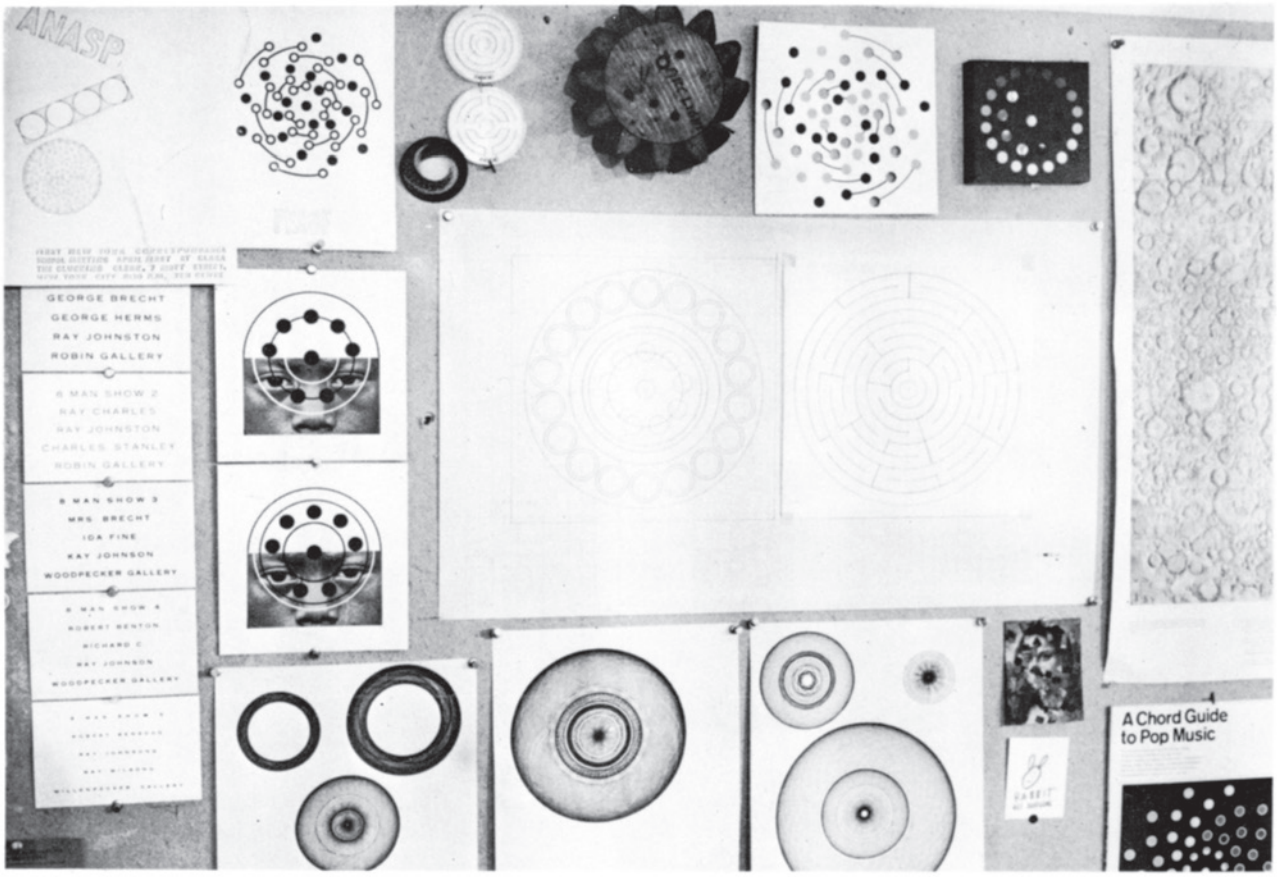
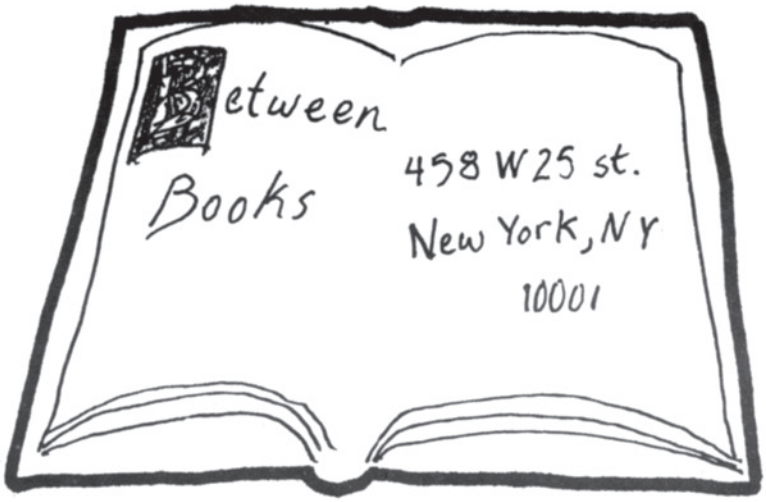
**Ray Johnson** Ray Johnson **ray johnson**

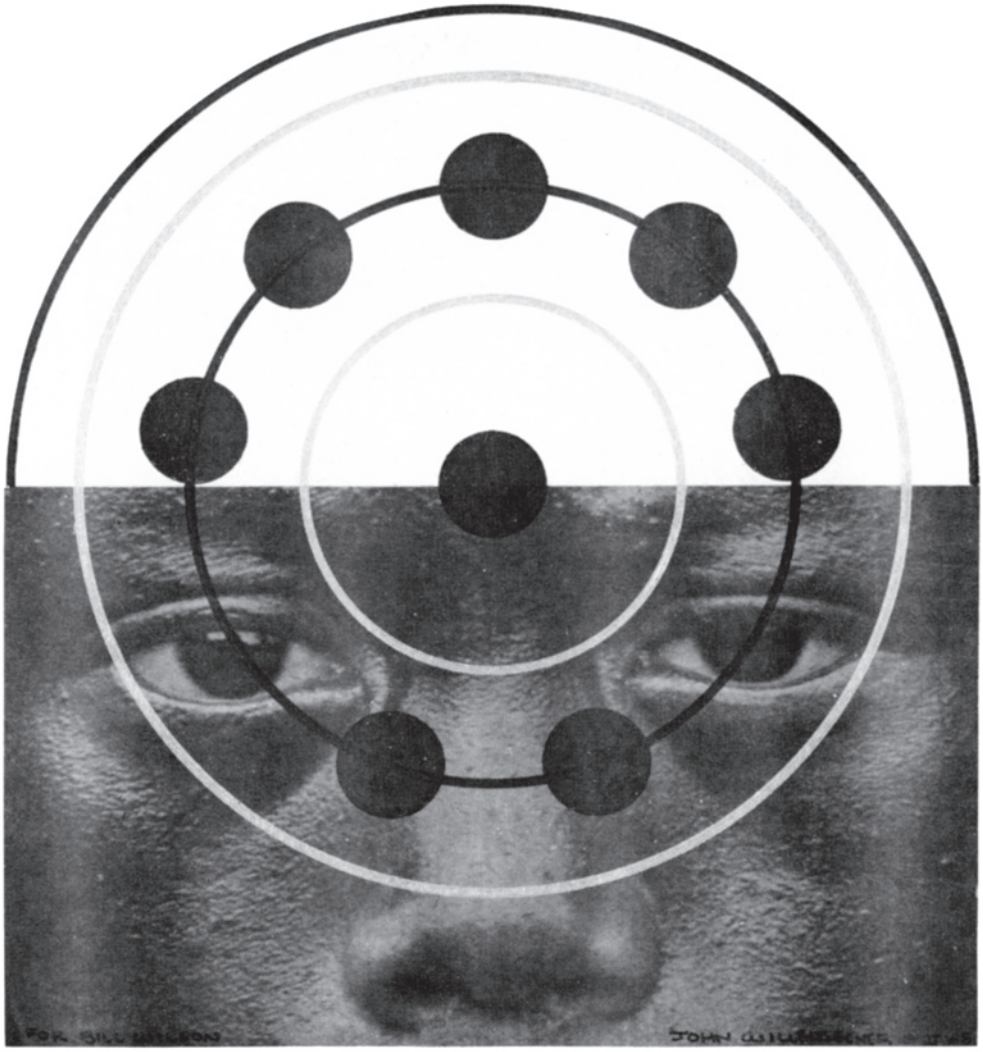


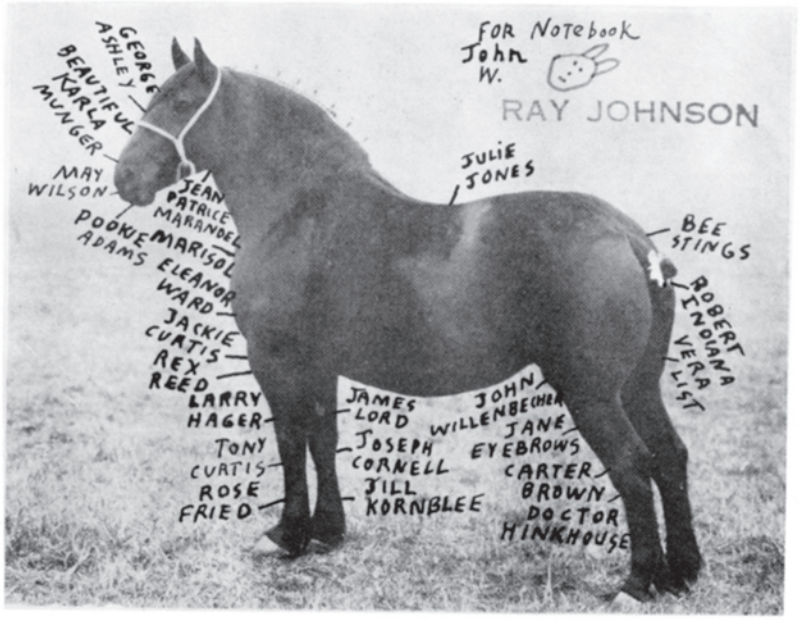

JOHN WILLENBECHER

# 6 LB.
# 3 OZ.
# KATE

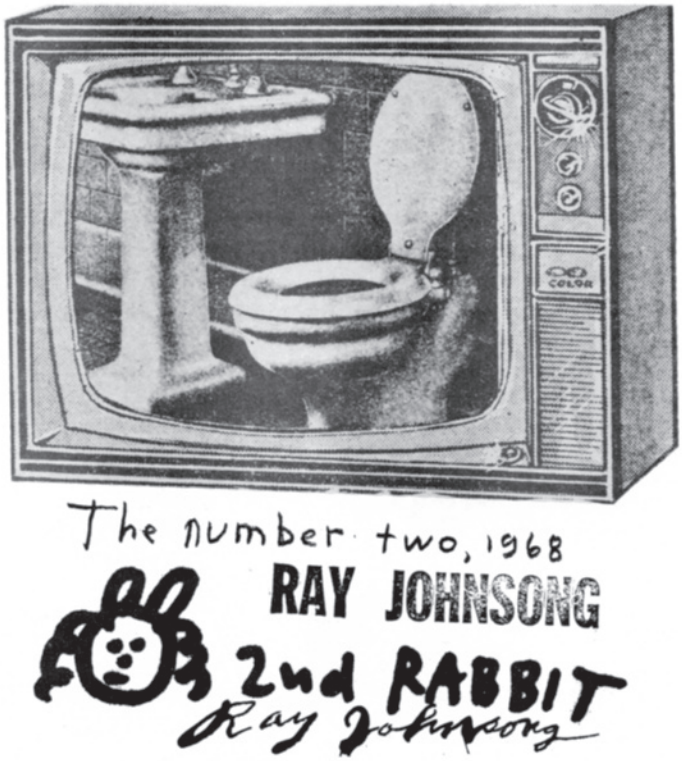
# ARA ANN
# 6 LB. 6½ OZ.
# WILSON

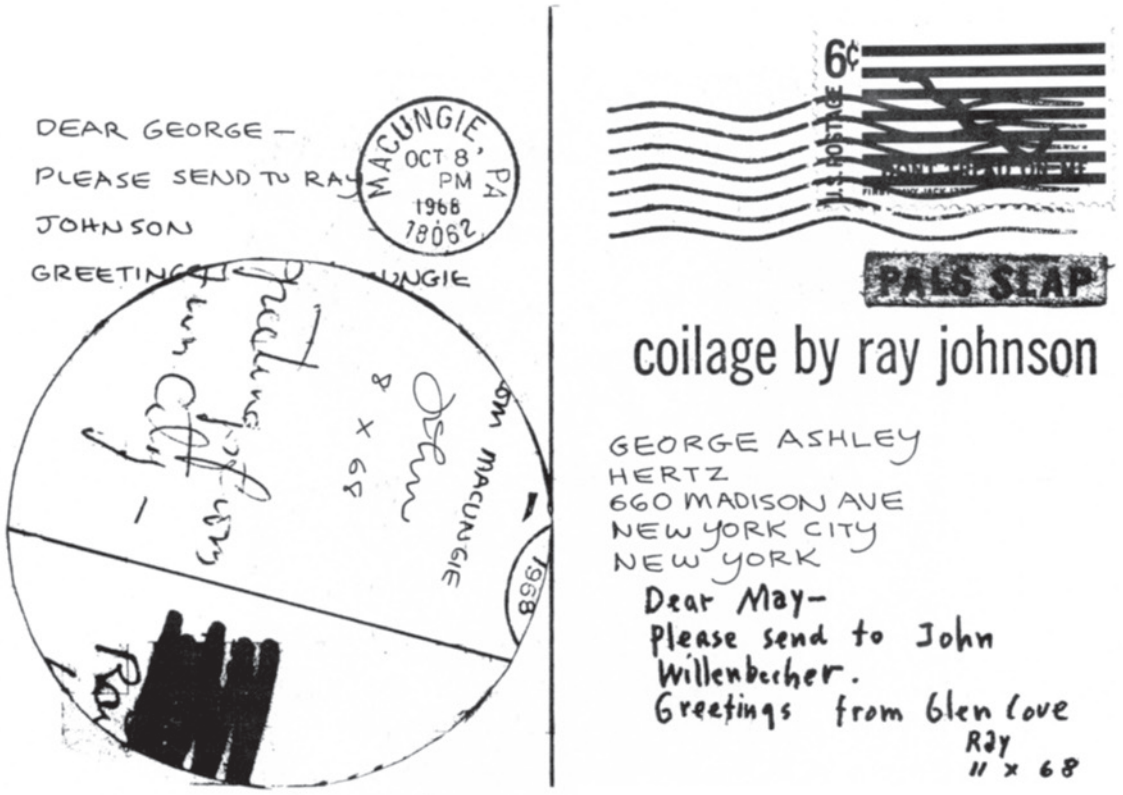


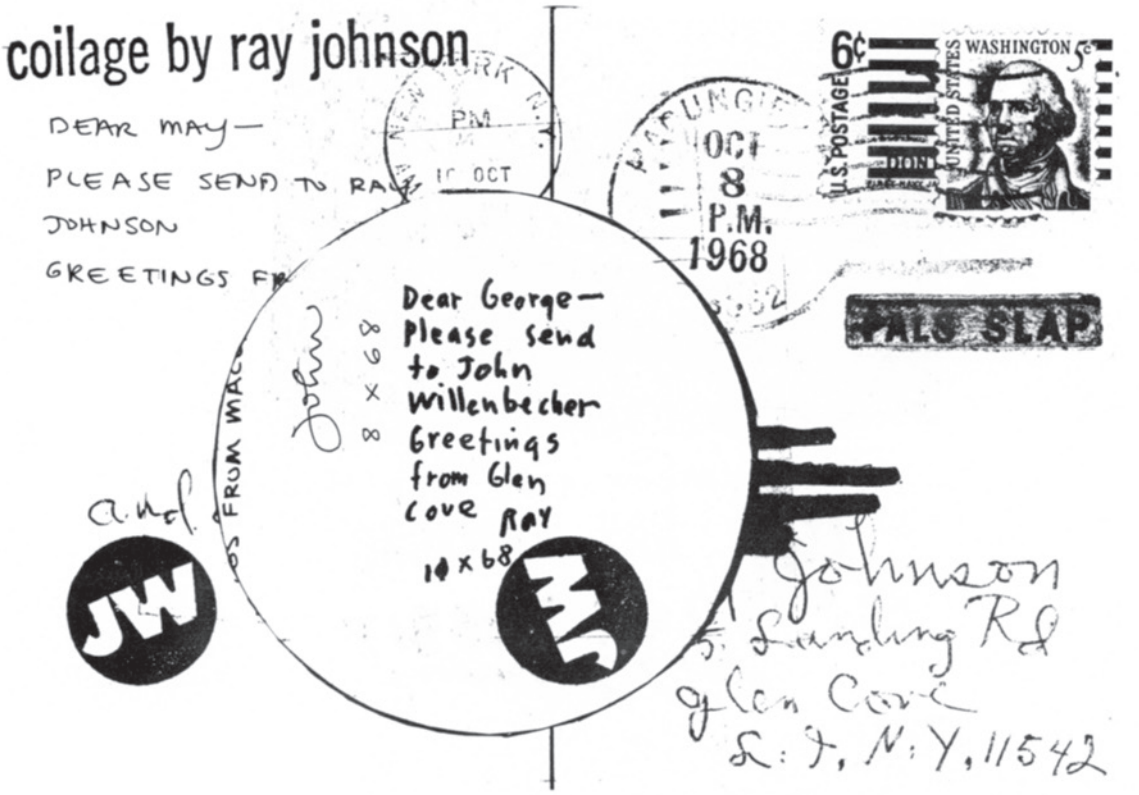


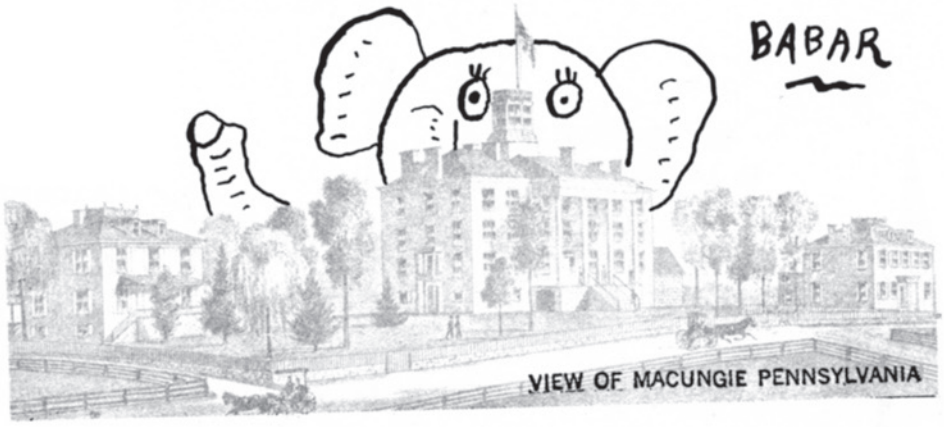

FOR Notebook
John
W.
RAY JOHNSON
GEORGE ASHLEY
BEAUTIFUL KARLA MUNGER
MAY WILSON
POOKIE ADAMS
JEAN PATRICE MARANDEL
MARISOL
ELEANOR WARD
JACKIE CURTIS
REX REED
LARRY HAGER
TONY CURTIS
ROSE FRIED
JAMES LORD
JOSEPH CORNELL
JILL KORNBLEE
JULIE JONES
JOHN WILLENBECHER
JANE EYEBROWS
CARTER BROWN
DOCTOR HINKHOUSE
BEE STINGS
ROBERT INDIANA
VERA LIST


15. Robert Indiana THE FIGURE 5 *1963*




DEAR GEORGE —
PLEASE SEND TO RAY
JOHNSON
GREETINGS
MACUNGIE, PA
OCT 8
PM
1968
18062
6¢
U.S. POSTAGE
PALS SLAP
coilage by ray johnson
GEORGE ASHLEY
HERTZ
660 MADISON AVE
NEW YORK CITY
NEW YORK
Dear May—
Please send to John
Willenbecher.
Greetings from Glen Cove
Ray
11 x 68
8 x 68
1968


coilage by ray johnson
DEAR MAY—
PLEASE SEND TO RAY
JOHNSON
GREETINGS FR
PM
OCT
8
P.M.
1968
6¢
U.S. POSTAGE
UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON
5¢
PALS SLAP
Dear George—
Please send
to John
Willenbecher
Greetings
from Glen
Cove Ray
10 x 68
8 x 68
JW
Johnson
5 Sunset Rd
Glen Cove
L. I., N. Y., 11542




Dear John,
That evening you saw Vince Aletti and I in Riker's and you had pancakes and I drove him crosstown, I went up to get some magazines he was throwing out and when I left I was walking down 12th Street and as I heard coming from somewhere Simon & Garfunkel (perhaps a juke box in a baR) singing Bridge Over Troubled Waters, I looked down and saw on the sidewalk Water Works.

John your three messages from Europe the absolute dullest things I ever got.

R.J.


John Willenbecher
(please hold)

2.25.70

AIRMAIL

John,
I am certian you will please send the enclosed letter to Charlotte Zloczower of the N.Y.C.S. to her at 36 Jackie Road, Glen Head, N.Y. with my return address upper left corner of envelope:

and envelope


O HARE


RAY JOHNSON
THE PINK HOUSE
44 WEST 7 STREET
LOCUST VALLEY
NEW YORK 11560

(and tell Leslie certian is spelled sertian).

Mr. Ray Johnson
The Pink House
44 West 7th Street
New York, New York 11560

This is terribly NYCS interesting because Albert M.Fine as reported by R. Costable N.Y.Mag.March 2nd issue page 42 has him at 25 Curtis Road in Revere,mass. & last night Buffie Johnson's ex-husband said Anne Revere, the actress lives on Fox Lane in Locust Valley.

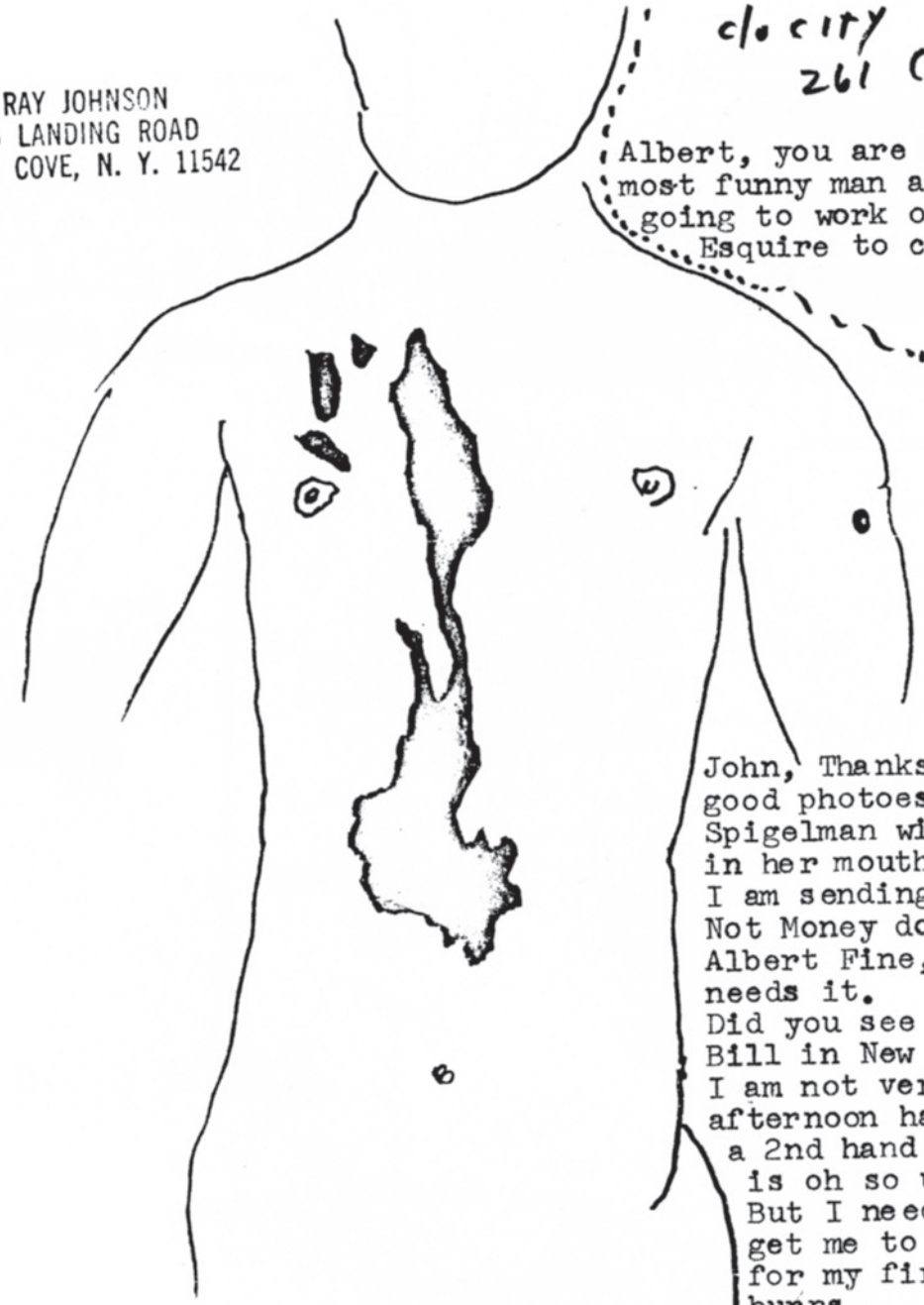
"Not At Street Address
Try Zip Code Station"
11560
Locust Valley
N.Y.

R. Johnson

RAY JOHNSON
65 LANDING ROAD
GLEN COVE, N. Y. 11542

detach here.
Send to A. Fine
c/o City Lights
261 Columbus
SF. CAL

Albert, you are probably the most funny man alive and I'm going to work on getting Esquire to cover your act.



John, Thanks for the very good photoes. Love Miss Spigelman with the apple in her mouth.
I am sending the This Is Not Money dollar bill to Albert Fine, who really needs it.
Did you see Piggy with $ Bill in New York mag.?
I am not very happy this afternoon having purchased a 2nd hand Red VW which is oh so ugly!
But I need something to get me to Jones Beach for my first degree sun burns.
You should see my tummy and chest red birth mark. Why haven't I rushed to a photoe booth?
Thanks again you're wonderful.
Ray

April 22, 1969

George,

I accidentally dropped a pan of boiling hot water on myself this morning, went to the Glen Cove Hospital Emergency Clinic in the pouring rain, was given a tetanus shot in my left arm. Could you please xerox this page sending one copy to Andy Warhol, 33 Union Square, New York City? I could use about forty-four xerox pages for N.Y.C.S. mailings.

Peace,

ERNIE BUSHMILLER FAN CLUB

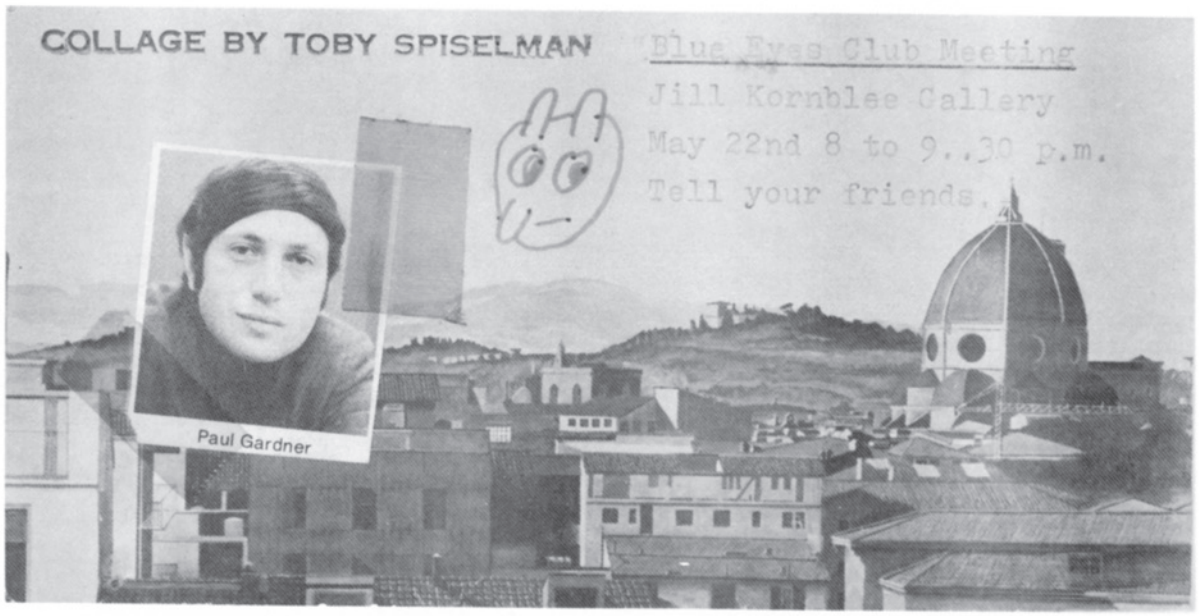
September 19, 1969

Dear Anais Nin,

The other day, a bird flew into Nancy & Aunt Fritzi's apartment and they thought it was a robin and then they found out it was a woodpecker because it ate some of the furniture.

Sincerely yours,

Ray Johnson

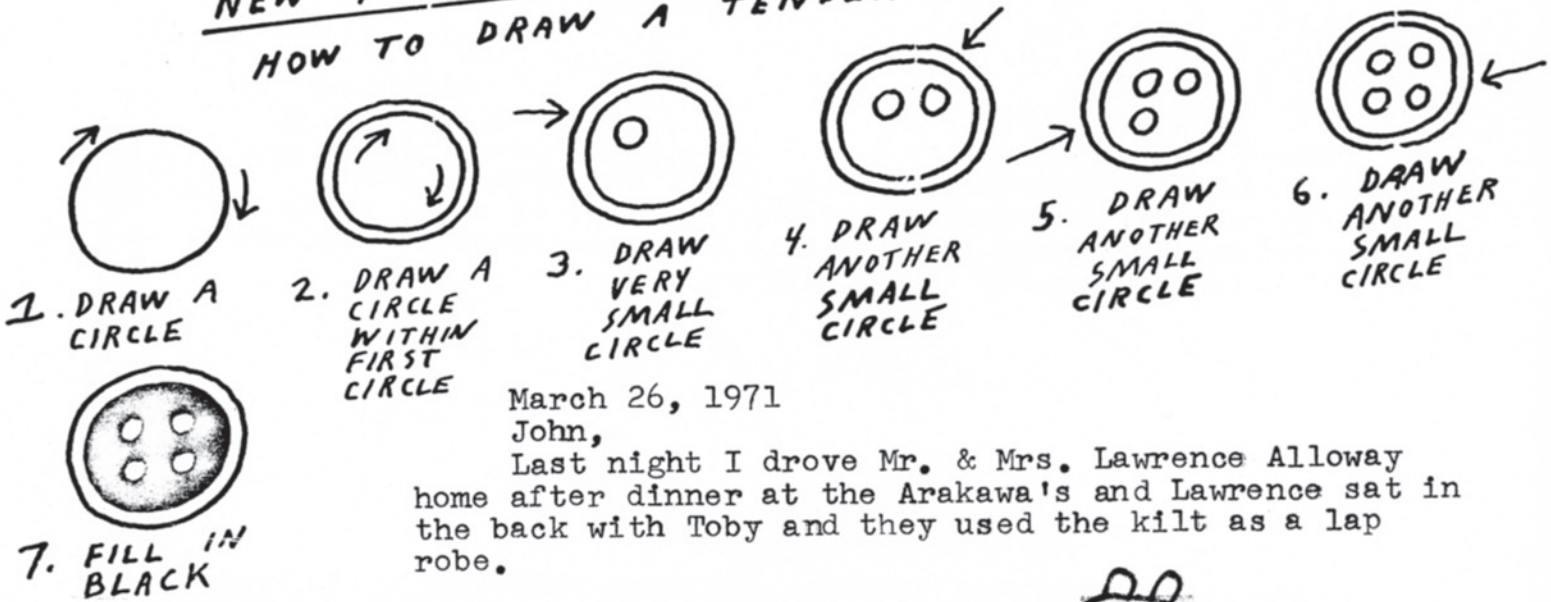



J • PATRICE MARANDEL 15 W 68 ST NYC NY 1

Please tell John Willenbecher that the 2 5/8ths inch long screw he gave me at the Whitney Opening gave birth in my glove compartment to a little baby Phillips head.

NEW YORK CORRASPONDENCE SCHOOL

HOW TO DRAW A TENDER BUTTON

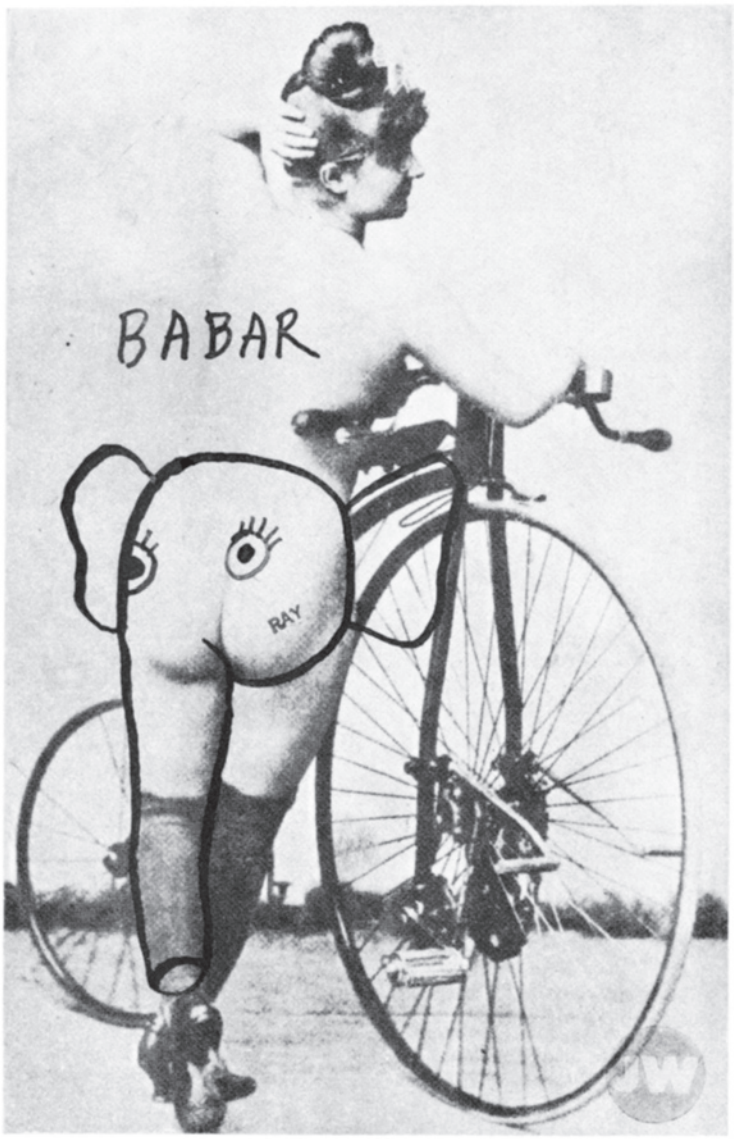


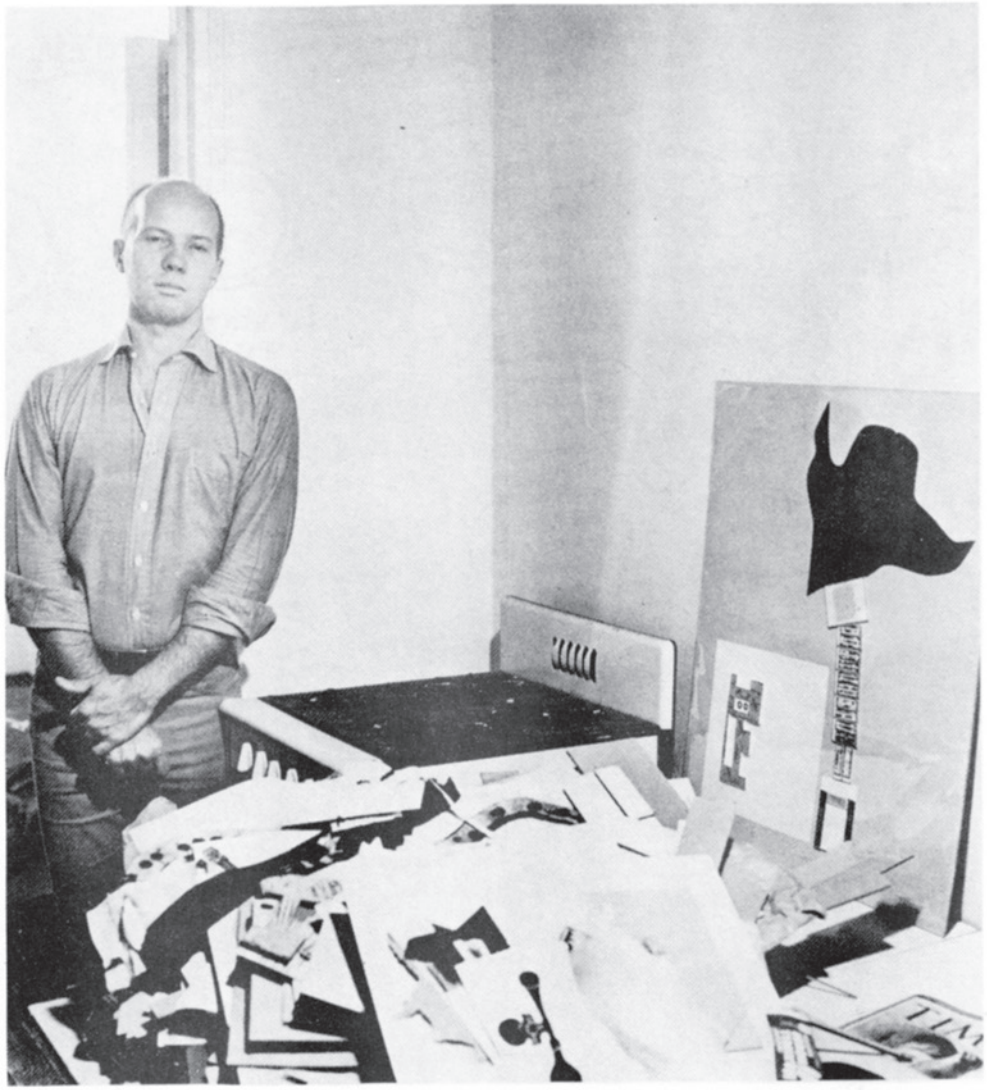

March 26, 1971

John,

Last night I drove Mr. & Mrs. Lawrence Alloway home after dinner at the Arakawa's and Lawrence sat in the back with Toby and they used the kilt as a lap robe.

*Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in 'The Barclays of Broadway'*


BABAR
RAY

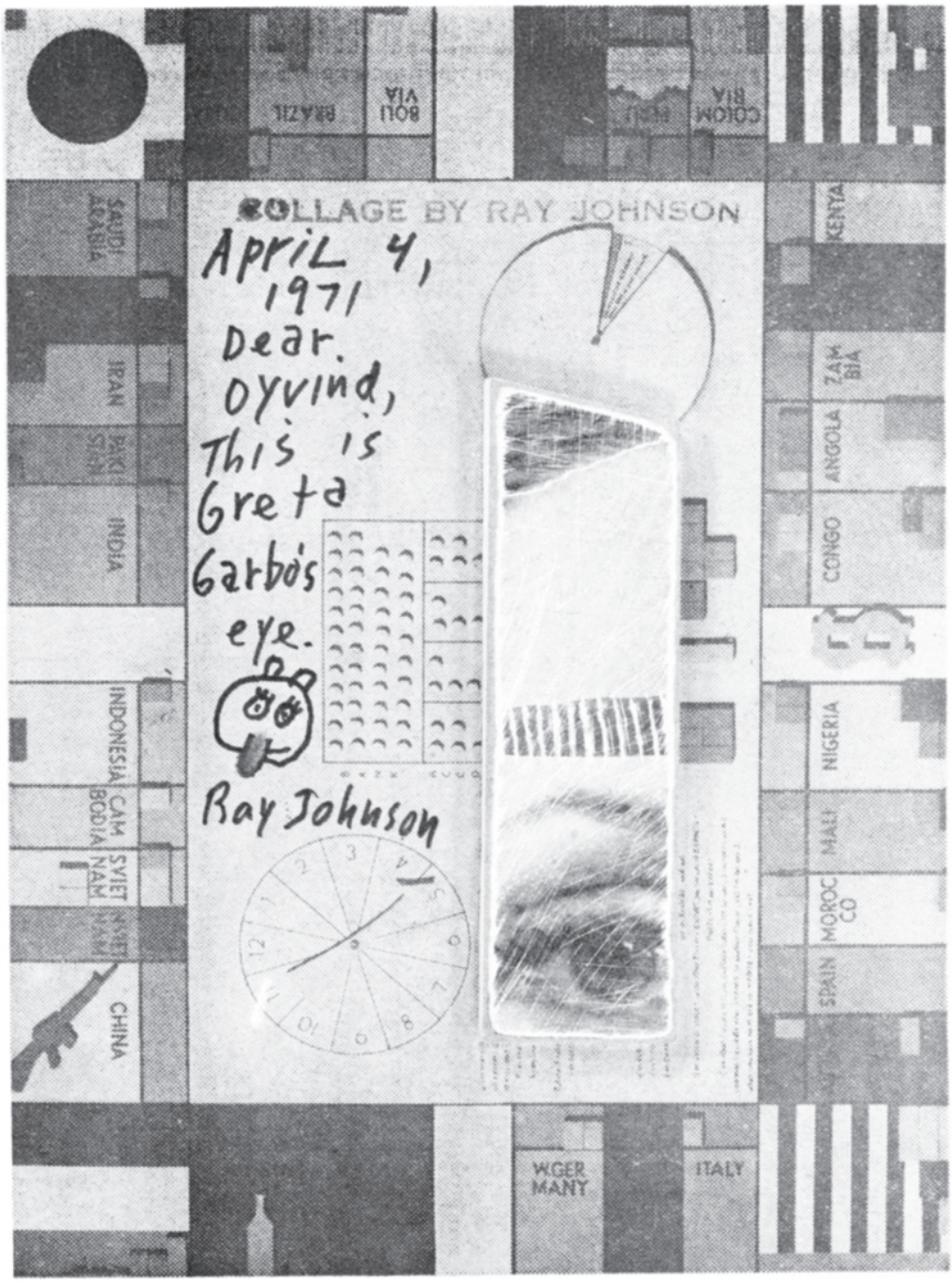


Many years ago I drew snakes.
They were underfoot.
Anne and Bill Wilson had a baby.
His name was Ocean.
I made paintings of combs and hats.
I live in Manhattan.
I made a painting of an Island.
Last summer on the beach at Coney
Island I was reading Playboy magazine
and decided when I got home to do a
drawing of Jean Seberg's shoe.
"The pink ice falls on his head" is
a fragment of something I wrote.
Between the foot and head is the knee.
A neon light cast pink light on the
snow.

A lot of my early work which I didn't
destroy or mail out in envelopes to
friends I ditched.
I dreamed about a mantah ray splashing
in Lake Michigan.
Chicago wind blew hat away.

RAY JOHNSON


and Rusty Russell


COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON
April 4,
1971
Dear.
Oyvind,
This is
Greta
Garbo's
eye.
Ray Johnson
BOLIVIA
BRAZIL
COLOMBIA
PERU
SAUDI ARABIA
IRAN
PAKISTAN
INDIA
INDONESIA
CAMBODIA
SVIET NAM
NVIET NAM
CHINA
KENYA
ZAMBIA
ANGOLA
CONGO
NIGERIA
MALI
MOROCCO
SPAIN
W.GERMANY
ITALY

# RAY JOHNSON PAINTINGS
# WILLARD GALLERY
# April 25 - May 27

1. Stele
2. Comb White
3. Gray Comb
4. Purple Comb
5. Comb with Yellow Green Stripe
6. Comb Knife
7. (Sandy Leonard's) Hair Bow Comb
8. Shark with Comb
9. Figure with Yellows
10. May Boot
11. Lice
12. Tip
13. Fireplace Hat
14. Black Hat with Figures
15. Frogs
16. Heart
17. The Snake has a Heart
18. Enclosure
19. One Third
20. Three Thirds
21. It
22. Do Not Jill
23. Birds
24. Alain Delon Match
25. Virginia Woolf
26. Picasso
27. Queen Anne Chair
    (Collection Alvin Friedman-Kien)
28. For Toby
    (Collection Toby Spiselman)
29. Small White Hand
30. Glove Tied
31. Glove
32. Massage Ball
33. Buddha Urinating
    (Collection Dieter Rosenkrantz)
34. Buddha Urinating No. 2
    (Collection Coburn Britton)
35. Wanda Gag
36. Marilyn Monroe 1926 - 1962
37. Joe Raffaele 1933 -
38. Figure with Blue
39. Figure with Yin Yang
40. Figure with Heart
41. Reaching to

September 26, 1967

Dear John,

Thank you for sending me the page listing the LeHigh Univ. 14th Annual Painting Exhibition.

Golly gee! First time I ever showed with Peggy Bacon, a contemporary of Wanda Gag. And with Leonard Baskin, who once said at the National Institute of Arts & Letters that "my work was shit".

I'd love to see Jo Anne Schneider's "Still Life with Apples". I wonder if they hung my "Comb with Yellow-Green Stripe" next to it?

I'll bet your "Sunup System" looked great next to Peppino Mangravite.

I sure look forward to next year's 15th Annual maybe we can get to show with Diego Rivera. He's the greatest!

Much thanks,

R

P.S. I enclose Hilda Carmel's letter to David Bourdon 4/29/65 about mica, whose "awesome beauty which time, atmosphere and pressure has created". Please return it to David with the post card depicting the Peabody Museum formica serpent, which I would like David to return to me.

# Happy membership

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

*Monday, July 14, 1969*

I mean, what would you do?

I am certain only of my own uncertainty. I am now a member of the New York Correspondence School. I know this because it says so on the postcard:

**April 29, 1969**
**Dear John,**
**Mr. Andreae is now a member of the New York Correspondence School.**
**Ray Johnson.**

You observe that Mr. Johnson is not writing to me. He is writing to John. Further evidence on the same card suggests that the said John, who may or may not have seen Mr. Johnson's note, is John Willenbecher. I know this because Mr. Willenbecher (in a different type) has sent a brief note to Mr. Johnson — on the same side of the same card. It reads:

**Dear Ray,**
**I'd walk a mile for Nancy Graves.**
**John Willenbecher**
**NYC 27 IV 69**

To the right of this is a round print made, presumably, by a rubber stamp, and containing the letters JW. It is always possible that these are Mr. Willenbecher's initials.

Above the JW, perched more like a bird than a mammal, is, without any intended rhyme, a camel. The camel is also a rubber stamp. Or the rubber stamp is a camel. It depends how you look at it. It is not an Arabian camel (Camelus dromedarius) often called dromedary. It is a Bactrian camel, doubly watertight, equipped with two humps. It is Camelus bactrianus, none other.

All this is on one side of the card. And more. Next to Mr. Johnson's name is a slightly smudged ink drawing of a head with two bunny-like ears. The head is neckless. It is also on one side. It may well be (for all I know) a self-portrait of Mr. Johnson. But I have never met Mr. Johnson, so I can't be certain. I am not certain.

* * *

And then there is the collage. Strictly speaking, the collage is on both sides of the card. It consists of the bottom part of a brief article by me which appeared on this page several weeks ago, a piece about Nancy Graves and some camels she had made and had exhibited at the Whitney Museum in New York.

This partial article is glued to the card partly on one side, partly on the other. One might say that it is bent. But it is on this side of the card that one is informed that the collage is by Alexandra Findlay.

**COLLAGE BY ALEXANDRA FINDLAY**

it says.

We now proceed to the flip-side.

Working from top to bottom, we start with the other side of the collage. To the left of this, Mr. Johnson (or someone) has kindly stamped his address. Below this is Mr. Willenbecher's address. Below Mr. Willenbecher's address is my address, with the words "Please send to" next to my name. To the left of my name are the only words on the card that appear to be actually addressed to me:

**Happy Membership,**

These two simple words (nicely rounded by a comma), conveying a sentiment I can only appreciate, may be the work of Mr. Willenbecher —the type appears to match his, at any rate.

Then at the bottom of this side are the words, partly in type, partly in rubber stamp:

**PLAY IT STRAIGHT, MAY WILSON**
and *her* address.

* * *

So that is the card and its messages, and I'm not at all sure what to do next. I could just sit back and be happy in my membership, I suppose. But how can I be sure that if I sit back, I might not lose my membership for reasons of nonparticipation? Then again, how should I participate?

Should I send the card on to someone else? Has May Wilson in all her straightness seen it yet? Should she? How can I be sure she deserves to see it? *Or would even like to?*

My waking hours are plagued with such questions. Perhaps I should just hold on to this card-cum-collage and hope it increases in value. Perhaps I should have it framed—in one of those Janus frames used by museums to show the work of draftsmen who have inconsiderately drawn something on both sides of their piece of paper.

Since it is a *school* that my membership is to be happy in, perhaps I should be learning something — but then is it possible to be both happy and learning something simultaneously?

Maybe I'm expected to start sending enigmatic postcards to people myself. Or should I telephone Mr. Johnson (or Alexandra, or May, or John) and express my thanks? But since it's a *correspondence* school, perhaps telephones are out. On the other hand every one of these people is actually featured in the New York telephone book, so presumably they have telephones; and if they have telephones it must mean that they are expecting someone to phone them; and it could be me. You never know.

* * *

On the other hand I could just send them each an unusual present — a mold for a plasticine porter for May Wilson, for instance; a delicate replica of one of Bici Hendrick's knitted manhole cover covers for John Willenbecher; a chart indicating the precise duration of February fill-dike for Alexandra Findlay; and a mesembryanthemum seed for Ray Johnson.

In fact I am not untaken with the idea of sending a mesembryanthemum seed to Ray Johnson. I think he might like that.

I begin to feel more certain already. A mesembryanthemum seed for Mr. Johnson. Just the thing. It would give him something to do. It would somehow pass back the responsibility for action. It would enable me to sit back and enjoy my membership, while he struggles with his mesembryanthemum seed. I won't tell him what to do with it. I'll leave that entirely to him. But this mesembryanthemum seed will be a token of my appreciation for everything he has done to make me a happy member of the New York Correspondence School.

And then I will go out in the hope of seeing John Willenbecher walking a mile for Nancy Graves—or maybe even in the hope of seeing a camel. It's several weeks since I last saw a camel in New York.

CHRISTOPHER ANDREAE

The EASTGATE
A Prestige Gold Coast Hotel
ONTARIO STREET EAST OF MICHIGAN AVENUE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60611
SUPERIOR 7-3580

Would you please send the enclosed la gloria come souvenir to harry soviak? He never thanked me for delivering his mannequin with may's jewelry to the feigen gallery.

May 3, 1970

John,

I enclose Peter Frank's list of galleries. Have you ever encountered him? he has red hair and talks loud and zooms into a gallery with a shopping bag, looks at everything in two minutes and zooms out to the next show. I think he sees everything the city has tooffer.
He told me my last show didn't have enough things in it.
I think he thinks in terms of quanity.

Alan Lindenfeld, 315 Central Park Wrst said he wants vera lists address. He suggested we ro to the top of the Empire State Building. It was difficult to row to the top but we got there.

We were chased out of a souvenir shop because we were eating ice cream cones. We saw Richard Bernstin and later ended up at his studio where I was given Candy Darling poster and four naked Beattles and there was a girl with her legs up in the air reading a book. And imoprted Swiss beet juice.

I look forward to a visit to your nex I mean new loft. I'm saving just starting to save for Harry Soviak those brown Roosevelt stamps.

I liked his show and haven't been able to go back a 2nd time to study them more closely to analyze the golden proportions.

We saw an albino, a hunchback and a bearded lady. B.l. was at Women's Liberation Art Show also there were George & Ann Ashley and the Fernblack-Floorshines.

RESIDENTIAL & TRANSIENT

Raymond

Dear Bill

New York City August 31 1971

Thanks for your six rather overwhelming pages of comment on my three and a half pages of Notes. Overwhelming in a good sense, I mean, not in the sense of Dora, which I'm wondering whether you were touched by.

But it's taken this long for me to digest it all, and I'm not sure I have even yet.

The first half of your commentary seems to be about your annoyance with my unwillingness to expose myself through explication. That of course, is simply my nature and you acknowledge it yourself at the end when you exonerate me from being answerable to your demand for explication. I like mysteries not because they present problems to be solved but because they are mysterious. But don't imply that I am purposely playing games, that I am archly putting up mysteries and obscurities to lure and intrigue. God knows, I don't think I'm doing that. If you think there are reasons I know of for all those things in my Notes, you are wrong. Having everything explained and cleared away has, I suppose, a certain satisfaction. But after you've done it the thing explained becomes a bore. I can't tell you how delighted I am that no one, despite even very recent efforts, has offered an indisputable explanation for Giorgione's Tempesta or for Leonardo's marvellous presumably allegorical drawing of the ship with the tree-mast. I for one hope they are NEVER solved. How could I feel this way and ever be an art historian? This I know now, but only sensed in 1961 when I left the Institute. Motherwell in that quote is so right. For me the possibility of ecstacy couldn't come with mere explanation. For me it comes — all too rarely — in my studio as a result of making something, some thing, which dovetails with an undefined feeling or emotion. (Sounds like I am talking about expressionism, but I'm not — at least not in the accepted art history meaning of the word.) If I could make the explanation I wouldn't have to make the thing. The thing exists or allows itself to be made, or exists itself in my head (a great deal of my work never sees the light of day) precisely because I don't want to or can't make that explication.

I guess the whole 'problem' surrounds the difference between these notes as private and public: the difference between them in my notebooks and on a two-page spread in ArtNews or Artforum. In my notebooks they are 'interesting' and 'useful' and 'beautiful'; but in cold print, presented as though they are something they would become 'annoying', 'teasing,' 'obfuscating,' 'obscuretant'. Do you see my point, or do you think I'm just being paranoid?

Maybe I should say a word or two about the Notes and the commonplace books in general. What they are, actually, are garbage cans I can save. Cans for beautiful garbage, stuff that would have been thrown away, but that had to be saved. If I hadn't written it down or pasted it in I would never have remembered a lot of it (since my memory leaves a great deal to be desired). But the point is that it isn't stuff of gigantic meaning, even to me. But it is of some meaning or I wouldn't have put it in. It's just that I found myself accumulating a lot of scraps of either words or images which were too small to really save, somehow, and so rather than accumulate heaps of scrap material in corners of my room I began pasting them down in little books. Scrapbooks, really. 'Here's something to paste in your memory book' an Italian teacher I once had used to say as he handed back the exam papers. Since they were nothing of vast importance I felt very free to free-associate in them, to put down things which occurred to me without testing them first in the caldron in my head from which the preserves of my 'work' emerge (block that metaphor!) I needed an area in which I could be freer than in my constructions

in which almost every detail has to be carefully considered and planned ahead. So it might seem that this freeness — can I call it a kind of poetry? — results in teasings and obscurities. Would you have all poems dispatched properly into rendered prose translations? As if that were possible!

The notebooks — as it turned out — also provided a kind of continuous travelogue over my years of existance as a practicing artist. What astonishes me on looking back over the things I jotted down over ten years is how consistant they seem and how connections and re-connections trace back and forth across time. Let me put in here how it was I came to make these selections and my method. Naturally they are selections. After 10 years, I went back and in effect censored out things I had written, quotes I had quoted, as being non-applicable. I only include what I now feel were the winners. Like an art collector who buys one of each from every show for a given number of seasons and then goes back over the collection and keeps only those by artists who have become famous. So of course some kind of continuity ought to result. But I did not do any re-arranging. Everything in the Notes I sent you is chronologically in exact order. I simply sat down at my typewriter and went through the notebooks, starting with the first and ending with the one in present use. And in each one I went from page one to the end. As I went along, paging through, I copied down things which seemed relevant somehow. The rest I leftout. But I didn't re-arrange anything. The thing which amazes me is how much the order in which I put things makes a kind of sense — and you point this out a couple of times in what you comment. But I did my selection very quickly and with as little pondering as possible. I think I made the selections and typed it all up in the form I sent you within less than an hour. And I changed nothing before I sent it too you.

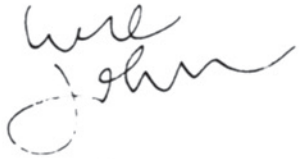
Your thoughts in the second half of your letter about my work in general I found absolutely fascinating and apt. You make connections I never thought of, working in my intuitive blind sort of way.

A couple of specific technicalities: I can't for the lifeof me figure out what you mean by 'pity the poor author' of that business on Stein, but since the author is me I hope you meant it nicely (the way you put it is very ambivilent, at least to me). That Stein lecture was written very much spur of the moment in a trattoria in Florence. . . The Carlyle quote I read second-hand in the TLS (25.6.71) and comes from 'Sartor Resartus', whatever that maybe (page 736 of the TLs if you want to look it up). . .I can't quote Fuller, but in a lecture I heard by him a couple of years ago at the YMHA he went on and on about triangles as the basic structure of all natural forms.

I just re-read the above paragraph and heavens-to-betsy I don't mean to imply you haven't a perfect right to consider what I wrote on Stein as perfect rubbish.

Phew.

When are you coming back to autumnal New York?



P.S. Bill Katz was visiting me the other day and I let him read my Notes and also your letter — I hope you don't mind. He said they ought to be published together an interesting thought. Also, your maman expressed interest in reading the Notes which I'm perfectly willing to let her do, but she's also interested in your reply which I won't give her without your blessing.

# JOHN WILLENBECHER: PYRAMIDS, SPHERES, AND LABYRINTHS

***John Willenbecher's work is a mediation between extremes: the rationality serves as a typology of mysterious and wondrous sensation, while the physical structure and materiality cloak a sense of infinitude.***

***WILLIAM WILSON***

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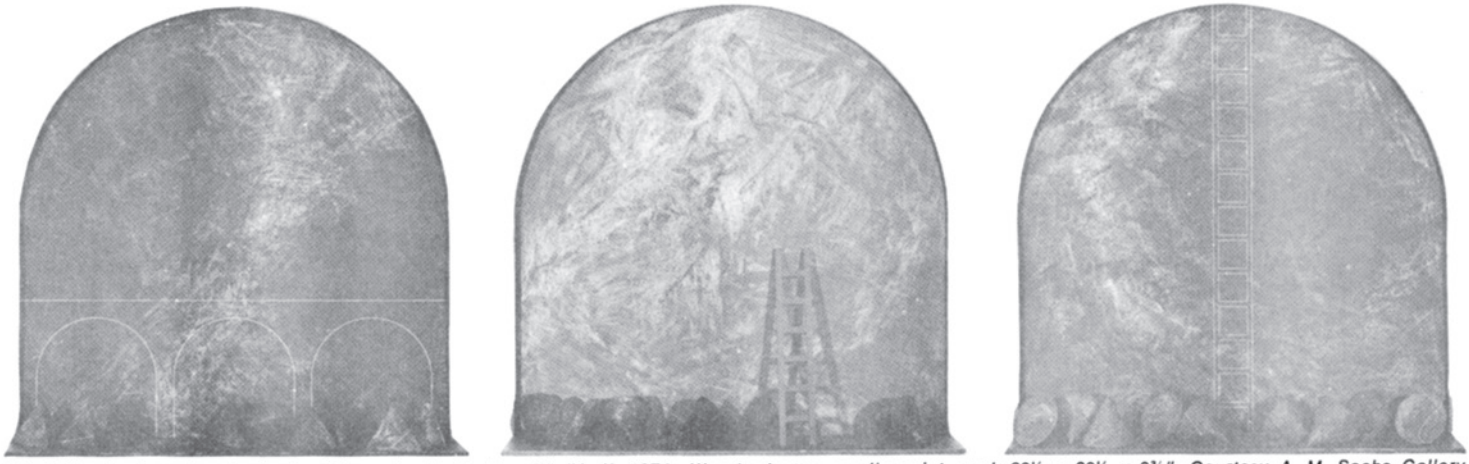


John Willenbecher, Cenotaphs for Etienne-Louis Boulee, III, IV, II, 1974. *Wood, plaster, acrylic paint, each 39¼ x 39¼ x 9¾". Courtesy A. M. Sachs Gallery.*

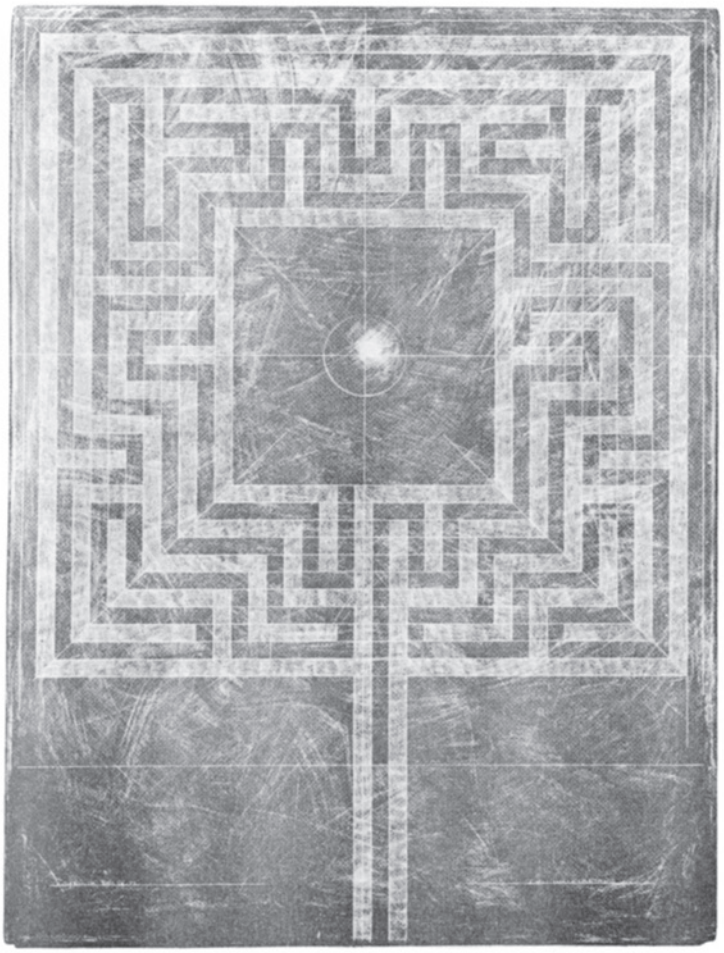
Art is a theory of reality. The artist's task is to prove his reality to himself so that he can believe it and love it; art comes down to what do you think you're doing, who do you think you are, and where in the world are you? The task of criticism is to name the concepts experienced in the mute art, and to suggest the adequacy of visual proofs to the theory. Mel Bochner writes, "At the risk of appearing self-contradictory, I do not believe art is understood through intellectual operations, but rather that we intercept the outline of a certain manner of treating (being in) the world" *(11 Excerpts).*

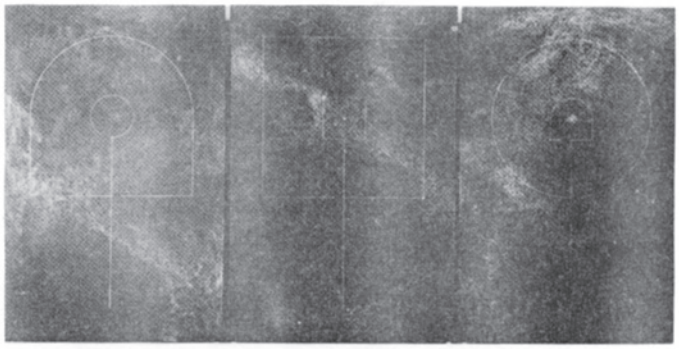
For John Willenbecher, to be is to be a variable center interwoven into a background of systematic, geometric, yet infinite relations. John Willenbecher's work can be indefinite and secretive. This may be uninteresting if the result is a lack of connections among you, him, the work, and something important, but it is interesting when the indefinite is strengthened to the *infinite,* and the secretive is strengthened to the *mysterious.* His work is rational and meticulous, sometimes in the impeccable good order of a tomb. But the rational calculations and incisive visual definitions are in behalf of the incalculable and undefinable. The problem is to prove by sandpapering and delineating images on gesso and paint—to render through physical acts on material things—the experience of "wondrous connection." Emphasis on materiality would emphasize quantities, not relations; quantities are finite, not infinite; and only the infinite is sufficient grounds for a proof of mystery.

At a pole opposite to materiality, the immaterialization of art into bloodless ideality leads to an implosion among the transcendentals; beauty, truth, and goodness collapse into a philosophic black hole, and experience of wonder is lost because phenomenal experience becomes, as Whitehead writes, "one of the interior avocations of the Absolute." Willenbecher's work mediates between extremes of materialism and idealism, between extremes of immanence and transcendence, and the arch that he uses illustrates the mediation since it is a mean between a circle and a square. The method of throught is Aristotelian, looking for the mean that participates in two extremes. His work explores the tensions between the finite and the infinite, and avoids both the nullifications of the finite and the emptiness of the infinite.

In so far as the universe consists of materials, and of relations between materials, it is rational, and we can do as science does: trace references from part to part, and interpret how one part bears upon another part, and how those parts bear upon a probabilistic whole. But there is no end to the sequence of relations of relations, so whether or not the physical universe is finite but unbounded in physico-mathematical descriptions, it is also a finely meshed network of relations, as infinite as the class of all possible objects of thought, as mysterious as the class of all thoughts of impossible objects, and as infinite and mysterious as the relations between X and the thought of X and the thought of the thought of X and the thought of the thought of the thought of X, ad infinitum.

The relations between parts of life can be clear and rational in each bright particular; a photomicrograph can dispel the aura of our ignorance from the larva of the brittle star, *Ophiothrix fragilis*; and the radio telescope can disperse the confusions that surround distant radio sources, as recent radiophotographs clarify 3c236, an object in Leo Minor that is 5.7 megaparsecs (almost 19 mil-





John Willenbecher, The New Constellation (Triptych 3), 1974. *Acrylic on masonite, three panels, 48 x 32" each. Courtesy A. M. Sachs Gallery.*

John Willenbecher, The New Constellation (Triptych 1), 1974. *Acrylic on masonite, three panels, 48 x 32" each. Courtesy A. M. Sachs Gallery.*

John Willenbecher, Labyrinth 25.IX.72, 1972.
*Acrylic on masonite, 64 x 48". Courtesy A. M. Sachs Gallery.*

lion light-years) across. But microscopic and telescopic operations that correct vision do not destroy mystery, for mystery dwells not in ill-defined perception but in an infinity of relations.

Infinity eludes probabilities because probability statements require a limited ground of instances in order to define the ratio of favorable to unfavorable cases. Whitehead argues that "The whole theory of the ratios of cardinal numbers, on which statistical probability depends, breaks down when the cardinal numbers are infinite" *(Process and Reality, p. 233).* The number of relations into which geometric figures enter is infinite. Sartre writes of the geometrician who "is free to create a particular figure which pleases him but can not conceive of one which does not immediately enter into an infinity of relations with the infinity of other possible figures" *(Being and Nothingness,* p. 503). An infinite number of relations, which in a writer like Borges can cause intellectual vertigo, is used in Willenbecher's work to provoke rational thought into an appreciation of mystery.

Living, feeling, and working in this world, Willenbecher transforms materials ("Materials have always to be subservient") because materials are the ground of a feeling of a probable order until they are fitted into relations and connections that are the ground of a feeling of endlessness. So the gesso, paint, plywood, masonite, sandpapering, and delineating are felt in the background, but they are subsidiary to images of undesignated immensity.

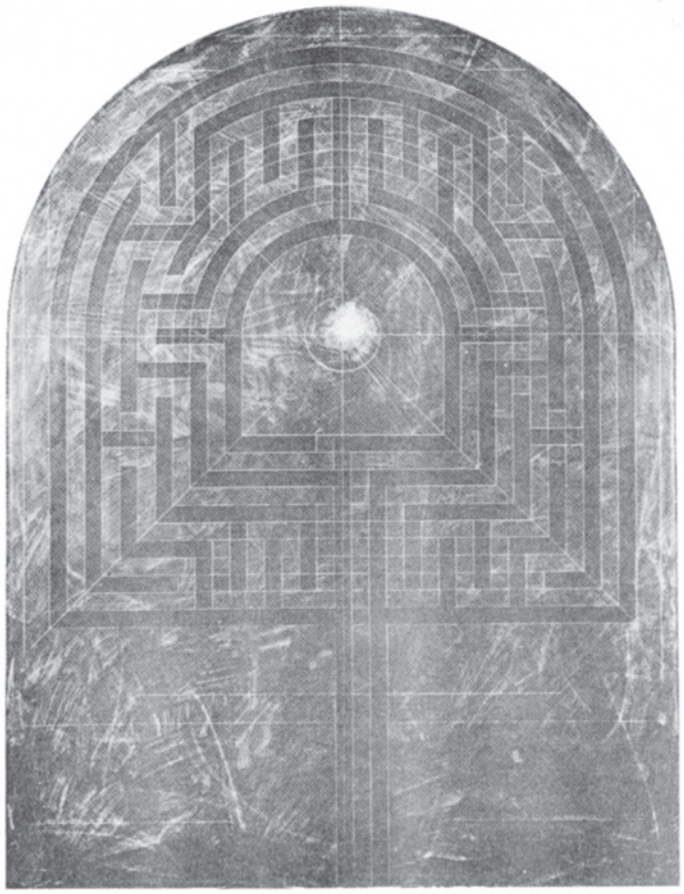
The images of spheres, ladders, and labyrinths have sources and analogues in religious and secular art, but Willenbecher never uses raw references. Historical references are abstracted to timeless relations. The artist is at the center, or is the center, of a field of relations, and this center is amplified into an image of a world, open but not random, stable but not static, synchronic not diachronic.

The artist projects his world onto pyramids, spheres, and labyrinths—geometric symmetries—and the systematic and rational connections of these shapes correct that center toward universal forms. The artist as cause causes effects which affect himself as cause. Again: as the center (a body, a man, an artist) changes, the work changes, until changes in the work work changes on the center (since 1972, closed relations around a closed sphere have yielded to more open relations around a more open center).

Willenbecher's early work with fixed structures and defined relations between parts implied explicit inferences unless they included such improbabilities and incongruities as random numbers and letters, or wheels of fortune. The incongruities kept the number of relations possible and open, but much of that work was so uniform that it suggested the distributions of probability, not an order consistent with suggestions of the infinite. The mental correlative of mystery is neither explicit and fixed inferences, nor randomness, but an integration of the human senses and an immense field. The feeling of getting the work as a whole—either in spite of or because of incongruities and discontinuities—is the feeling of a construction of multiple relations into a clear and mysterious whole. So the spectator, achieving an integration of relations into a whole which has no limits, is made aware that he is walled in by relations, that he is mystified by a lack of limits to relations, but also that he is real in so far as he is related; so that to be is to be a variable center interwoven into a field of infinite relations.

Visual investigation of a sphere is finite but unbounded, like the ins-and-outs of a labyrinth. Thus the art consists of fixed structures which evoke feelings of limitlessness, thereby *proving* a theory of limitless relations in the way that art proves its theories, or its fictions, by evoking experience. If the mind grasps the limitlessness

John Willenbecher, Labyrinth 11.IV.72, 1972.
*Acrylic on masonite, 48 x 36". Courtesy A. M. Sachs Gallery.*



John Willenbecher, Labyrinth 6.X.72, 1972.
*Acrylic on masonite, 64 x 48". Courtesy A. M. Sachs Gallery.*

of relations, and responds with a sense of limitless feeling, then the theory is proved by concrete experience. So thought is rendered as a rational ascent within limits, like a ladder. But the rational is superimposed on the incomprehensible because the boundaries of rationality were passed when thought and feeling reached ratio-less infinities with no upward boundary. Mysterious beauty has about it not only the feeling that it is not quite to be believed, but also the feeling that it is unprovable but true; *or:* mysterious beauty is a feeling that is not quite to be believed, a feeling that is unprovable but true. The beauty of mystery is a truant from probability.

The labyrinth, an image in John Willenbecher's thinking since 1968, shows the mind finding its way through rational but indirect relations. However, immured as it is, the mind can follow relations only toward an experience, not a logical conclusion. The mental act that is the correlative of the labyrinth is attention that does not methodically reason, nor passively contemplate, but which actively concentrates. This concentration or focus on a center is evident in some labyrinths whose center contains a sphere. Moving through such a labyrinth, one rotates around a center, and this movement is interpreted in myth and ritual as movement from the physical appearances toward a spiritual Absolute. The difficulty is that a sense of the Absolute usually deprives ordinary experience of its seriousness, even as attention thrown forward to an absolute center or toward a certain goal deprives a quest of its step-by-step, here-and-now values.

Willenbecher's recent work displaces emphasis from arrival at a center in order to distribute attention more evenly throughout the experience. Turning or rotating around the center of the labyrinth relates to the physical sphere, as spheres are the rotation of a surface around a point, and to intellectual spheres, as the turning and rotating are images of intellectual methods (Levi-Strauss links myths into a sphere and traces cross-connections between myths which "run through the inside of the sphere" *(From Honey to Ashes,* p. 253). Since one is baffled but cannot get lost in these unicursal labyrinths which have no wrong turnings, the image is not of the sequence of discovery and reversal in Platonic dialectic or Aristotelian tragedy, but is an image of paradox and contradiction: "Backwards in order to go forward/Forward only to go backward" (John Willenbecher). Paradox implies an invisible relation, or one whose absence is a presence; paradox suggests truth inconsistent with proof. Contradiction implies impossible relations, and is the intellectual counterpart of visually "impossible objects" or illusions which are problems to conjure amazement, not to be solved.

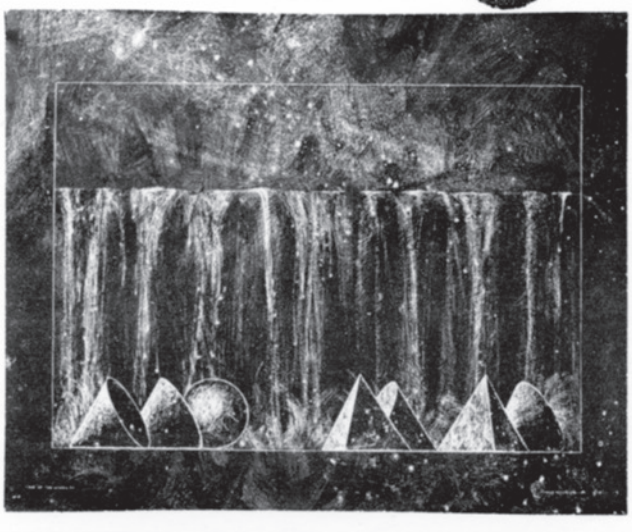
An experience of the work of John Willenbecher is an experience of attending from subsidiary material and physical objects to rational incidents and images (ladders, spheres) that bear upon an infinite field that is reason for wonder. The field of relations transcends rationality as the approach to infinity is a reproach to dogmatic physicality. Reason is not denied, but is bounded by a boundless domain. John Willenbecher's personal world ("I like it that no one lives in the loft above me and no one lives in the loft below me") is mapped onto an outside world, and in an exchange of conversities and convergences, that human center is concentrated and liberated by seeing itself magnified to the threshold of scalelessness. The subjective center, that cannot be rounded *off* like a number of decimals, is rounded *out* by its projection toward an objective world. Thus Willenbecher visualizes life as mysterious, incommunicable feelings in a field of systematic yet mysterious connections. The art is evidence of the artist's speculations and adventures as a nexus of infinite relations.

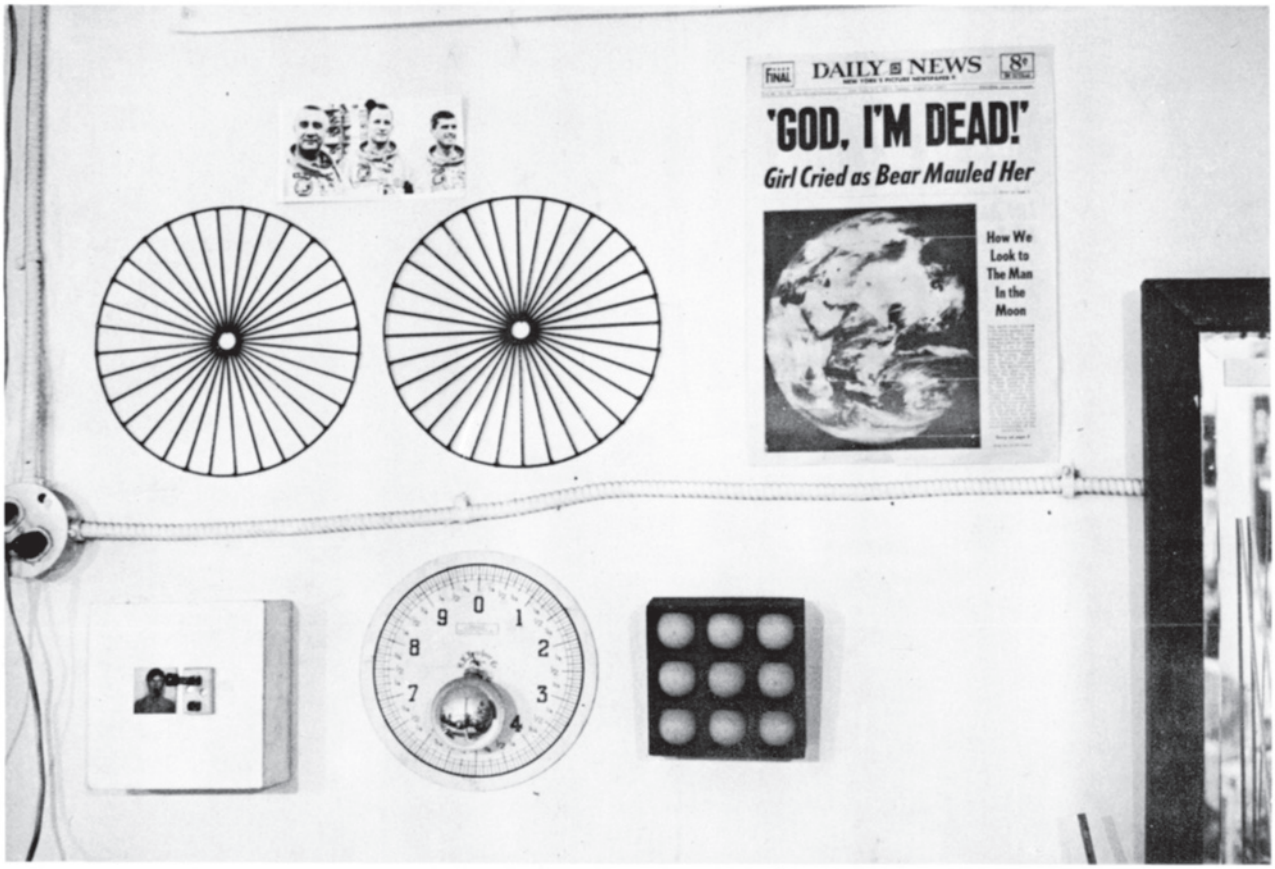
This may be more
than you bargained for —

PARTS OF GROWING UP

I was born in Macungie, Pennsylvania. Rather, on a farmhouse just outside of town. I also grew up there and today I occasionally revisit the house and the land where I first learned to play. My mother and father never discouraged me from inventing outlandish play schemes. My mother gave me a sense of the visual importance of one's surroundings and an appreciation for things old. I belonged to a club. The membership consisted of two persons, myself and a neighbor lady, Mrs. William D. Reimert. We met every thursday evening to discuss current events, listen to recordings of Shakespeare, keep scrapbooks (one had a particularly absorbing section on gooney birds), put on marionette plays and write quantities of very silly nonsense verse. In grade school I enthusiastically partook of the radically advanced teaching methods of a fifth and sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Sherwood Jellison. She believed in <u>making</u> and <u>doing</u>, lots of it, to enhance what you might learn from books. She also let us visit fellow students at their desks so long as we kept it down.

JW John Willenbecher October 1977

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