

FACING OUT: RAY JOHNSON, GERTRUDE STEIN & BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE

I

In February 1935, during her intensive U.S. public lecture tour – 74 lectures in 37 cities across 23 states – Gertrude Stein was staying in Charleston, South Carolina when John Rice, then rector of Black Mountain College, telegraphed asking whether she would like to give a lecture as well as talk informally to the faculty who according to Rice were “suitably addicted to conversation and not unacquainted with [Stein’s play] *Four Faints* [ie. Saints]” (Burns, 15). The invitation had arisen through the novelist Thornton Wilder who having spent five days at Black Mountain the previous year wrote to Stein recommending it as “a live little experimental college that has long read your work” (Burns, 14). Stein replied to Wilder asking why she and Alice B. Toklas hadn’t heard of Black Mountain before – “It looks like a heavenly place and their account of themselves most amusing” (Burns, 15) – regretfully turning down the invitation because of their hectic schedule. Impromptu invites from around the country had continued to pour in thick and fast as news of her lecture tour spread. She did, however, consider Rice’s invite as an inducement one day to visit the college.

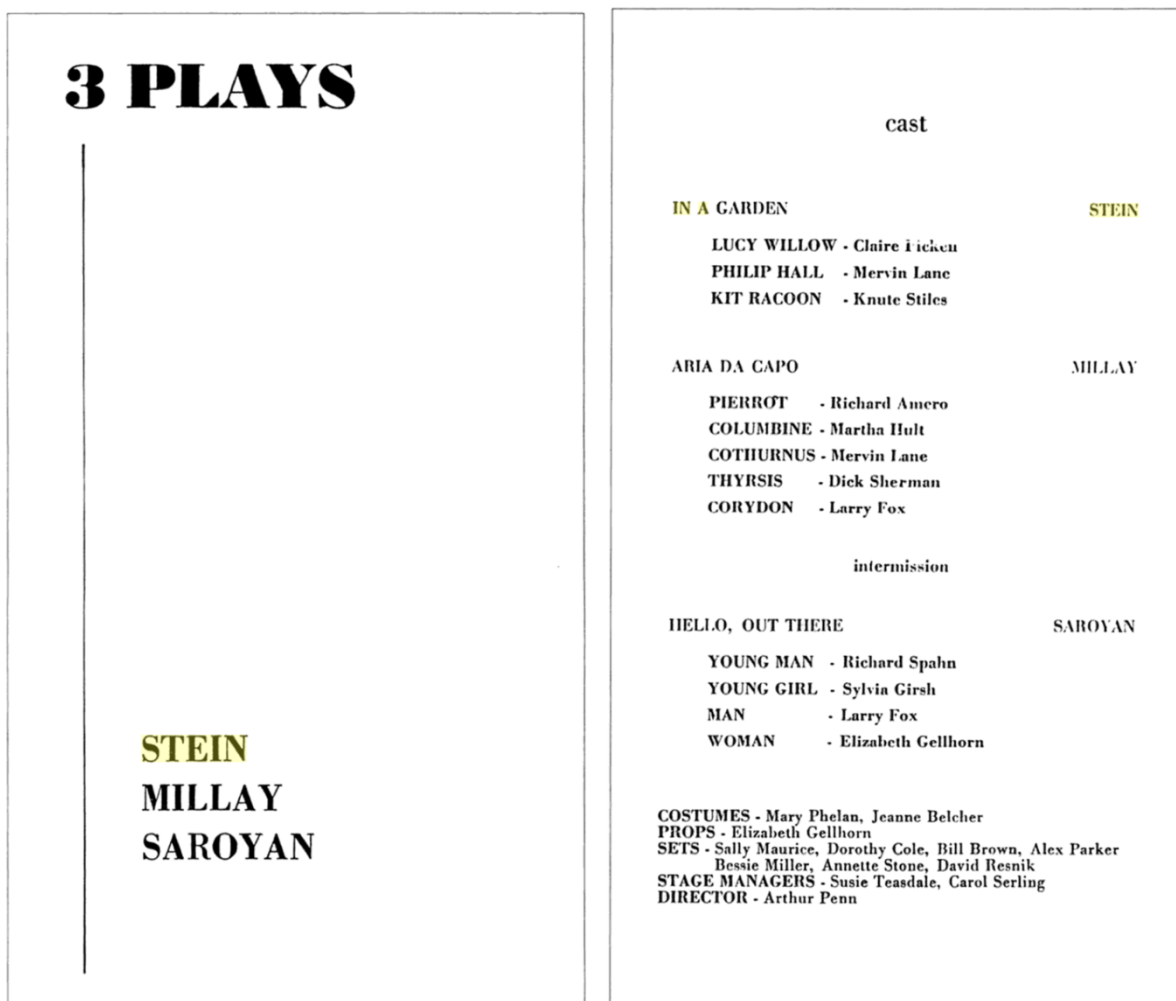
Stein never did make it to Black Mountain, returning in May to France where she died eleven years later in 1946. Of course, after her death her writing became significant for a number of the Black Mountain poets, for Robert Creeley and particularly for Robert Duncan who worked on his Stein imitations between 1952 and 1954, just before arriving to teach at Black Mountain College in 1956.¹ By contrast, Charles Olson refused to include Stein on the curriculum. Not only was her systematic “smashing [of] every connotation words have ever had” (Von Hallberg, 73) as William Carlos Williams put it antithetical to Olson’s mining of the historical dimensions of language,² but her gender would probably have been problematic for some of ‘Olson’s Boys’ (Hilda Morley’s phrase) who Jonathan Williams described as Black Mountain’s “he men flaunting their hemi-demi-semi-barbaric yawps in the sylvan air” (Hair, 116).³ Resistant to Robert Duncan’s teaching of Edith Sitwell in his classes, they probably wouldn’t have taken much to Stein either.

In the summer of 1948, just prior to Olson’s initial arrival, the college staged a performance of one of Stein’s short plays, “In a Garden,” alongside other short pieces by Edna St Vincent Millay and William Saroyan. The whole ensemble was directed by Arthur

¹ Duncan’s text was published in 1964 by Fred Wah’s Sumbooks with the title *Writing Writing a Composition Book for Madison 1953 STEIN IMITATIONS*.

² See Olson’s little poem “These Days” in which he famously demands: “whatever you have to say, leave/the roots on, let them/dangle/And the dirt/Just to make clear/where they come from” (Butterick, 106).

³ Williams in a letter to the poet Ronald Johnson describing the antagonism of ‘faculty machismo’ to Robert Duncan’s inclusion of Edith Sitwell on the Black Mountain curriculum.



Penn – in the 1960s & 1970s of course one of Hollywood’s most critically acclaimed directors and producers – who was one of three new student-teachers offering informal non-credit bearing courses at Black Mountain, courses that according to the May 1948 *Black Mountain Bulletin* were a practical expression of the College’s ongoing project in “learning and experimenting” (*Bulletin*, 1). Having studied at the Neighborhood Playhouse in Philadelphia between 1939 and 1941, Penn had gone on to direct soldier shows in Germany during the war before enrolling at Black Mountain in the Spring of 1947. Bringing Stanislavskian techniques to the College, Penn’s aim was “to make acting a creative rather than an interpretive art form” (*Bulletin*, 1) for which Stein’s “In a Garden” would have been the perfect vehicle.⁴

Described in the 1948 *Library Journal* as “hardly playable” and lacking “conventional dramatic form” (Watson, 245), “In a Garden” was written for children even though at the time, as Dana Cairns Watson reminds us, it was not considered children’s literature. Published together with *The First Reader* alongside two other short plays, the whole

⁴ Black Mountain student Knute Stiles believes that M. C. Richards rather than Arthur Penn had suggested “In a Garden,” as well as the St Vincent Millay and Saroyan plays, as none of them portended “the violent stuff that became [Penn’s] hallmark later” (Lane, 222).

publication was described as “a juvenile for adults” (Watson, 245). Featuring three ‘child’ characters, Lucy Willow, Philip Hall and Kit Raccoon, it opens with Lucy Willow stating her desire to be a queen.⁵ However, she is met with resistance by the two male characters both of whom proclaim themselves kings, Philip Hall by hitting his chest which rings like a bell (*proving* he is a king) and Kit Raccoon by simply proclaiming himself ‘Kit Raccoon the First.’ Each then invites Lucy to be their queen. She refuses, saying that she knows she is already a queen and asks both Philip Hall and Kit Raccoon how they know they are kings, which they try to prove each by producing crowns. Lucy Willow wavers but continues to affirm her queenliness asserting her singularity in contrast to the *two* kings before her. Vying to become singular like Lucy Willow and thus have her for themselves, the play culminates in Philip Hall and Kit Raccoon each killing the other with a battle axe, leaving Lucy Willow triumphantly to declare herself queen:

It is lovely to be a queen, I must be a queen, I *am* a queen, I can tell by *feeling*, I am a queen and it is lovely to be a queen (Stein, *First Reader*, 62).

Donna Cairns Watson sees Stein’s little play as a vehicle for encouraging children to think about identity. Given the performance context, I think that the playing out of power games within a closed environment perceived as safe also uncannily mirrors some of Black Mountain’s more dubious political manoeuvres as well as its often precarious sexual politics.⁶ More poignantly, Lucy Willow’s final moving assertion of affective as opposed to cognitive sovereignty recalls Bergson as well as anticipating the recent turn to affect in the humanities. “In a Garden” *feels* very contemporary.

Student Knute Stiles, who played Kit Raccoon (and who was Arthur Penn’s roommate), stated that “it was a gem of a play with anarchist, pacifist – and of course feminist – meanings” (Lane, 222). I think we can also add queer meanings to Stiles’ list. Astrid Lorange reminds us how heteronormative criticism often reads Stein’s writing as encoded lesbian desire doing so through a binary of legibility and illegibility and by finding evidence of hidden queerness in the text. Instead, Lorange argues that Stein’s work is queer “precisely because it queers the category of queerness” (Lorange, 195). Citing her story *Miss Furr and Miss Skeene* from 1911, a love story between two women which does not name a sexual relationship, Lorange emphasises the ambiguity of Stein’s work which often makes a designation of queerness impossible. “This,” says Lorange, “is what is thoroughly queer about Stein” (Lorange, 195). Similarly, in “In A Garden” there is something very queer – to Twenty-First century ears even more so – about a girl proclaiming herself to be a ‘queen’ in

⁵ A version of “In a Garden” was produced by Jaap Drupsteen in 1983 for Dutch TV with choreography by Bambi Uden and computer-sequenced music by Fay Lovsky. Watch it on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxD0WgMyL4k&t=259s>

⁶ In the wake of Paul Goodman’s brief and explosive residence during the summer of 1950, Martin Duberman stated that “Black Mountain...had never been wholly consistent or just in its handling of sex, even by its own limited definition of what constituted ‘responsible’ behaviour” (Duberman, 331).

the way that Lucy Willow does without hearing it throughout as an impossibly queer designation.

II

It is not on record whether the artist and collagist Ray Johnson attended the performance of “In a Garden,” though studying at Black Mountain from 1945 through to the summer of 1948 he might very well have been around to see it performed.⁷ Either way, Stein became a significant figure for him with references to her and her writing permeating his work after he left the College and moved to New York City.⁸ A collage work from 1975, *Untitled (Gertrude Stein in ‘50s Kitchen)* juxtaposes a photograph of Stein with a housewife leaning over a domestic stove. The famous cover of the New Directions edition of Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* which Johnson designed and which features in many of his artworks includes in one version an anagram of Stein’s name in the bottom left-hand corner, spelled “Gertrude Nites” (Zuba, plate 101). Another collage, *Untitled (Gertrude Stein Urinating/Dear Marilyn Monroe)* which Johnson returned to again and again between 1976 and 1994 barely



Untitled (Gertrude Stein Urinating/Dear Marilyn Monroe)

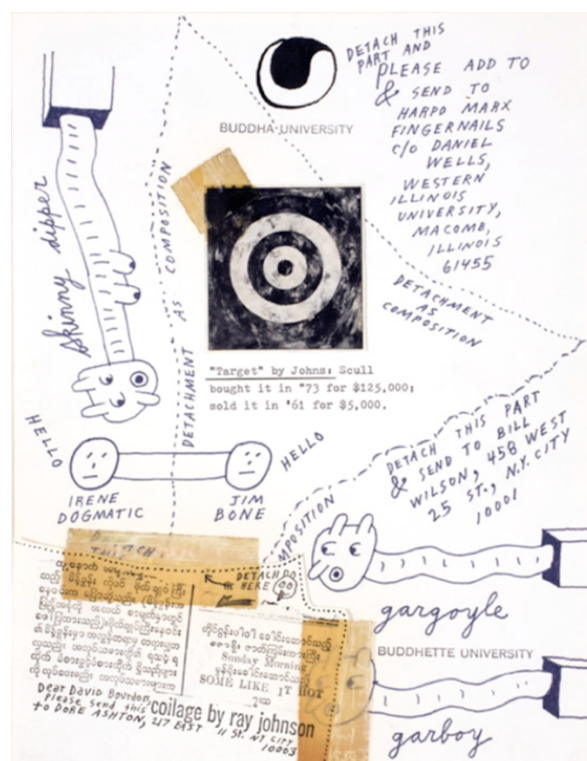
⁷ We do know that Johnson was involved in John Cage’s 1948 production of Erik Satie’s “The Ruse of the Medusa,” helping to build the set.

⁸ In New York City, Johnson lived with the sculptor Richard Lippold (in a tenement alongside Cage and Morton Feldman) who he had met at Black Mountain in 1948 and with whom he continued an affair until 1974.

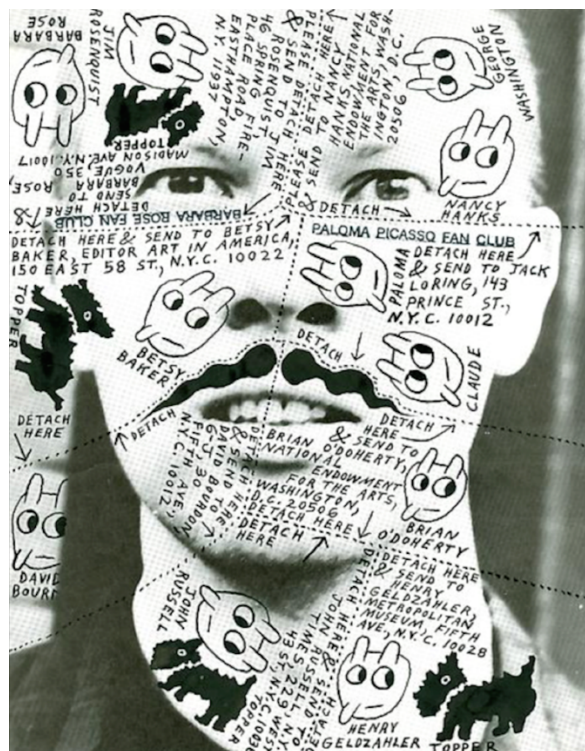
registers Stein visually, or by name, though its incorporation of circles within the overall circular design, with cut out section for emerging urine (*Ray Johnson, 149*), has potentially significant Steinian connections as we shall see.

Like Stein, Johnson operates within a queer economy, within the epistemology of the closet as Kevin Killian notes (citing Eve Sedgwick) in his introductory article to Johnson's selected writings (Zuba, 18). Like Stein, Johnson's work is also riddled with linguistic play – verbi-visual puns, jokes, anagrams (as in Stein/Nites above) and double entendres – pictorial and textual instances of what Lee Edelman calls homographesis, “the capacity for queerness to signify incommensurate meanings simultaneously” (Lorange, 187). Like Stein, Johnson's work also operates through what one commentator has called “a closed system of images...its origins...so thoroughly concealed that one must look for correspondences rather than explanations...” (DeSilva, 148).

Johnson is most well-known for his mail art which he began in earnest in the mid-fifties, an art which by its very nature relies on literal correspondence. Later dubbed “The New York Correspondance [*sic*] School” by one of his correspondees, it operates through dispersal rather than concentration. Largely conceived as a way of circumventing the confines of the art world with which he had a fraught relationship his whole life – famously he was at one point dubbed “the most famous unknown artist in America” (DeSilva, 141) – Johnson mailed his art works to specific recipients with the instruction to adapt them in any way they saw fit and then mail them back to himself or on to other recipients. As a method, it is what might be deemed a metonymic or contiguous rather than a metaphoric practice. On one of these mail-outs he referred to the process as “Detachment as Composition” whereby the surface is criss-crossed by dotted lines accompanied by the instruction to



“detach here” or to “detach this part” (Zuba, plates 134, 128). The artwork is conceived as fundamentally non-singular, existing not as a concentration but as something to be taken apart and redistributed among other correspondents. As well as destabilising the single author function, detachment here also designates Johnson’s relation to the art work as essentially ego-less: “I DO NOT EXIST. I NEVER DID ANYTHING” he writes to artist Virgil Ghinea (Zuba, plate 128). In another mail-out, Johnson covers a photograph of his own face with these ‘detach’ lines thus calling for an act of potential *self* detachment or ‘dis-figurement’ (Zuba, plate 134), each detached part also incorporating one of Johnson’s trademark ‘bunny heads,’ a way he often imaged himself and another form of psychic detachment.



“Detachment as Composition” of course also echoes Stein’s 1926 lecture “Composition as Explanation” much of which resonates with Johnson’s mail art practice:

And so now one finds oneself interesting oneself in an equilibration, that of course means words as well as things and distribution as well as between themselves between the words and themselves and the things and themselves, a distribution as distribution (Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 29).

Stein’s account of the fluid movement between various orders of word and thing describes Johnson’s later circulation through the U.S. postal system of the combined linguistic and material components of the mail-outs as well as the distributive interplay of language and substance within individual works. Indeed, throughout “Composition as Explanation” one

encounters phrases, sentences and paragraphs which all seem to point to Johnson's mail art. "Composition is not there it is going to be there" (Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 24) writes Stein, anticipating the inherent immanence in Johnson's deferred, never fully-present mail outs. "There is something to be added afterwards" (Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 25) Stein herself adds, which also describes the incremental nature of much of Johnson's work. Her well-known (non)definition of 'composition' as "beginning again and again and again" (Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 25) also captures what happens to Johnson's mail outs as they meet new collaborators. "And then," Stein writes, "there is using everything" (Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 24).

"Using everything" is Johnson's collage method. At Black Mountain, studying under Josef Albers, Johnson's art primarily consisted of geometric forms and grids.⁹ He continued to work with geometric patterns after leaving the College but in the mid-50s began working on what he called his "moticos" which he described thus:

They're really collages, paste-ups of pictures and pieces of paper, and so on – but that sounds too much like what they really are so I call them moticos. It's a good word because it's both singular and plural and you can pronounce it how you like. However, I'm going to get a new word soon (DeSilva, 141).

As Lucy Lippard reminds us, "that new word was never born" (DeSilva, 141). Johnson further describes the moticos:

The next time a railroad train is seen going its way along the track, look quickly at the sides of the box cars because a moticos may be there. Don't try to catch up with it; it wants to go its way... (DeSilva, 141).

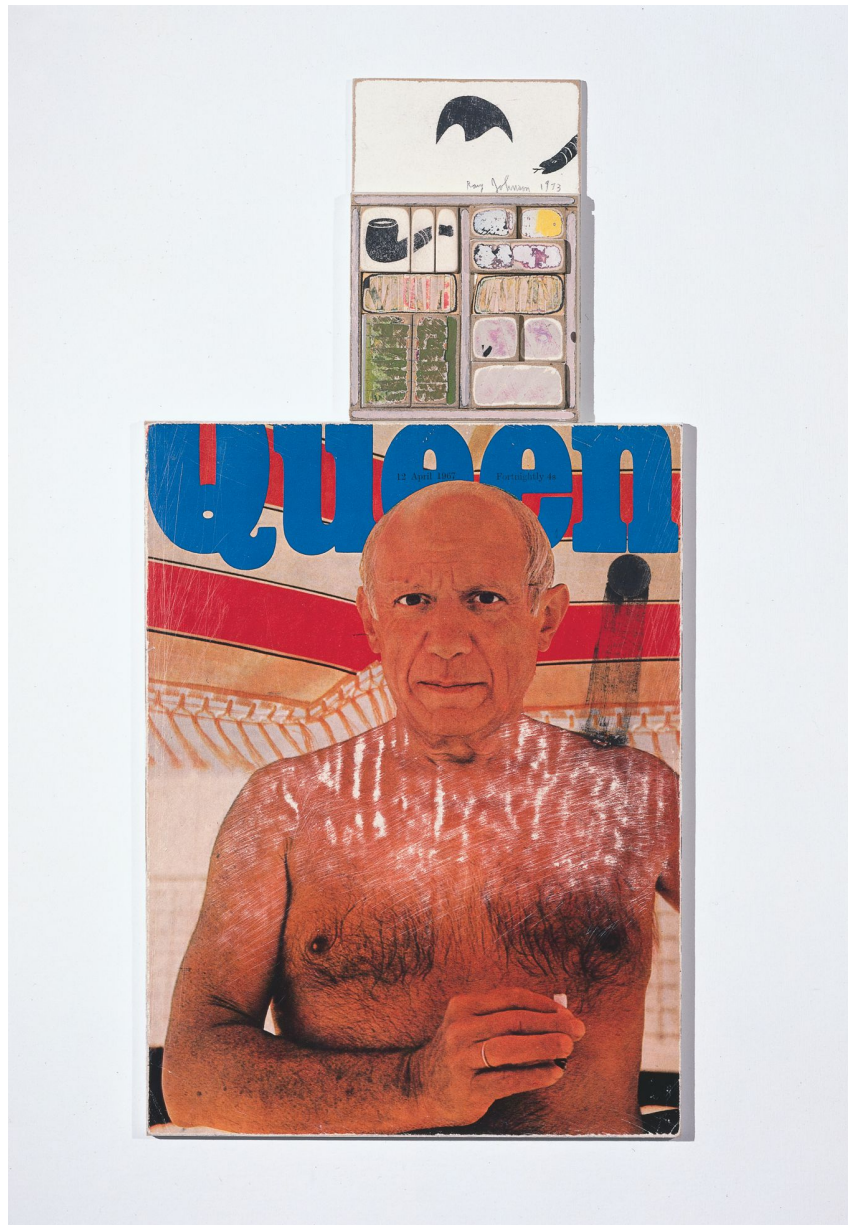
A moticos can be found anywhere. Here, the moving train and the warning not to try to catch it because it has a life of its own also anticipates the fleeting and ephemeral nature of Johnson's mail art. The word "moticos" – "both singular and plural," and because not "either/or" another example of homographesis – is, it has been often pointed out, an anagram of "osmotic" which is what Johnson's collages do, osmose or absorb everyday material into what Lucy Lippard calls a "life-art" (DeSilva, 145). Just as a moticos can be found anywhere, Johnson's collages are examples of Stein's "using everything." As the comprehensive archive of the Ray Johnson Estate informs us, for early moticos he used the cardboard which came with freshly laundered shirts as the mount for images cut out of magazines and advertisements.¹⁰

⁹ (Molesworth, 183).

¹⁰ See <http://www.rayjohnsonestate.com/glossary/>

III

For the remainder of this talk I want to hone in on a single Johnson piece which at first glance might seem a-typical of much of his work. In its apparent singularness it differs from the visual and textual overload that typifies much of Johnson's output, though as we shall see it's not quite as straightforward as it might seem. It was used as the notice for an exhibition which ran from December 2017-May 2018 of 20 of Johnson's collages at the *Museum Frieder Burda* in Baden-Baden entitled "Ray Johnson: Picasso Queen."¹¹



Untitled (Picasso Queen). Mixed media on cardboard.

¹¹ https://www.museum-frieder-burda.de/index.php?id=21&L=1&tx_eventbase_exhibition%5Bexhibition%5D=129&tx_eventbase_exhibition%5Baction%5D=show&tx_eventbase_exhibition%5Bcontroller%5D=Exhibition&cHash=68cc117dc82e09103eab38f39e5c642c

The image itself, *Untitled (Picasso Queen)*, is a mixed media work from 1973, the year of Picasso's death.¹² Johnson's source for the image is the cover of the April 12, 1967 issue of British society magazine, *Queen* (later *Harpers and Queen*, now *Harper's Bazaar*) which featured an article on Picasso by the art critic David Thomson. The original cover photo and the inside images are by magazine-editor, photographer, sculptor and painter Alexander Liberman. As a bastion of the establishment, *Queen* was a thoroughgoingly heteronormative publication as the contents page demonstrates with its adverts for Moss Bros – where “a man can get the best of both worlds in men's wear” (*Queen*, n.p.) – and for “That Man” Revlon aftershave, “for single minded men” (*Queen*, n.p.).

Arguably the Twentieth century's defining artist, Picasso was of course also notorious for his rampant heteronormativity and Johnson plays on this here, using the magazine's masthead to turn Picasso, resplendent in his hirsute bare-chestedness, into something of a gay icon. The King is dead, long live the Queen! Johnson's reframed image plays with our ability to look at Picasso as legendarily heterosexual and simultaneously see him as homosexual, a little like the ambiguous duck/rabbit image that Johnson also used in many of his artworks. I would argue that Picasso here is also a fantasised projection of Johnson himself. On the masthead, the two 'e's of “Queen” sit behind Picasso's bald head not unlike the rabbit ears that Johnson also famously attached to his own bald head in his “bunny” portraits.¹³ As an artist “in the shadow of Johns and Rauschenberg...an also-ran Warhol and even a third-rate sort of Yoko Ono” as Kevin Killian describes him (Zuba, 18), or again as “America's most famous unknown artist,” Johnson fantasises about being absolute top dog, the “Napoleon” of art as Gertrude Stein famously called Picasso in her second portrait of the artist, “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso.”¹⁴

¹² Picasso's name appears in many of Johnson's art works as does that of his daughter Paloma who also became the figurehead for one of a number of fan clubs established by Johnson. Other fan club figureheads included actress Shelly Duval and Marcel Duchamp.

¹³ In another piece, the bunny ears are replaced by the vertical outline of a pair of shoes, one black and one white and labelled 'L' and 'R' respectively (see *Ray Johnson*, 169). In a further piece, Johnson attaches two large 'Lucky Strike' circles to the sides of James Dean's head, not unlike Mickey Mouse ears.

¹⁴ “If I Told Him” begins thus:

“If I told him would he like it. Would he like it if I told him.
 Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it.
 If Napoleon if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon.
 Would he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I
 told him would he like it would he like it if I told him.
 Now.
 Not now.
 And now.
 Now.
 Exactly as as kings.
 Feeling full for it.
 Exactitude as kings.
 So to beseech you as full as for it.
 Exactly or as kings.
 Shutters shut and open so do queens. Shutters shut and shutters and so shutters shut and shutters

Stein's poem was itself originally published in another society magazine, *Vanity Fair*, in 1924. Linda Voris warns against reading "If I Told Him" for resemblance, in other words by comparing Picasso too readily to the figure of Napoleon with whom the poem famously opens, simply because, everybody supposes, both were forceful but diminutive leaders. Demanding "a new and more dynamic model for reading" (Voris, 176), she argues that Stein's poem is an example of 'radical epistemology' which rather than privileging 'likeness' through personal recollection – Stein *thinking* about Picasso – it makes knowing a compositional effect (Voris, 176). Trying to read the poem as a biographical portrait of Picasso is to look *through* the text rather than *at* it, at what Voris calls the poem's elaborate surface intratextuality (Voris, 179). "If I Told Him" works metonymically through chains of association or contiguity. Thus the reference to Napoleon at the beginning of the poem leads to Stein's later use of the word 'kings' which in turn "summons the word 'queens'" (Voris, 184). It all goes back to what Stein called "distribution" and "arrangement" in "Composition as Explanation."

Stein's use of the word "queens" in her poem is of course itself summoned by Johnson through the singular word "Queen" of the magazine's title and there are other intertextual references to "If I Told Him" in *Untitled (Picasso Queen)*. Whilst Stein's poem refuses to "exact a resemblance," Johnson makes use of a photograph, a medium which of all the visual arts comes closest to affording "exact resemblance," yet of course he has not simply reframed the magazine's cover. There are other additions. Above the dominant image of Picasso sits the smaller rectangle, slightly off-centre and at first glance supplemental, though on closer inspection it is full of significant detail and aligned perfectly with Picasso's head, like a crown of sorts. This rectangle is itself sub-divided into smaller rectangles, reminiscent again of the geometric painting Johnson learned under Albers at Black Mountain (though it also looks a little like a Joseph Cornell box).

Some of the rectangles are more easily discerned than others. The most 'legible' image is the pipe, recurrent in Johnson's work, reminding us of René Magritte's own warning against exact resemblance "ceci n'est pas un pipe" or "The Treachery of Images." The snake appearing from the right, another frequent Johnson image (mostly with a head at each end), often occurs as a phallic pun on his own name (and also reminding us that in French, "faire un pipe" is to give a blowjob). Beneath the pipe is what seems to be a row of leaning books, conceivably alerting us to the textual context of this collage with what look like green shutters in the lower left taking us back into Stein's poem, to the sentence "Shutters shut and open so do queens." The shutter here – another potential nod to Eve Sedgwick's closet – might also be an allusion to the shutter of the camera that took

and so and so shutters and so shutters shut and so shutters shut and shutters and so. And so shutters shut and so and also. And also and so and so and also.

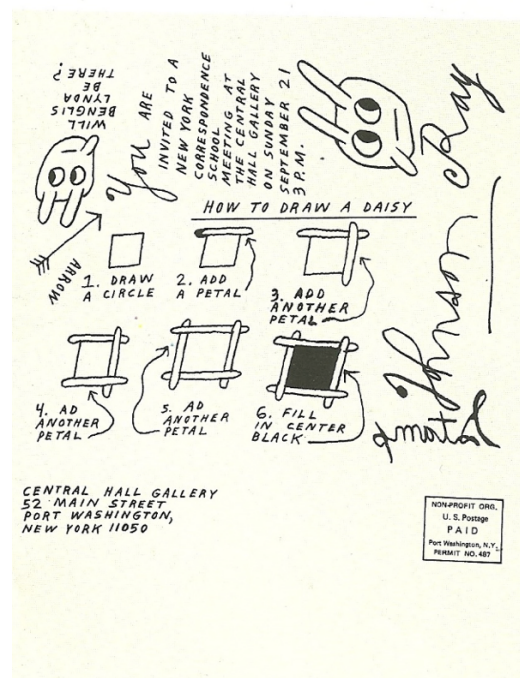
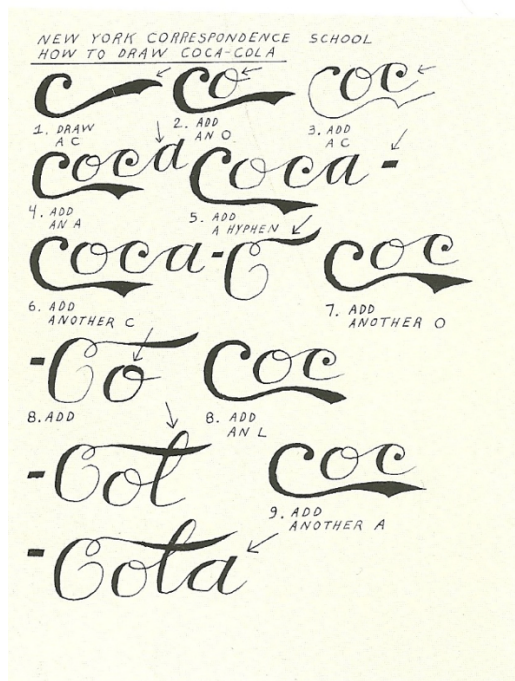
Exact resemblance to exact resemblance the exact resemblance as exact resemblance, exactly as resembling, exactly resembling, exactly in resemblance exactly and resemblance. For this is so. Because" (Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 230).

Picasso's picture or indeed to Picasso's eyes in the photograph and their notoriously dark pupils. Other shapes are more obscure, though perhaps reminiscent of the work of some of the Abstract Expressionists such as Rothko. On top of the whole ensemble floats a weird glyphic shape, not unlike a comedy toupée.

The other 'addition' to Johnson's piece appears below the 'n' of "Queen", a black circle sending out dark (punning) 'rays' that burn their way into Picasso's left shoulder (either that or it's a kind of comet taking off from it). The circle picks up on other circles in the picture – Picasso's pupils, his nipples and the ring on his finger (another reminder of his heterosexuality) – though the vertical/diagonal thrust of the rays also takes us down to the semi-concealed cigarette in his left hand. As in Linda Voris' injunction to read "If I Told Him" dynamically, Johnson's own portrait of Picasso is as much about the dynamic structural arrangement of its elements as it is a series of recondite ciphers to be decoded.

IV

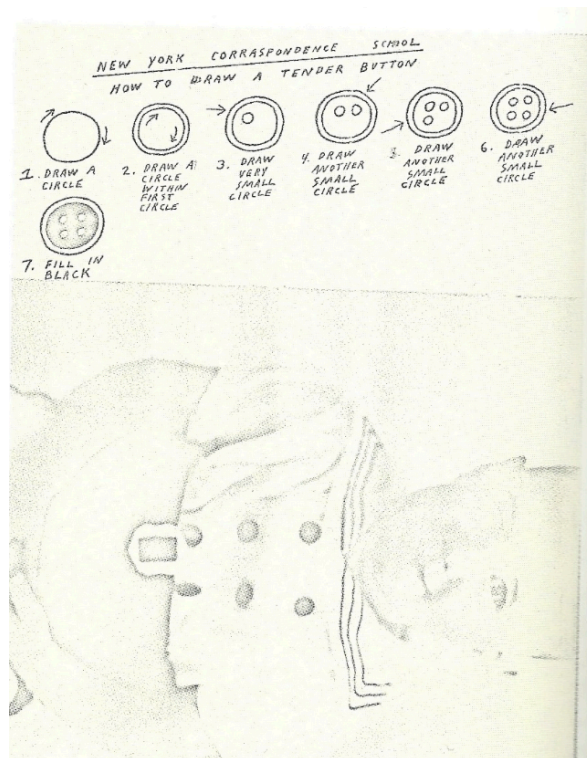
Like the pipe and the snake, the circle is a repeated shape in Johnson's work. It appears for instance in a series he worked on called "How to Draw..." whose title of course echoes Stein's *How to Write*. Just as Stein's text is not exactly a writing primer, Johnson's series flirts with the promise of proficient draughtsmanship through a knowingly playful naivety. The most well-known "How to Draw" is "How to Draw a Bunny" in which a simple circle is added to by degrees, making up the very crude picture of a rabbit which as I have already mentioned became a recurrent motif of self portrayal.¹⁵ In "How to Draw Coca-Cola," using



"How to Draw Coca-Cola" and "How to Draw a Daisy"

¹⁵ *How to Draw a Bunny* is also the title of John W. Walter's and Andrew Moore's compelling 2002 film about Ray Johnson.

the brand's famous cursive lettering, Johnson seems gradually to spell out the name of the drink but it never quite coheres. "How to Draw a Knuckle Sandwich" literalises its metaphor with the simple drawing of a bunched-up hand between two slices of bread. "How to Draw a Daisy" is a sequence of framed *squares* which from the outset deliberately thwarts our expectation of 'natural' daisy-like circles (Zuba, plate 140). Perversely, it is "How to Draw a Tender Button," by title the most explicitly Steinian of all the "How to Draws" which is the most representational with its final image offering the "exactest resemblance" to an



"How to Draw a Tender Button"

everyday, round, common-or-garden button though Johnson's final instruction to "fill [it] in black" makes it affectively 'darker' and not unlike the black circle in the Picasso portrait.¹⁶ It's almost like turning a tender button into a full stop.

Randomly opening my copy of *Not Nothing*, the wonderful selection of Johnson's 'Writings' published by Siglio Press in 2014, I come across a piece from January 7, 1965 in which he asks: "Can a circle be here? Yes, I think a circle can be there" (Zuba, plate 28). This sounds like Stein both in its diction and its indirection though unlike Stein Johnson uses a question mark, in *Poetry and Grammar* "the completely most uninteresting" (Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 128) of all available punctuation. In what might tentatively be called her hierarchy of punctuation, Stein favoured the full stop or period which she says she always liked the look of and which came to develop a life of its own for her, breaking up her writing

¹⁶ Note that in "How to Draw a Daisy" Johnson also dictates that the final square be 'filled in black.' The resultant image looks more like an Ad Reinhardt painting than a daisy, a reminder that for a time in the 1950s Johnson acted as Reinhardt's assistant.

in arbitrary ways, interrupting it in a way that wasn't really interruption (Stein, *Writings and Lectures*, 130). Like Lucy Willow in "In a Garden" finally realising she is a queen because she feels it, Stein really *feels* full stops. It would take another talk to trace Johnson's use of circles through Stein's love of the full stop, except to say that in his own writing full stops do stop being punctuation and become material embodiments in their own right, with their own 'life of their own.' So do commas which are often figured as glyph-like proto-life forms in a good number of Johnson's artworks.¹⁷

Perhaps we can read Johnson's circles as physical manifestations of the anti-participatory 'Nothings' that he staged in the sixties as a response to the era's vogue for the Happening. Perhaps he uses them because he has two 'os' in his surname, feeling nominally the materiality of letter-forms which as other writers have recognised can have profound, lifelong psychological effects. Perhaps, as he writes in the same piece from January 7, 1965 above, a circle really is "an object for killing snakes." Again, given his name, that might be like killing himself. There is a darkness to much of Johnson's output which is never wholly tempered by its attendant playfulness. Or rather, the playfulness often has a darker side to it. In all likelihood Johnson committed suicide, by swimming out into the cold January waters of Sag Harbour,¹⁸ though as John W. Walter's film about him implies, even in this final act Johnson self-consciously plays his audience. To rule out any criminality over his death, the police decided to look around Johnson's house in Locust Valley, New York. One thing that caught the eye of the investigating police officer was that "there was nothing facing outwardly." In other words, he continues,

anything that he might be working on, a picture, pictures hanging on the walls were non-existent...All you saw were shelves, you saw stacks of paintings...all facing the wall. Nothing faced out until of course you walked upstairs and then in one room there was a big two-by-three-foot picture of Ray Johnson facing out.¹⁹

In what has rightly been called astonishing footage, Walter's film (through the police camera) shows us round the house before revealing Johnson's picture of himself. Photographed wearing a black sweater against a plain white background, Johnson stares from the screen like a perverse Olsonian figure of outward. As a revelation, however, as a final act of facing out, as if for the first time to say explicitly (again echoing Stein) look at me now and here I am, this picture unsurprisingly reveals very little, almost nothing. It's certainly no picture of Dorian Gray. Neither is Johnson outing himself, something by all

¹⁷ See, for instance, *Untitled (Jackson Pollock Fillets)*, 1973 and *Buddha's Legs*, 1973-86 (*Ray Johnson*, 60, 100). In *Untitled (Dear Marcia Tucker)*, 1972-75, the comma forms are figured and named explicitly as 'catfish' (*Ray Johnson*, 57). In *William Burroughs* from 1978, protruding out of the author's back is a box containing four bold commas each rotated into a different position. Another comma form sits outside the box not unlike a growing foetus (*Ray Johnson*, 77).

¹⁸ On January 13, 1995.

¹⁹ *How to Draw a Bunny: A Ray Johnson Portrait*. Dir. John W. Walter, Palm Pictures, 2002.

accounts he never had to face.²⁰ Ultimately, it's the "nothing facing outwardly" that is everything in the camera's purview, the picture of himself a mere red herring, or at the very least a more austere, inscrutable version of *Untitled (Picasso Queen)* – Johnson perhaps finally outfacing Picasso. It's as if at the very end Johnson is asking us all to complete a final "How to Draw," one that we'll never complete – "How to Draw a Conclusion." Draw a C. Add an O. Fill in black.

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²⁰ As his close friend William S. Wilson stated in an interview, Johnson "never said 'I am a gay man.' Ray was not lying, he was not hypocritical or insincere, he refused the system of classification that sees heterosexuality as the opposite of homosexuality. Ray never concealed his sexuality; there was no closet to hold him" (Kahan, 85-86).

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