In the mid-1950s, artist Ray Johnson (1927-95) began to send collages, messages, and found and altered objects to a growing base of artists and friends, asking that they continue to expand this networked correspondence through the mail system, initiating what in the 1960s would be named the New York Correspondence School (sic). Perhaps Johnson intended the name as a pun on the New York School, another name for the Abstract Expressionist movement based in New York, which had dominated painting in the 1950s. But he introduced a new, often overlooked dimension to the exchange from traditional systems of art production and consumption, Johnson and other mail artists set their work within the present tense of social reality. “Mail Art.” Johnson claimed, “has no history, only a present.”

Ray Johnson’s work—collages, correspondence art, and performance events—remains mysterious and a bit hard to pin down. As a young artist, he studied at Black Mountain College, an experimental school in North Carolina founded in 1933. Johnson’s early paintings nod to the Bauhaus heritage of his teacher Josef Albers. But soon after he settled in New York City in 1949, Johnson abandoned geometric abstraction and started making small collages. He moved in a new direction, toward chance-based expressions and explorations, more in line with John Cage and Merce Cunningham, whom he first encountered at Black Mountain, and their circle of friends in New York, including Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly.

Johnson’s collage approach was diaristic, a stream-of-consciousness flow through the matter and memory of his everyday life and surroundings, shifting from one topic to another, across all variety of things. He often altered his collages over time, allowing potential and flux to operate materially in his process. In the mid-1950s he began to make small collage panels, which he called Moticos, using images cut from magazines and advertisements—often of celebrities and popular products of the time. Johnson altered iconic images of Elvis Presley, Shirley Temple, and Marilyn Monroe, among others, in these collages. James Dean was a particular favorite, appearing in several works. Johnson also made various textual references to Warhol. In Man O’War (1971-88-94), a dense network of glyphs and patterns集结在一个简单的剪影马。约翰逊集成一个名称：“MAN O’WARHRL7–1947.” A connection between the famous thoroughbred racehorse Man O’War and the celebrity artist is made, but is far from clear.

In 1988, New York-based collaborator Robert Warner began a correspondence with Johnson. Until Johnson’s death in 1995, he and Warner continued their exchange, mostly by mail and telephone, and only occasionally in person. Over the course of their friendship, Warner received hundreds of pieces of mail art from Johnson, ranging from collages to a piece of driftwood that was hand delivered. At one of their rare in-person meetings, Johnson gifted Warner with a small group of Ray Johnson collages. BAM/PFA is carrying on the correspondence project with another iteration of the presentation. We are grateful to Richard Tuschman, director of the Ray Johnson Estate; and especially Robert Warner for their enthusiasm to share this wonderful collaboration.

Lucinda Barnes  
Chief Curator and Director of Programs and Collections

Table of Contents: Ray Johnson Robert Warner Bob Box Archive / MATRIX 241 is organized by Lucinda Barnes, chief curator and director of programs and collections, in collaboration with Robert Warner. The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis and the continued support of the BAM/PFA Trustees.
PUBLIC PROGRAM
ARTIST’S TALK: ROBERT WARNER
Friday, January 27, noon

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RAY JOHNSON & ROBERT WARNER
BOB BOX ARCHIVE
MATRIX 241

FRONT Ray Johnson and Robert Warner: Untitled valve from Bob Box Archive, 1988–95; mixed media; dimensions variable. Photo: Tod Lippy, from Esopus 16 (Spring 2011).
INSIDE Ray Johnson: Untitled correspondence from Bob Box Archive, 1988–95; mixed media. From Esopus 16 (Spring 2011).