the same time, from the isolated island, Spoerri launched *Le Petit Colosse de Symi*, a series of newsletters produced in Greece and distributed by the Galerie Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich, for which he elected his Fluxus friends as correspondents in various areas of Europe and in the United States.³⁶

After the USA: Reciprocal influences

During Spoerri’s stay in New York City, the two artists became involved in each other’s art-making process: Johnson participated in the series *31 Variations on a Meal (Eaten by ...)*, and, in turn, involved Spoerri in his correspondence circle.

The Spoerri Archives contain at least three letters sent by Johnson in November 1964, while Spoerri was temporarily staying in an apartment in Stanton Street. In particular, an unsigned letter from 16 November is clearly addressed to Spoerri and references Spoerri’s then girlfriend, Jacqueline “Kichka” Baticheff (fig. 2). In contrast to its impersonal flavor, because of Johnson’s decision to appropriate the letterhead from a “non-place,”³⁷ namely the Hotel Dixie, the letter in question contains what one could consider confidential matter hinting at a very intimate friendship: Johnson writes, “I usually sleep until I am sure it is time to get up and I am not too depressed.”³⁸ At the same time, however, one might question whether this personal information

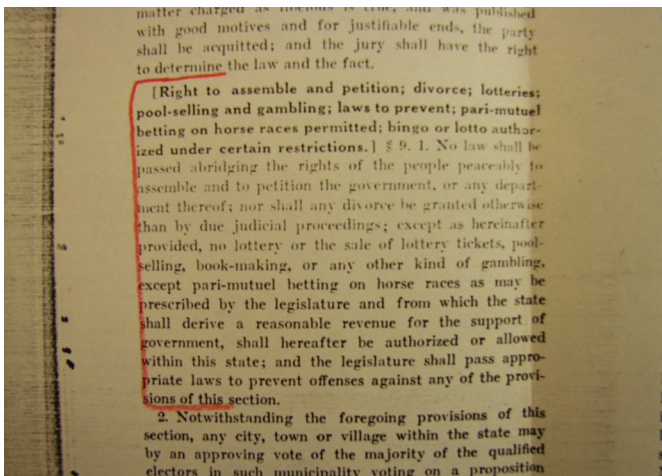
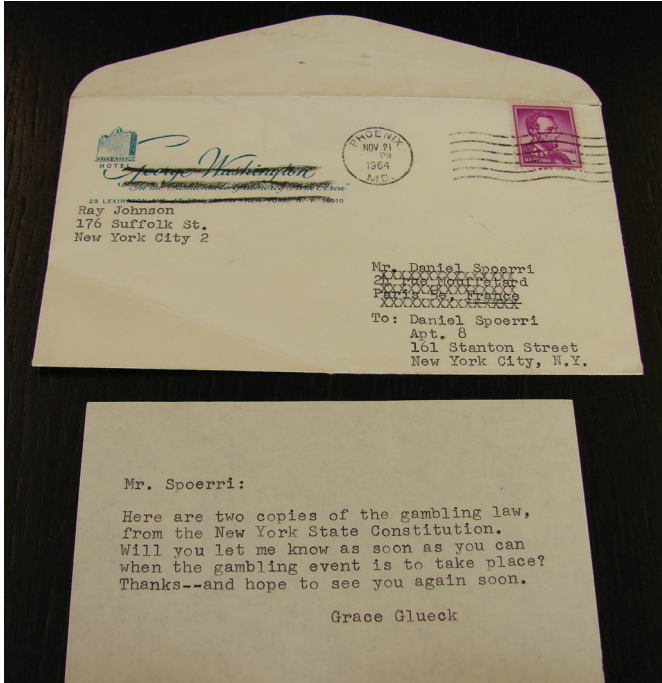
34 Ray Johnson, letter to Daniel Spoerri, “March 3-a-baBy” [1965?], Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri Archives, AFr. 592.

35 Chapter four, “Eat Art: Beyond Food,” provides an in-depth explanation of how the well-traveled Spoerri’s isolation on a small island increased his awareness of the relationship between food-related behaviors and different cultural norms. See Cempellin, 2017 (note 11), pp. 111–118.

36 Daniel Spoerri, *Le Petit Colosse de Symi*, *The Nothing Else Review* 2, 1966–1967, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri Archives, AFr. 136.

37 Augé defines the “non-place” as “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity.”, Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe, London/New York, 1995, pp. 77–78, URL: https://monoskop.org/images/3/3c/Auge_Marc_Non-Places_Introduction_to_an_Anthropology_of_Supermodernity.pdf [accessed: 06.06.2020].

38 Ray Johnson, letter to Daniel Spoerri, 16 November 1964, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri Archives, AFr. 592.



3 Ray Johnson, letter to Daniel Spoerri, November 21, 1964

might be fabricated: that the letter itself functions as a performance, like the empty spaces Spoerri found when entering Johnson's apartment.

Johnson's illegitimate use of someone else's letterhead, which occurs in much of his correspondence, is rooted in his awareness of a much larger issue faced by the US Post Office Department since the second postwar period—namely, the increase of unlawful forms of communication between senders and receivers, whose privacy was protected from postal inspection through the

inviolable secrecy of the mail.³⁹ The fact that it was very unlikely he would be discovered intrigued Johnson and drove him to take some risks, including impersonating someone else. (fig. 3).

One envelope in the Spoerri Archives, dated 21 November 1964 (Fig. 3), features Spoerri's address in Paris, stricken through typewritten marks, and his first address in Stanton Street, New York below. The sender is Johnson and the return address, Suffolk Street, located just a few blocks away; however, the postmark reads Phoenix, Maryland. The letter contains a brief message from Grace Glueck—at the time, a high-profile art news editor for the *New York Times*—asking when Spoerri's gambling event would take place. Included is a photocopied page citing a local law prohibiting gambling. Was the author of the letter Glueck or Johnson? Glueck's name does not appear in the list of contributors to the historical Whitney exhibition of correspondence art.⁴⁰ It seems more likely that the author was Johnson, who possibly used the anonymity offered by a typewriter to impersonate someone else and drove three hours to the post office in Maryland.

Despite adopting the Fluxus-inspired, joking spirit of the collage as a means of artistic expression, Johnson was very adroit and methodical in gathering information when he wanted to involve someone in his correspondence network. His working method was characterized by a thematic approach. As William S. Wilson claims, Johnson would gather information about people he met so he could tailor the correspondence based on what he knew about them:

“Ray Johnson first notices something about a person, an image which might be central or marginal, and then he fills an envelope with scraps of images that comment on or add to or combine with that image [...]. He files a person under something in his mind, and then sends along through the mails whatever he feels belongs in the same file.”⁴¹

For instance, a collage Johnson sent to Spoerri on an unknown date (fig. 4) contains several loose fragments including a photographic portrait of Spoerri and some other images that are evocative of his love of food and company, drinking and partying, and interest in women.

Spoerri's storytelling genius met Johnson's contagious correspondence process when Spoerri published the US Fluxus edition of *Topographie* through Something Else Press in 1966. The publisher's announcement invited subscribers to mail in further anecdotes correlated to the objects, people, and places cited in

³⁹ Summerfield/Hurd, 1960 (note 18), p. 130.

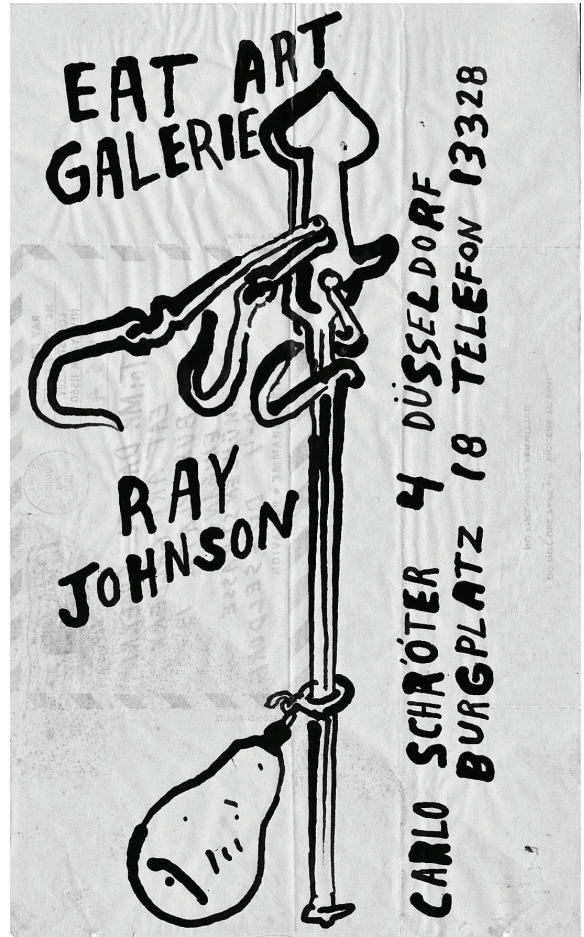
⁴⁰ Ray Johnson, “New York Correspondance School”, exh. leaflet, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2 September–6 October 1970, Ray Johnson Estate, box 51, folder 2e: 1970–79.

⁴¹ Wilson, 1966 (note 17), p. 54.

and inventions, deeply resonated with Spoerri's fascination with interrogating anecdotes through storytelling; he developed this interest over the following decades with projects, such as the *Musée Sentimental* and *Pharmacie Bretonne*.

After Spoerri's time in the United States, Johnson's correspondence seems to stop and then intensify again between 1968 and 1971. When Spoerri founded Eat Art as a series of post-Fluxus multisensory events, unfolding over the years in both localized and dislocated venues, he had Johnson's full attention. In December 1970, Johnson wrote to Spoerri suggesting that a banquet event (whether real or fictional) of the "New York Correspondence School" (with a different misspelling, perhaps alluding to Spoerri's variations?) should be advertised "as a Daniel Spoerri Eat Art Gallery Spoerri."⁴⁵ Evidently, Johnson—who early on had chosen the technique of collage to connect distant people, places, and times—understood that Eat Art went beyond the staging of individual events to encompass variations of relational happenings spread across large expanses of space and time.⁴⁶ (fig. 5)

On 30 June 1971, Johnson mailed a letter to Spoerri at his Eat Art Galerie in Düsseldorf. It was a sketch in black marker of what look like hooks attached to the top of a rod or a pump with a bulb towards the bottom (fig. 5).⁴⁷ Its sketchy nature leaves it open to interpretation: perhaps it is a metaphor for creativity as a pump that produces new ideas to illuminate the bulb or a

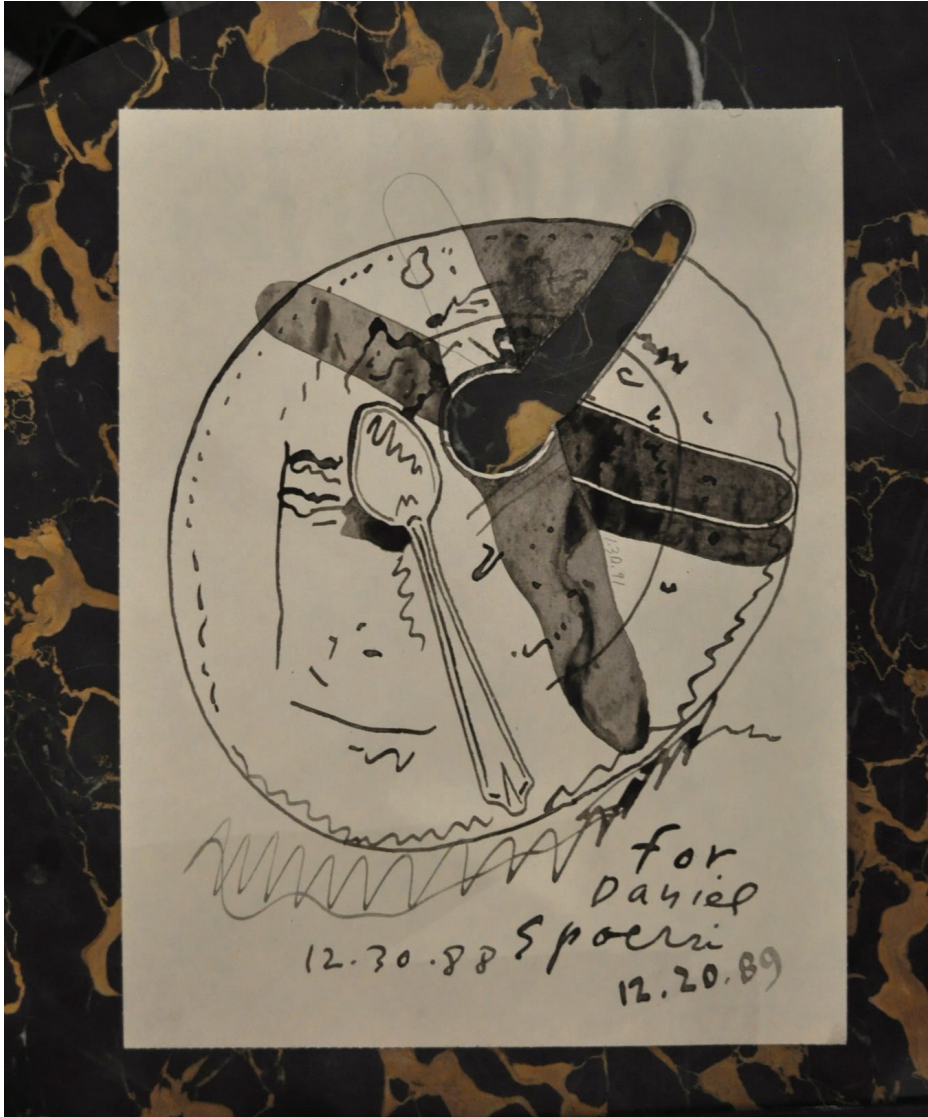


5 Ray Johnson, "Eat Art Galerie," June 30, 1971, Poster suggestion for exhibition?

⁴⁵ Ray Johnson, letter to Daniel Spoerri, 27 December 1970, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri Archives, AFr. 592.

⁴⁶ See Cecilia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: From Futurist Cooking to Eat Art*, Minneapolis, 2010, p. 156.

⁴⁷ Ray Johnson, letter to Daniel Spoerri, 30 June 1971, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri Archives, GFr.716. The date is reported on the envelope inside the frame.



6 Ray Johnson, Spoon on plate with phallic cut-out, 1.30.91 “For Daniel Spoerri 12.30.88; 12.20.89” written below

metaphor for Spoerri himself—a catalyst with the potential to hook creative ideas coming at him from all directions. In any case, this letter could have been a suggestion for a poster or an exhibition proposal for Eat Art that Johnson was submitting via correspondence as an end in itself. Perhaps this was Johnson’s way of complimenting Spoerri on his generative and prolific approach to art, or maybe Johnson was showing Spoerri a way to imagine the banquet through correspondence.

A sketch dedicated to Spoerri bearing two dates, 1988 and 1989 (fig. 6), reveals Johnson's obsession with Eat Art, which continued long after the establishment of the movement in Europe. It is impossible to know whether or not Johnson meant to send this to Spoerri at some point; it is now held in the Ray Johnson Archives along with some other sketches related to the theme of Eat Art made roughly during the same period. The sketch in question features a spoon resting on a plate—a clear reference to banquets. Some elongated shapes in dark ink seem to allude to fingers and are quite phallic in nature. One of these shapes has been cut out, allowing the surface on which the sketch is placed to show through as if it were penetrating the image. This subtle allusion to food and women, both well-known passions of Spoerri's,⁴⁸ points to the preservation of life through nourishment and reproduction. Indeed, during the Henkel banquet in late October 1970, which inaugurated the Eat Art movement, Spoerri himself stated, "I realized that this one glued moment was only a lightning second in the course of a whole cycle, which means life and death, decay and rebirth."⁴⁹

Conclusion: the paradox of attraction and exclusion

On 8 February 2019, in a phone interview with an almost 89-year-old Daniel Spoerri, I asked the artist about the origin and nature of his acquaintance with Ray Johnson. He answered by highlighting the term "dance," which is also contained in the title of the major 1970 retrospective held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, *New York Correspondance School*, as Johnson chose to have it misspelled.⁵⁰ The show featured the work of Johnson and that of artists within his network, including some from the United States, others who were originally from somewhere else but had relocated to the United States, and even artists living outside the United States, such as Ian Milliss from Australia and Gary Lee-Nova from Canada.⁵¹ Daniel Spoerri's name does not appear on the list of participants of this major exhibition. However, an imaginary seating chart from Morocco, dated 21 February 1969, features a bunny head of Spoerri among eighty other heads bearing the names of artists well-known to Spoerri, such as Arman, Christo, Warhol, and several of the artists on the list of participants

48 In the book *Lo Spoerri di Spoerri* (Vercelli, 2008), which is the Italian translation of the 2001 German edition *Anekdotomania. Daniel Spoerri über Daniel Spoerri* (Basel/Ostfildern-Ruit, 2001), the artist examines thoughts, events, and encounters related to various moments in his artistic career, including several anecdotes and allusions to women and food.

49 Daniel Spoerri, "Introductory speech at the Eat Art Banquet at Henkel's", 29 October 1970, Swiss National Library, Prints and Drawings Department: Daniel Spoerri Archives, AFr. 567k.

50 A manual correction in pen, presumably added by Johnson, is visible in the list of contributors to the 1970 exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, Ray Johnson Archives, box 48, envelope 39c.

51 Included in the archives of the Ray Johnson Estate is a list with the objects received from the participants of the exhibition on various dates between July and August 1970 as well as their addresses.

of the Whitney Museum exhibition.⁵² In 1976, Johnson received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to document the New York Correspondance School: the extensive list does not include Spoerri's name.⁵³

In our phone interview, Spoerri explained that he did not remember much about Johnson because they had never become close: their personal interactions were limited by the performative nature of their communication. The information contained in Johnson's letters, including those that appear most 'personal' in nature (see fig. 2), could either be true or invented—there is no way to find out which. This aspect of Johnson's *modus operandi* must have fascinated Spoerri, who had already started to incorporate storytelling in his art with *Topographie* a couple of years before they met. However, the lack of authenticity and depth in their relationship prevented Spoerri from including Johnson in his projects following his stay in the United States, including, presumably, *Eat Art*.⁵⁴ Spoerri's relational art is a biographical extension of himself in time: *Topographie* narrates the comings and goings of Spoerri's friends in his apartment at the Hotel Carcassonne, what they were served, what they brought or removed, and what they consumed. The Giardino di Daniel Spoerri, Spoerri's sculpture garden in Seggiano, Italy, intentionally features only work from his friends,⁵⁵ and Johnson was not among them. Given that Spoerri never had access to the 'real' Johnson, their artistic relationship terminated with the end of their physical proximity, when Spoerri moved back to Europe. The exclusion was mutual. In our conversation, Spoerri claimed that Johnson had never fully considered him a part of the New York Correspondance School because Spoerri only sometimes followed Johnson's enclosed instructions to forward his letters.⁵⁶

While this encounter between two major modernist artists has left some scattered evidence and intriguing anecdotal tracks that provide crucial insights into reciprocal influences within their divergent artistic approaches, it has also left many questions unanswered. Any art historical effort to reconstruct a linear chain of events is frustrated at this point in time. Paradoxically, a mixture of historical reconstruction and speculative guesswork is most suitable in the study of these artists, whose creativity was nourished by an anecdotal attitude and whose artistic identities thrived in their common roots in Fluxus—albeit each on his own terms.

52 Ray Johnson, "The NYCS Rabat, Morocco", 21 February 1969, Ray Johnson Estate, Box 116, Binder 36.

53 "I have drawn silhouettes of the following people, who have kindly posed for me", Ray Johnson, "Silhouette University", 16 December 1976, Ray Johnson Estate, box 125, binder 1.

54 Spoerri founded his Giardino, where only work from the artist's friends is displayed, in 1997; Johnson died two years earlier. This would not have prevented Spoerri from posthumously including him, as he did with other artists, but he chose not to include Johnson.

55 Daniel Spoerri, interview by Leda Cempellin, "Hic Terminus Haeret - Qui Risiede il Confine", in *Gli Artisti del Giardino di Daniel Spoerri*, exh. cat., Rottweil, Forum Kunst Rottweil, Rottweil, 2013, pp. 12-15, here p. 12.

56 Spoerri, 2019 (note 2).