Facing Others

Ray Johnson's Portrait of a Curator as a Network

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BETWEEN 1963 AND 1964, ARTIST RAY JOHNSON made a portrait of curator Samuel J. Wagstaff which, in Johnson's words, came to bear "no definite image."[1] Johnson's process of making, remaking, and unmaking this portrait engaged new desubjectivizing trends in art, particularly minimalism, which Wagstaff helped bring to prominence with his exhibition *Black, White, and Grey* (1964) at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. In his deconstruction and dispersal of Wagstaff's portrait, Johnson deployed various forms of art-world communication (interpersonal, commercial, and organizational) to unwork a singular, unified image of the curator and claim identity as fluid within networks of association. In doing so, Johnson challenged portraiture's traditional role as a means of consolidating and revealing the subjectivity of both artist and sitter.[2]

Because Johnson became renowned in the early 1960s for creating one of the most important mail art networks, wherein participants connected with one another through the circulation of collaged correspondence, the posted material surrounding the production of Wagstaff's portrait must be considered part of the portrait itself. By closely examining the extensive correspondence between Johnson and Wagstaff housed at the Archives of American Art, this essay considers how Johnson's portrait reassembles social identity. It also

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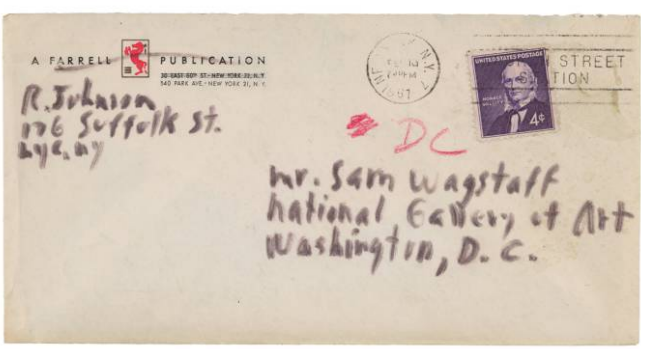
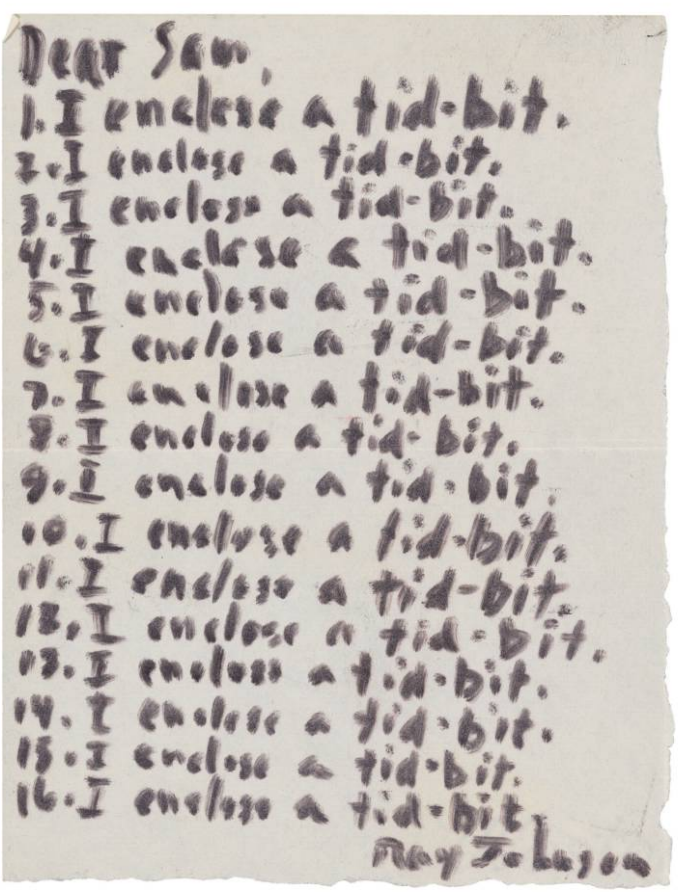
Ray Johnson, mail art to Samuel J. Wagstaff, 1964. Samuel J. Wagstaff Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © The Ray Johnson Estate.

analyzes how Johnson's assemblage troubles portraiture's dependence on mimesis, along with the hierarchical relationship between originary subject and attendant object (matter and form) that it so often implies, reimagining the portrait as a materially grounded, dynamic network of people and things.

Although previous scholars have noted the networked character of Johnson's practice and his exploration of performative identity, none have examined how they relate to portraiture of the period.[3] This essay considers Johnson's portrait of Wagstaff in relation to experimental portraiture in the United States during the 1960s, which, as art historian Kathleen Merrill Campagnolo argues, "[attempted] to eliminate subjectivity and remove traces of the artist's hand, tendencies that seem at odds with the genre."[4] Artists working in this vein constructed new, often nonmimetic approaches to likeness that conceived of subjectivity as mutable, multiple, and incomplete.[5] Johnson participated in this transformation by creating portraits that represent personhood as an embodied and open system that resists discrete categorization and total disclosure, particularly with regard to gender and sexuality. Homophobia—an oppressive force that both Johnson and Wagstaff would have felt intimately as men involved in same-sex relationships during the pre-Stonewall moment of the mid-1960s—suppressed and silenced homosexuality, even as it demanded that sexual difference be located, outed, and named.[6] Given this context, I argue that Johnson sought to recast identity as relational rather than absolute, networked rather than self-contained.





When Johnson began his portrait of Wagstaff in late 1963, the two men had known each other for several years. They were introduced by a mutual friend who thought that Wagstaff would like Johnson's work because of the former's interest in contemporary art and his affinity for postal ephemera.[7] Quickly striking up a correspondence, Johnson began sending Wagstaff "tid-bits" of interconnected ephemera drawn from an array of sources but often referencing events in the New York City art scene (*fig.* 1). Not yet the prominent curator, collector, and much-photographed partner of artist Robert Mapplethorpe, Wagstaff had recently transitioned from a fellowship at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, to a curatorial position at the Wadsworth Atheneum. Johnson, who had been active in New York's downtown art scene for more than a decade, served as a key contact for the early-career curator, introducing him to John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg and lesser-known artists Sacha Kolin, Norman Solomon, and May Wilson.[8] Johnson often inscribed his mailers with "please send to" this or that artist, integrating social networking into his collage process (*fig.* 2).[9] Such interconnected fragments of correspondence would also become part of the Wagstaff portrait's structure.

Initially titled *Dimple*, Johnson's portrait of the curator was originally six feet tall, "all white except for the dimple which is a black shape 6 ½ inches long at the top area of the drawing which being inked runs down the surface to the bottom."[10] Although Johnson did not disclose why he chose to

fig. 1
Ray Johnson, mail art to Samuel J. Wagstaff, 1961. Dimensions variable. Samuel J. Wagstaff Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © The Ray Johnson Estate.

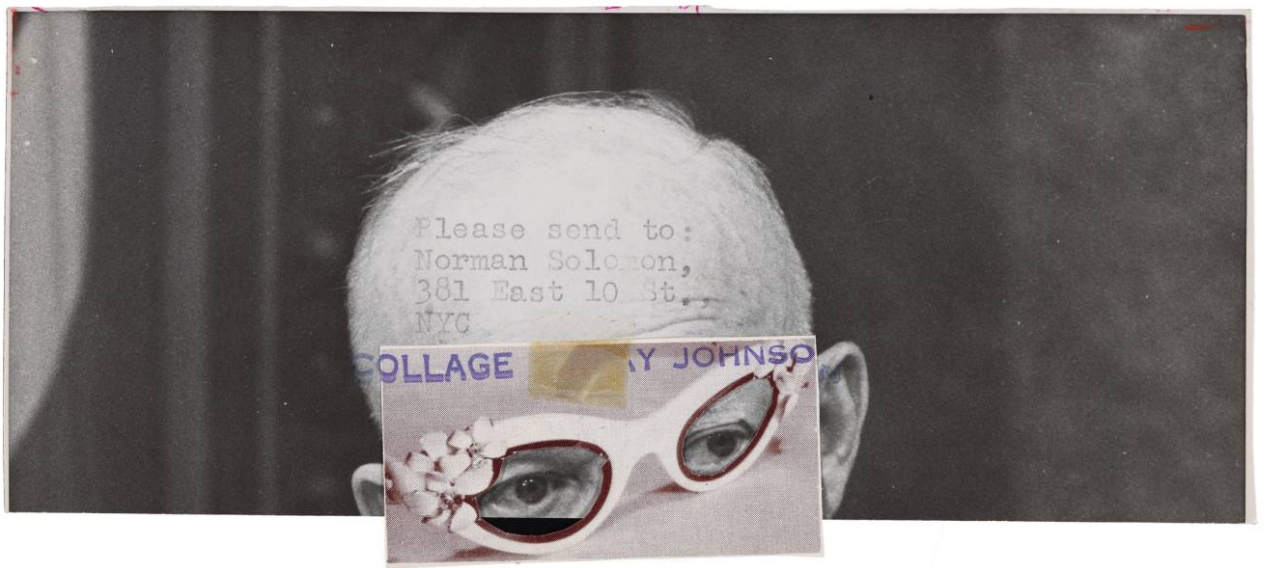
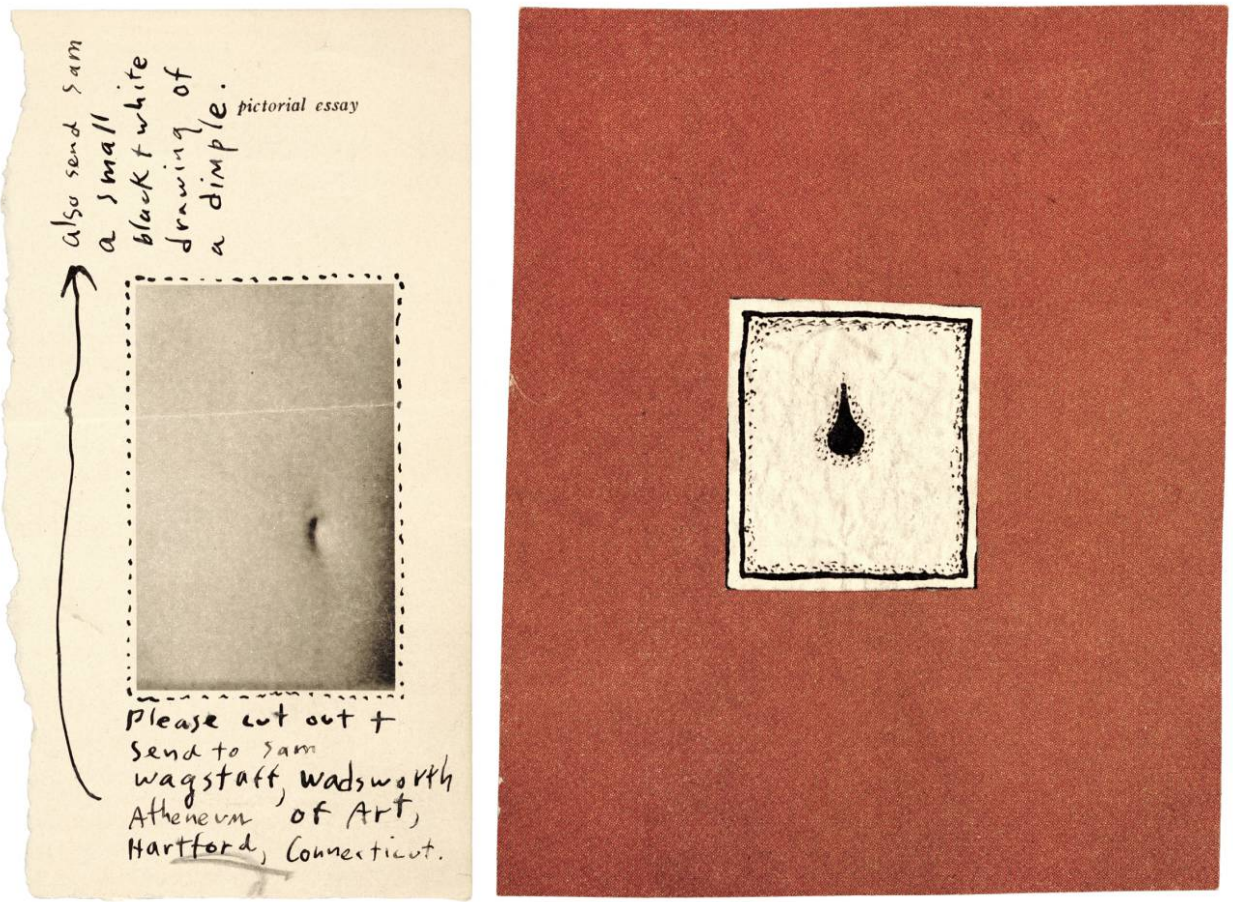


fig. 2
Ray Johnson, mail art to Samuel J. Wagstaff to send to Norman Solomon, 1964. Samuel J. Wagstaff, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © The Ray Johnson Estate.

portray the curator with a large dimple (which, given Johnson's descriptions of the painting, must not have looked like a dimple at all), it was presumably because of the prominent dimple on Wagstaff's right cheek. That said, such a depression can be found in many places on the body, as underscored by a photograph of a belly button that Johnson labeled "dimple" and had Chicago-based artist Karl Wirsum send to Wagstaff as part of the portrait's process of creation (*fig.* 3). We might even say that it was the dimple's very lack of anatomical specificity that appealed to the artist. Unlike the traditional mimetic portrait, which is defined by the artist's ability to capture his or her subject's unique essence and appearance, Johnson's picture of Wagstaff sought to trace the mutability and precarity of the self through de-essentializing representations grounded in embodied experience.[11] In this way, the image resonates with Pablo Picasso's cubist portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (1910; Art Institute of Chicago), which art historian Yve-Alain Bois describes as exposing the open and arbitrary nature of representation with forms that act interchangeably as mouths, noses, or eyes, thereby decentering the subject and extending its metaphorical possibilities.[12] Johnson's decentering and dispersal of the portrait, however, expands beyond the picture plane. As he told pop artist James Rosenquist, his work was an extension of cubism because he "put things in the mailbox and they get spread out all over."[13]

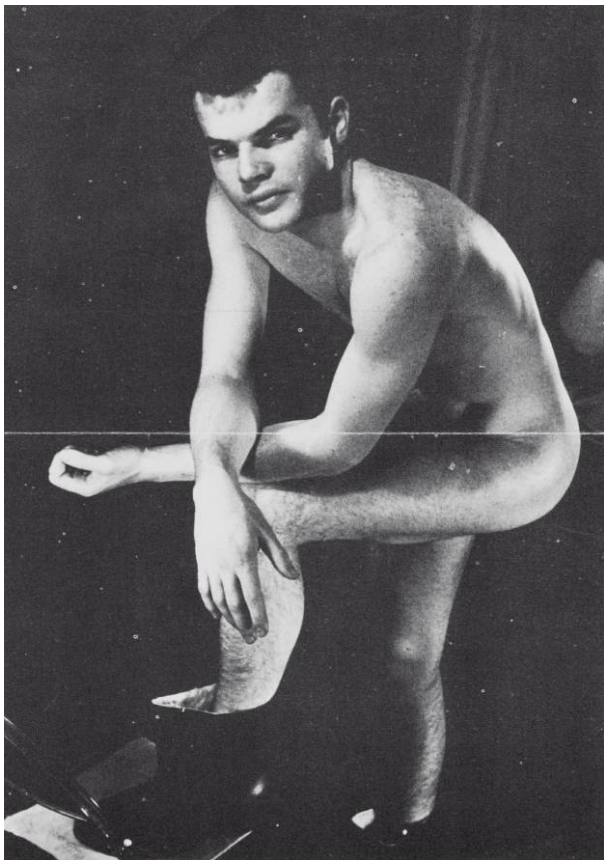
Indeed, Wagstaff's "dimple" multiplied through posted correspondences. After the curator came to Johnson's studio to see the portrait, Johnson wrote to him that he had added a second dimple, which he described as "exactly like the first but of course it would create a different situation than the original."[14] Johnson asked other correspondents to mail dimples to Wagstaff. The artist invited Wirsum to forward the photograph of a navel mentioned above, along with "a small black + white drawing of a dimple" (*fig.* 4).[15] Upon receiving these items from Wirsum, Wagstaff wrote to Johnson, "Surely, two dimples are better than one," to which Johnson responded, "Are three dimples better than two if two dimples are better than one?" The dimples continued, with Johnson sending the curator ephemera related to this distinct physical feature such as photographs of "dimpled" men from homoerotic

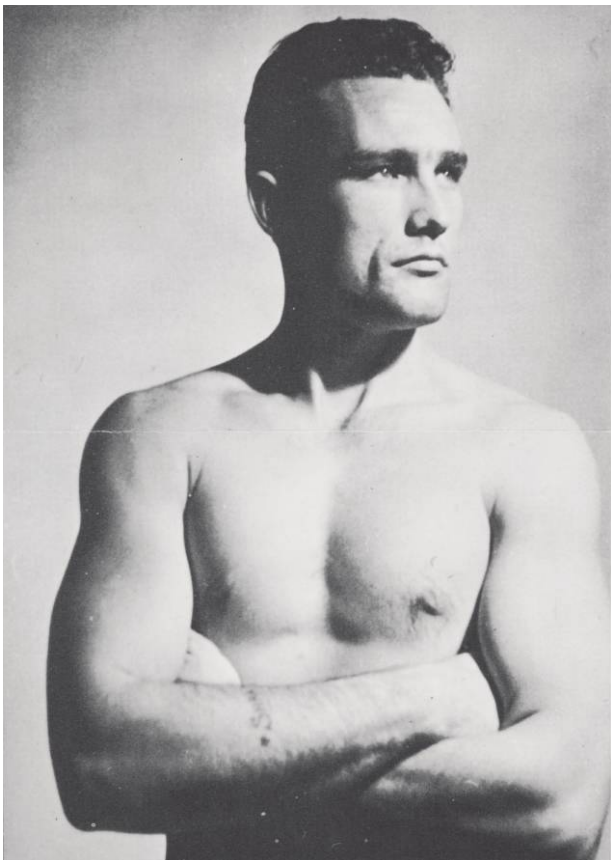


figs. 3, 4
Ray Johnson, mail art to Karl Wirsum to send to Samuel J. Wagstaff, 1963. Dimensions variable. Samuel J. Wagstaff Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © The Ray Johnson Estate.

physique magazines (*figs.* 5, 6).[16] Through this triangulated process, Johnson transformed the intimate back-and-forth of private correspondence into an exchange between multiple parties—what we might call a network—and underscored the primary role of the viewer/reader in the production of the portrait. Resisting an oppositional conception of the relationship between difference and repetition, Johnson anticipated philosophical writings on the networked nature of identity in which repetitions are not indicative of sameness and stabilization. As philosopher Gilles Deleuze put it, "I make, remake, and unmake my concepts along a moving horizon, from an always decentered centre, from an always displaced periphery which repeats and differentiates them."[17]

Communications proliferated over the course of making Wagstaff's portrait, as Johnson broke *Dimple* down into pieces, added to it, and reassembled it. Every time he moved it, turned it upside down, hung it in his toilet or "john," or exhibited it in offbeat downtown venues such as the lobby of the New Bowery Theatre on St. Mark's Place, where his friends Diane di Prima, Frank O'Hara, and James Waring staged plays, he would write to Wagstaff informing him of the portrait's shifting form or position. Fragments of mass media sent to the curator bore signs of the changes. For example, Johnson posted a magazine page featuring a film star who had flipped head-over-heels for a model in a chic pink dress along with the message,





figs. 5, 6
Ray Johnson, printed matter sent to Samuel J. Wagstaff, ca. 1963–64. Samuel J. Wagstaff Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © The Ray Johnson Estate.

"Today I turned 'Dimple' upside down" (*fig.* 7). He also sent postcards with atypically placed stamps, encouraging Wagstaff to imagine the various ways his portrait was being altered and reoriented (*fig.* 8). The front of these postcards notably displayed the names of artists George Brecht and George Herms, whom Johnson asked to post material to Wagstaff and who were part of the stable of his Robin Gallery (an imaginary exhibition venue that only existed in publicity materials).[18] Through the accumulation of interconnected ephemera, Johnson not only deconstructed and decentralized the portrait but also revealed how subjectivity becomes an open mesh of connections in contemporary "network societies," formed by the ever-blurring boundaries between public and private and between interpersonal, organizational, and commercial communications.[19]

By analyzing the correspondence art aspect of the portrait held in the Archives' Wagstaff Papers alongside what remains of *Dimple* (*fig.* 9), now known as *Balshazzar's Feast*, we can see how Johnson "dismantle[d] the face" (to borrow from Deleuze and Félix Guattari). For one, the "de-dimpled" portion of the portrait—now composed of fourteen horizontal wooden bars cut from the work's original frame—was painted white and heavily sandpapered, thus displacing center with edge.[20] Through this process, Johnson deployed what Deleuze and Guattari have called the "faciality machine" or "white wall/black hole system" that produces subjectivity. "Significance is never without a white wall upon which it inscribes its signs and redundancies," the philosophers claimed. "Subjectification is never without a black hole in which it lodges

fig. 7
Ray Johnson, mail art to Samuel J. Wagstaff, 1964. 7 x 4 ¾ in. Samuel J. Wagstaff Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © The Ray Johnson Estate.

consciousness, passion, and redundancies." Deleuze and Guattari believed that, by dismantling the face, artists could destabilize the binaries on which faciality depends (white/black, male/female, straight/gay, center/periphery, etc.) and reach a polyvocal, multidimensional, and networked realm of being or becoming.[21] They thus anticipated how contemporary portraiture dismantles hierarchies attendant to privileged mainstream identity, imagining instead contingent structures for understanding selfhood.[22]

Utilizing this system in which signification (white wall or projection screen) and subjectification (black hole or consciousness) work together to locate, name, and control the body, Johnson took the "order of the face" as his starting point to both acknowledge and loosen its hold.[23] In his portrait of Wagstaff, Johnson worked toward this aim not only via defacement but also through labeling and naming. Affixed to the bottom of the portrait

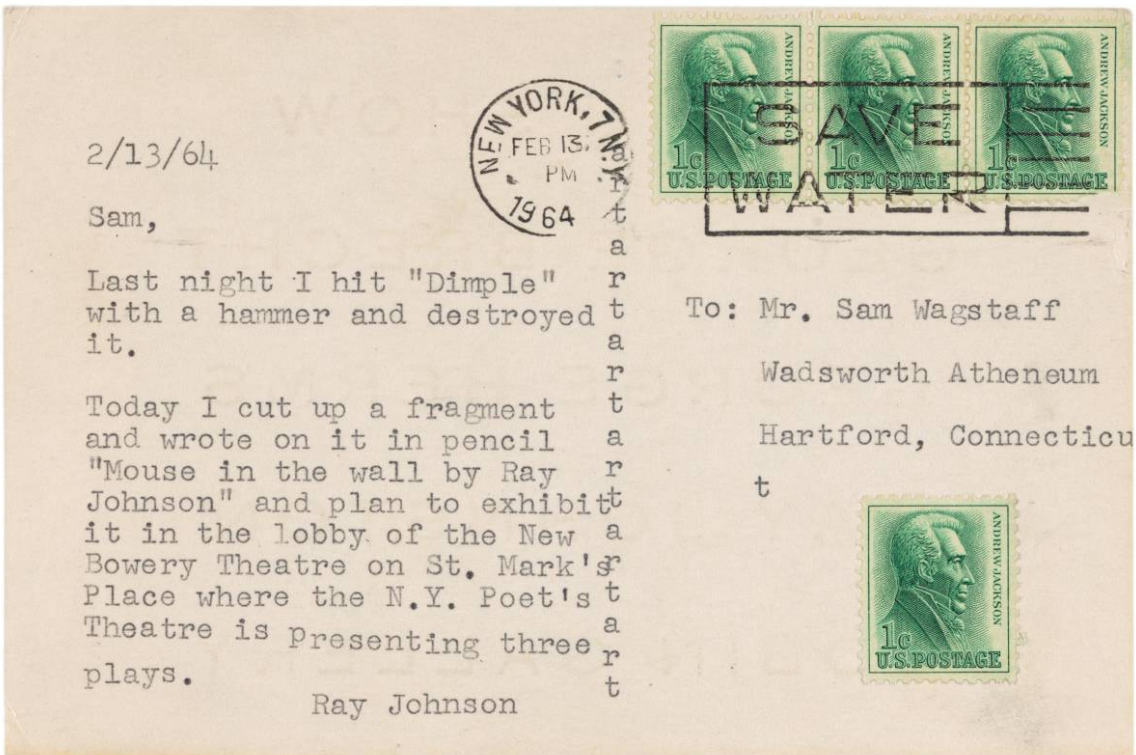


fig. 8
Ray Johnson to Samuel J. Wagstaff, February 13, 1964. Postcard (verso), 4 x 6 in. Samuel J. Wagstaff Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © The Ray Johnson Estate.

is a small gold label for *Belshazzar's Feast* (1820), an oil sketch by English romantic painter John Martin, that Wagstaff had mailed to Johnson from the Wadsworth Atheneum.[24] Serving at once as a marker of the two men's correspondence and as a means of generating new networks of association, the label stressed a key aspect of Johnson's artistic practice: the performative nature of naming.[25]

Although others have noted how Johnson's playful use of names disrupts their standard usages within postal and art-world systems (which employ them as a means of establishing the singular and authentic existence of senders and recipients, artists and collectors), they have not examined how naming relates to portraiture and the order of the face.[26] Johnson disturbs the stable link between proper names and their referents to generate multitudinous connections and associations. In his portrait of Wagstaff, he emphasizes the label's misspelling of *Belshazzar* as *Balshazzar* and uses it to generate numerous misfitting correspondences related to the "ball" aspect of "bal-shazzar." From a photograph of a minimalist sphere found in an art magazine to images of a man's bulge clipped from a physique magazine and of the exposed breasts of women wearing monokinis (all the rage in 1964), Johnson and his collaborators sent Wagstaff numerous spherical forms to stress how identity based on naming is open and relational.[27]

fig. 9
Ray Johnson, *Balshazzar's Feast*, 1964. Wood, paint, and metal, 12 × 14 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2016.102. © The Ray Johnson Estate. Image courtesy of the Ray Johnson Estate.

As Johnson named and renamed, made and unmade Wagstaff's portrait, the curator was hard at work on *Black, White, and Grey*. The exhibition was personally and professionally significant for Wagstaff. "These works," he told a reporter shortly after the show's opening in January 1964, "make me wonder about myself. . . . One finds oneself in the face of these things."[28] Although Johnson's work was not included in this exhibition, his portrait of Wagstaff, I contend, was designed to engage the show's content. Not only was the portrait originally black and white, before becoming all white, but it was also simple in form. Sometimes heralded as the first exhibition of minimalist art, *Black, White, and Grey* aimed to map what Wagstaff called the "sparse" aesthetic that pared form "down to a minimum."[29] With a monochromatic palette, the exhibition sought to highlight the cool and impersonal stance of much contemporary art. However, more than merely capturing a new style, Wagstaff, as art historian James Meyer has shown, "identified an anti-subjective tendency permeating a broad spectrum of advanced work."[30] His exhibition included

artists such as Dan Flavin, Agnes Martin, Robert Morris, Frank Stella, and Anne Truitt, who would come to be associated with minimalism, as well as Johns and Rauschenberg, who, while certainly not minimalists, could be seen as sharing an anti-expressive and de-subjectivizing approach that externalized and decentralized a work's authorship.

By creating art that was contingent on its viewing conditions, and on processes of designation and selection that removed the maker's hand, minimalists undermined traditional measures of authorship and the unity of form and content wherein work emerges from the studio fixed and fully realized.[31] However, as art historian Martha Buskirk has argued, rather than diminishing the connection between maker and work, this "externalization of the evidence of authorship" often underscored this link via artist-authorized "written instructions, certificates, and even contractual arrangements" that stabilized, consolidated, and controlled meaning. Johnson, by contrast, attempted to expand the complex network of authorial relations facilitated by these "contingent objects."[32]

Given the roster of artists represented in *Black, White, and Grey*—many of whom were drawn directly from Johnson's milieu—it is perhaps surprising that he was not included. The reasons for his omission remain unknown: Johnson could have declined to participate, as he was notoriously difficult to pin down for exhibition, or Wagstaff could have declined to invite him because of the curator's professed fear of getting too involved in Johnson's game of circulating private correspondence to "who knows who."[33] What is clear is that Johnson used the genre of portraiture to investigate the new tendencies in art signaled by Wagstaff's exhibition. Far from the naturalistic likenesses of contemporaries such as Alex Katz, Alice Neel, and Larry Rivers, Johnson's networked portrait of Wagstaff had more in common with *Black, White, and Grey*'s nonmimetic works, which aimed to disrupt the subjectivizing categories that regulated gender and sexuality, and at the same time underscore homosexuality's fraught visibility in what would come to be called minimalism. Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (*fig*. 10) and *White Painting* (1951; SFMOMA) and Johns's *Canvas* (*fig*. 11) and *Coat Hanger* (1960; private collection) are particularly salient in this regard. Art historian Caroline A. Jones has argued that the body is "*figured by absence*" in these works, an impulse stemming from a denial or closeting enforced by the intensely homophobic society of McCarthy-era America.[34] The absented body, thematic neutrality, and semiotic instability of this nonmimetic art were not simply means of survival in an antagonistic society, Jones argues; they shifted agency from the maker to the viewer and addressed the externalization of subjectivity more broadly. Without an explicit subject, these works stress the literalism and outward directedness that defined minimalism. However, unlike minimalist artists, Rauschenberg and Johns often retained traces of expressive gestures, private meanings, and anthropomorphic forms in their work that obliquely referenced their same-sex relationships.[35]

The tension between randomness and order in Rauschenberg's paintings and between impersonal seriality and personal gesture in Johns's have provoked debates about the meaning and nature of the marks and images in their works, especially the role that sexuality played in this dynamic. However, all seem to concur that these artists used aleatory and serial/mechanical procedures to distance themselves from the innately expressive subject proposed by abstract expressionism and the bourgeois heteronormativity that movement affirmed.[36] Like Rauschenberg and Johns,

Johnson utilized indeterminacy and seriality in his work, yet he saw his art as distinct from theirs because he did not believe he could fully relinquish order or compositional control to the forces of pure chance. For Johnson, every mark had meaning, even if the correspondences were not definitive.

Furthermore, the correspondence art aspect of Johnson's portrait-making process depended on the willingness of members of the artist's extended network, such as Wagstaff, to make contact with others despite fears that doing so might render them vulnerable. Sometimes Wagstaff would fulfill Johnson's requests but often he did not, as evidenced by the numerous "please send to" collages remaining in the curator's papers. And *Balshazzar's Feast* registers this ambivalence. On the one hand, the solid wood, monochromatic object with a distressed surface resembles a face "figured in absence." It suggests refusal and de-subjectification, even as it seems to parody the minimalist work that fascinated Wagstaff. On the other hand, the work's richly allusive label, supplied by Wagstaff himself, demonstrates his participation in Johnson's game of turning official titles (be they on stolen letterhead, envelopes, or museum labels) into open-ended references in a private web of correspondences.

fig. 10
Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased de Kooning Drawing*, 1953. Traces of drawing media on paper with label and gilded frame, 25 ¼ x 21 ¾ x ½ in. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Purchase through a gift of Phyllis C. Wattis. © 2020 Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA at Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Ben Blackwell.

fig. 11
Jasper Johns, *Canvas*, 1956. Encaustic and collage on wood and canvas, 30 x 25 in. Collection of the artist, extended loan to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © 2020 Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA at Artist Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Ben Blackwell.

Like Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast*, a Biblical subject so dense with coded messages that it required a key for viewers to interpret it, Johnson's composition is laden with references to his correspondence with Wagstaff and others.[37] But Johnson's work was not meant to be precisely decoded. Instead, it leaves viewers wondering how to read the proverbial writing on the wall. Are we the ignorant ruler in Johnson's cagey reference to the Babylonian king in Martin's painting, or is Wagstaff? Or have we all been denied access to the feast? Because Johnson's assembled portrait is not a discrete object but rather a contingent one, it cannot be read as disclosing a singular subject or specific intimate relationships. It nonetheless draws on shared personal experience to participate in a conversation about how homosexuality operated in the homophobic communication networks of the art world through its circulation within that oppressive system.

In *Black, White, and Grey*, feeling and personal attachments were suppressed. By removing what he saw as the "emotionalism of color," Wagstaff sought to capture an austere "new attitude" in art that cut across artistic generations and styles.[38] For this reason, Wagstaff aimed to exhibit examples of Rauschenberg's earlier, monochromatic work rather than his more colorful recent photo collages, asking the artist about the availability of works "that have no color . . . the sparser the better."[39] He even tried to commission Andy Warhol to make an all-white version of the *Brillo Boxes* for the show, but Warhol refused and sent two black-and-white *Disaster* paintings instead.[40] The new art Wagstaff sought to delineate had "no subject, no emotion (showing), no handwriting, brushwork, space, or attempt to please or ingratiate."[41] Robert Morris's large-scale gray sculptures, with their imposing scale and neutral palette, epitomized this approach (*fig*. 12). Reflecting on his motivations, Morris said of his minimalist art from this period, "The great anxiety of this enterprise—the fall into the decorative, the feminine, the beautiful, in short, the minor—could only be assuaged by the big and the heavy."[42] Yet, ironically, Wagstaff's marketing of *Black, White, and Grey* with fashionable parties and multipage spreads in women's magazines such as *Vogue* played an important role in its success.[43] The impulse to produce austere, impersonal, and "masculine" work that suppressed yet depended upon "the decorative, the feminine, the beautiful" likewise fueled Johnson's engagement with minimalism.

Johnson's attempt to assert the significance of the "minor" vis-à-vis minimalism is particularly evident in his review of Morris's 1963 exhibition at Green Gallery.[44] The review centers not on the artist's sculptures but on everything going on around them on the show's opening night, including the various curators, critics, and artists in attendance, the brand of tobacco they were smoking, whose birthday it was, and what everyone was wearing. In fact, as Johnson tells readers, "It was difficult to see the Morris works there were so many celebs in the way."[45] Utilizing a camp aesthetic, Johnson's text magnifies minor details, depthless surfaces, and ephemeral experiences; as in his making of Wagstaff's portrait, he presents the meaning of a work of art as contingent upon and constructed by the social network in which it operates. In this way, Johnson's 1963 review anticipated more recent interpretations of Morris's sculpture as keyed to its circulation within the art world.[46]

Johnson's portrait of Wagstaff, like his Green Gallery exhibition review, was also designed to confront the homophobia of the art world as it was articulated in minimalist rhetoric. During the 1960s, paranoid talk about gay artists circulated among New York's old guard, who feared, as art critic Calvin Tomkins has described, "a network of homosexual artists, dealers, and museum curators in league to promote the work of certain favorites at the expense of 'straight' talents." The work of gay artists was often dismissed as "decorative or even 'campy'" in an attempt to put down this perceived threat.[47] Johnson's production of Wagstaff's portrait confronted homosexuality's fraught visibility in the networked art world of the 1960s and showed how it shaped minimalism by highlighting the queer culture the movement defined itself against.

Johnson stressed, as art historians Jonathan Katz and Änne Söll discuss in an article on queer curating, that "queer presence [in museums] is hardly either marginal or something new." The question "isn't about literal presence" but "discursive presence, about how often, or not often, queerness is named, defined, or referenced."[48] Although the artist acknowledged homosexuality as an organizing force in the art world and mobilized camp aesthetics against

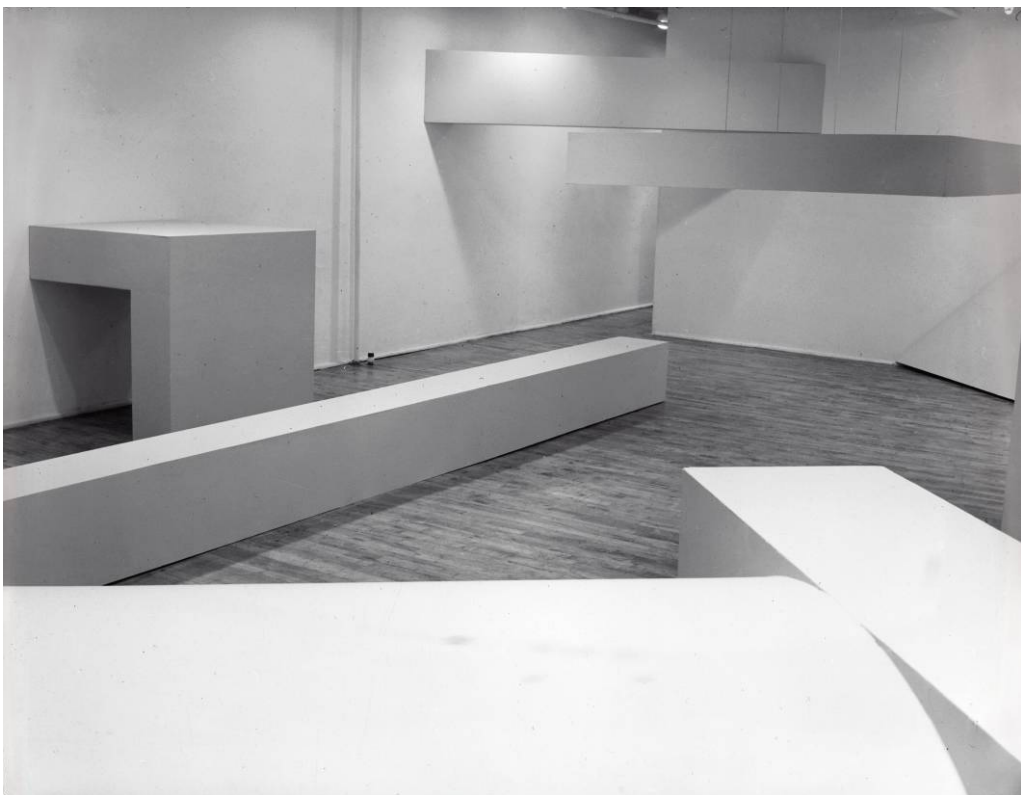


fig. 12
Robert Morris installation at the Green Gallery, New York City, 1964. Gelatin silver print, 4 x 5 in. Photograph by Rudy Burckhardt. Rudy Burckhardt Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. © Yvonne Jacquette Burckhardt.

its marginalization, his queer networked practice avoided precisely locating or literally labeling sexual difference as such. Using interconnected tidbits of ephemera—which blurred the line between fashion and fine art, public and private, commercial and interpersonal modes of communication—Johnson constructed portraits that presented identity not as a preset, binary category to be located and named, but as a continual process of what philosopher Bruno Latour calls "re-association and reassembling."[49]

Latour's actor-network-theory argues against the idea that sociological categories of identity precede the analysis of the actions of those under investigation (as in David Émile Durkheim's sociology) in favor of closely tracing the uncertain associations of actors in ways that may unsettle those very categories (thus following in the footsteps of lesser-known sociologist Gabriel Tarde).[50] As Latour describes, social identity is not "a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only . . . a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling."[51] Drawing on Latour, I suggest that Johnson traced the "peculiar movements" of Wagstaff's curatorial process as a means of investigating networked modes of being. Yet Johnson departed from Latour in his exploration of de-essentialized and dispersed subjectivity. In the artist's formulation, networking is not always motivated by a desire to accumulate power and stabilize social connections.[52] Johnson's correspondence art—which was given, rather than sold—did not aim to forge exclusive and reified relations, but rather

symbiotic and open ones.[53] Johnson's networking opposed attempts to consolidate, commodify, and control identity, offering instead the gift of indeterminate correspondences.

Art historian Ina Blom has insightfully described Johnson's correspondence art as "a gift without a present" that interjected surprising events into regulated routines of daily communication. However, Blom does not explore how the "radical otherness" of Johnson's 1960s correspondence was deeply informed by his queer positionality.[54] Johnson notably chose to include *Balshazzar's Feast* in only two exhibitions during his lifetime: the *International Group Show* at Vladimir Scherbak Gallery in June 1964, and the *100 Man Show* at PVI Gallery in January 1965. Johnson playfully described the latter to Wagstaff as a "Group Show of International Males," thus drawing connections between the two events and with gay erotica publishers such as International Male Studio of Copenhagen, Denmark, which circulated beefcake images similar to those Johnson posted to Wagstaff.[55] In coupling these exhibitions, Johnson not only referenced marginalized gay culture but also drew attention to the implicit male bias of the art world (in which the word "man" is synonymous with "artist"). Interested in how networking (via exhibitions, publicity, endorsement, and so on) is used as a tool for producing cultural capital through association, Johnson disrupted its normative functions and used it to creatively unwork the infrastructure of the art world, along with its sexist and heterosexist procedures.

Johnson's gifts were queer in that they refused to participate in the Western conception of social relations as driven by penetration, power, and self-aggrandizement; instead they valorized lack, loss of control, and self-dismissal. Stressing the value of women's and gay men's nondominant positionality, Johnson's work speaks to what literary theorist Leo Bersani has described as "a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self."[56] His gift events worked against mastery and containment, privileging instead a "failed subjectivity" that might be best understood as a kind of "self-shattering."[57] This failure is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Johnson's correspondence at the Archives.

Files of correspondence labeled "Johnson, Ray" in the papers of critics, curators, artists, and dealers—meant to hold private communications between sender and receiver—are littered with other people's mail. Johnson's correspondence in the Wagstaff Papers, for example, contains messages not originating from Johnson and/or not addressed to Wagstaff, including impersonal mass-market images sent by Johnson to Wagstaff for the curator to forward to someone else and personal letters between two other people that were redirected to Wagstaff by Johnson despite not being intended for him. In fact, the first piece of mail a researcher encounters in Johnson's correspondence in the Wagstaff Papers is not from Johnson at all, but rather from Fluxus artists Robert Watts and George Brecht.[58] And, in the collection's Brecht folder, one finds that the artist turned his loan paperwork for *Black, White, and Grey* into a collage that he directed Wagstaff's staff to send to Johnson.[59] Although archives, as the philosopher Jacques Derrida has explained, promise to confer and establish identity through the gathering of documentation, Johnson's correspondence impedes this function with a multitude of ephemeral bits that, while connected, refuse to cohere.[60] In other words, his postings resist what Derrida calls the archive's power of "consignation" (i.e., its ability to confirm identity) and interject indeterminacy into the system. Scattered throughout the Archives, Johnson's nonconsigned

presence demands that we locate him outside of himself and invites us to do the same with others. In fact, perhaps realizing that his work shared with the philosopher's writings an enduring preoccupation with the archive, a number of opaque and densely layered portraits and self-portraits that Johnson made later in life were inscribed with the phrase "Dear Derrida" (*fig.* 13).[61]

Furthermore, Johnson's practice of giving work multiple dates or postmarks, collaging collaboratively with known and unknown individuals, routinely destroying or recirculating his art, refusing to exhibit work publicly, and producing vast quantities of material, much of which he gave away for free, confound our ability to place the artist within a conventional art-historical classification system. Although Johnson demonstrated a fascination with and resistance to being archived, it is only through close examination of archives that we can see the challenges he presented to this system of worth.[62] Johnson's works mirror the externalization of authorship that Buskirk locates in the contingent objects of minimalist artists like Morris and Donald Judd.[63] But unlike them, Johnson did not try to consolidate authorial control through instructions and contracts; rather, he used the documentation upon which his objects' value depended as fodder for a masochistic game in which he cut up himself and others, thus denying gratification, stabilization, and totality.

fig. 13 (*opposite*)
Ray Johnson, Untitled (Dear Derrida Self-Portrait), 1974–92. Collage on cardboard panel, 9 ½ x 8 ½ in. © The Ray Johnson Estate. Image courtesy of the Ray Johnson Estate.

Johnson's self-effacing practice raises important questions about the ethics and political efficacy of a masochistic form of subjectivity within contemporary network culture. What would it look like for subjectivity to be understood not as an assertion of presence, but as an act of disassembling in which we are, in the words of theorist Judith Butler, "undone by each other"?[64] "Personification does not always humanize," Butler notes, but often conceals agony and grief. How, then, can we acknowledge our shared "precariousness" and attend to "the face of the other"?[65] Returning to *Balshazzar's Feast* with these questions in mind, we might ask ourselves what we see. A face made tangible by its effacement? A frame compressed inward to form a subject? And in an era of compulsory transparency and network penetration, what can be learned from the work's insistent opacity?

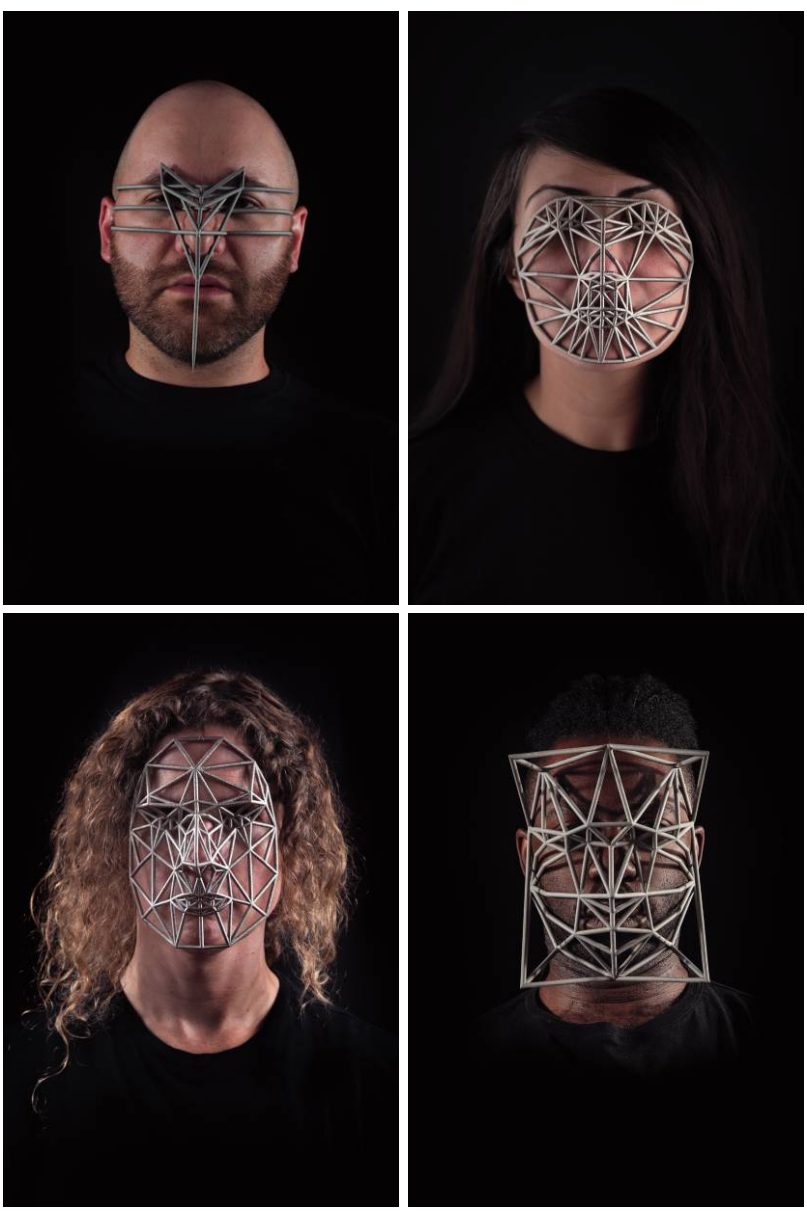
I wish to address this final question by reading Johnson's art in relation to that of contemporary artist Zach Blas, particularly Blas's works that speak to the relationship between portraiture and politics in our present-day network society. In the series Face Cages (*figs.* 14, 15, 16, 17), the faces of four queer artists (including Blas's own) are obscured and constricted by metal masks. These "digital portraits of dehumanization," as the artist calls them, are short videos that show the subjects subtly trembling beneath their masks, registering "the abstract violence of the biometric diagram."[66] Blas aims to address the deeply biased nature of biometrics, which promises the rapid and truthful representation of core identity but "often fail[s] to recognize non-normative, minoritarian persons, which makes such people vulnerable to discrimination, violence, and criminalization."[67] The booming field of facial recognition notably emerged in the mid-1960s, as a small series of experiments with a semiautomated system in which administrators manually plotted facial features and identified specific subjective markers (full lips, large dimple, etc.) to generate a searchable database.[68] Made at the beginning of the biometric

age, Johnson's portrait of Wagstaff—much like Blas's Face Cages—invokes his subject's distinctive features not to render him identifiable but to offer opacity.

Blas locates the value of "informatic opacity" in its ability to protect the minoritarian.[69] Building on the writings of philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant, the artist claims opacity as an anti-imperial tactic that "disrupt[s] the transformation of subjects into categorizable objects of Western knowledge."[70] His assertion of opacity has a new urgency in today's age of big data, self-quantification, and network surveillance, in which traditional modes of political representation (visibility and legibility) often reinforce biometric technologies that seek to firmly locate and identify bodies in space. Deploying this tactic in the series Facial Weaponization Suite (2011–2014), Blas created "collective masks" from the aggregated facial data of numerous volunteers.[71] Worn during performances and protests, these masks disallow detection by facial recognition technologies. *Fag Face Mask* (*fig*. 18), for example, compresses the biometric data of several queer men into an amorphous 3-D printed mask that both confronts the implicit homophobia of scientific studies that claim the ability to determine sexual orientation through outward

appearance and serves as a tool for avoiding capture by artificial intelligence.[72] Opacity and "lossy compression" (i.e., an incomplete and nonrepresentational assemblage) work hand in hand in Blas's portraits to resist codification.[73]

Like Blas's portraits, Johnson's portrait of Wagstaff (and his many portraits that followed it) embraces tactics like unworkability and inscrutability to withdraw from oppressive representational frameworks. As literary and film scholar Nicholas de Villiers has articulated, opacity is a "queer tactic" that suspends the binary logic of the closet by refusing to reveal or conceal identity.[74] Johnson's portrait works against the oppressive mechanism of the closet and the contemporary logic of productive transparency and network power. As a result, it provides a model of existence that is attentive to the face of the other.



figs. 14, 15, 16, 17
Zach Blas, *Face Cage 1*, 2015. Photographic still from endurance performance with Zach Blas.

Zach Blas, *Face Cage 2*, 2014. Photographic still from endurance performance with Elle Merhmand.

Zach Blas, *Face Cage 3*, 2014. Photographic still from endurance performance with Micha Cardenas.

Zach Blas, *Face Cage 4*, 2016. Photographic still from endurance performance with Paul Mpagi Sepuya.

All images courtesy of the artist.

fig. 18
Zach Blas, *Fag Face Mask–October 20, 2012, Los Angeles, CA*, 2012. Digital portrait with 3D plastic mask. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Notes

I dedicate this essay to Robert Warner, correspondence artist and friend of Ray Johnson. I am grateful to mentors and colleagues Terri Weissman, Hannah Higgins, Jennifer Greenhill, Kevin Hamilton, Jennifer Sichel, Lauren Applebaum, and Penelope Cray for their insights on this essay at various stages, as well as Frances Beatty and Maria Ilario at the Ray Johnson Estate for supporting my research and providing access to their archives. I thank Tanya Sheehan, Emily D. Shapiro, and the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript for their perceptive feedback and edits.

1 Johnson to Wagstaff, February 29, 1964, Samuel J. Wagstaff Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Wagstaff Papers).

2 See Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 14; and Ernst Van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal: Concepts of Representation and Subjectivity in Contemporary Portraiture," in *Portraiture: Facing the Subject*, ed. Joanna Woodall (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1997), 239–58.

3 See Craig J. Saper, *Networked Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 29–48; Stephen Moonie, "A Poet of 'Non-*ressentiment*'? Lawrence Alloway, Ray Johnson, and the Art World as a Network," *Getty Research Journal* 8 (2016): 161–76; and Kate Dempsey Martineau, *Ray Johnson: Selective Inheritance* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

4 Campagnolo, "In the Company of Cultural Provocateurs: Radical Portraiture in the 1960s," in Anne Collins Goodyear, et al., *This Is a Portrait If I Say So: Identity in American Art, 1912 to Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 61.

5 See Van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal," 239–54; Campagnolo, "Radical Portraiture," 61–89; and Cynthia Freeland, *Portraits and Persons: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 243–61.

6 On the function of homophobia in this period, see Nicholas de Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 2–3. On Wagstaff's same-sex relationships of the 1960s, particularly with Dan Basen and Dickie De Menocal, see Philip Gefter, *Wagstaff: Before and After Mapplethorpe* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 117–18.

7 Gefter, *Wagstaff*, 16, 50–1.

8 On Johnson's role connecting Wagstaff to Rauschenberg and Cage, see Gefter, *Wagstaff*, 54. For evidence of how Johnson connected Wagstaff to Kolin, Solomon, and Wilson, see Johnson's correspondence in the Wagstaff Papers.

9 For Johnson's "please send to" collages, see Wagstaff Papers.

10 Johnson to Wagstaff, December 8 and 17, 1963, Wagstaff Papers.

11 Van Alphen, "The Portrait's Dispersal," 239–40.

12 Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 90.

13 Johnson quoted in Rosenquist, "R.S.V.P.," in "Returned to Sender: Remembering Ray Johnson," *Artforum* 33, no. 8 (April 1995): 113.

14 Johnson to Wagstaff, December 28, 1963, Wagstaff Papers.

15 Mail art sent from Wirsum to Wagstaff at Johnson's request, December 28, 1963, Wagstaff Papers.

16 Wagstaff to Johnson, with typed response from Johnson to Wagstaff, n.d., Wagstaff Papers.

17 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2004), xix.

18 Johnson to Wagstaff, January 25, February 13, and February 29, 1964; William Anastasi to Wagstaff, June 6, 1964; and Johnson to Wagstaff, December 22, 1964, Wagstaff Papers. On the Robin Gallery, see Miriam Kienle, "Ray Johnson's Robin Gallery: Queer Publicity Network as Counterpublic," *Oxford Art Journal* 42, no. 2 (2019): 197–215.

19 Jan A. G. M. van Djik, *The Network Society: Social Aspects of New Media*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 1–40, 156–209.

20 Johnson to Wagstaff, February 29, 1964, Wagstaff Papers.

21 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 187-88.

22 Anne Collins Goodyear, "On the Birth of the Subject and the Defacement of Portraiture," in *This Is a Portrait if I Say So*, 91–120.

23 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 167, 178.

24 Johnson to Wagstaff, February 29, 1964, and December 22, 1964, Wagstaff Papers. The exhibition-scale version of Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast* is in a private collection; the Wadsworth Atheneum and Yale Center for British Art each own reduced-size versions of Martin's subject.

25 On naming in Johnson's work, see Ina Blom, *The Name of the Game: Ray Johnson's Postal Performance* (Oslo: National Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 19–22; and Ellen Levy, *What's in a Name? Ray Johnson's Free Associations* (New York: Richard L. Feigen, 2011), 5–12.

26 Blom, *The Name of the Game*, 20–21; Levy, *What's in a Name?*, 5.

27 See binder of mail art exchanged between George Ashley and Johnson at the Ray Johnson Estate, New York, NY.

28 Florence Berkman, "Pop Art on Exhibition Free, Far Out," *Hartford Times*, January 11, 1964, 26.

29 Wagstaff, "Paintings to Think About," *Artnews* 62, no. 9 (January 1964): 38.

30 Meyer, *Minimalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 77.

31 On the externalization of authorship in minimalism, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking Press, 1977); and Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 35–70.

32 Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 3–6.

33 Gefter suggests the former possibility in *Wagstaff*, 63. The quotation appears in May Wilson to Samuel J. Wagstaff, February 12, 1963, Wagstaff Papers.

34 Jones, "Finishing School: John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 653.

35 Kenneth E. Silver, "Modes of Disclosure: The Construction of Gay Identity and the Rise of Pop Art," in *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–62*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), 179–203; Jonathan D. Katz, "The Art of Code: Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg," in *Significant Others: Creativity & Intimate Partnerships*, ed. Whitney Chadwick and Isabelle de Courtivron (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 189–207; and Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 136–62.

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37 See Nicolas Flynn, "Seers and Not Seers: John Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast* and the Sublimation of the Self," *Word & Image* 16, no. 2 (April 2000): 163–76.

38 For "emotionalism of color," see Wagstaff, "Paintings to Think About," 62, quoted in Meyer, *Minimalism*, 77; for "new attitude," see Donald Judd, "Black, White and Gray," in *Donald Judd: Complete Writings, 1959–1975* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 117, quoted in Meyer, *Minimalism*, 77.

39 Wagstaff to Rauschenberg, December 11, 1963, RG2_3_B34_F2, Charles C. Cunningham Director's Papers, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, quoted in Meyer, *Minimalism*, 77.

40 Meyer, *Minimalism*, 78.

41 Wagstaff, "Second Thoughts on 'Black, White, and Grey'," n.d., 3, Charles C. Cunningham Director's Papers, Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, quoted in Meyer, *Minimalism*, 77.

42 Morris, "Size Matters," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 478.

43 Meyer, *Minimalism*, 78–80.

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48 Katz and Söll, "Editorial: Queer Exhibitions / Queer Curating," *On Curating* 37 (May 2018): 2.

49 Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

50 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 13–16.

51 Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 7.

52 Joost van Loon similarly critiques Latour's emphasis on networking as a means of consolidating power rather than generating symbiotic relations in "Network," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, nos. 2–3 (2006): 308–14.

53 Van Loon, "Network," 310–13.

54 Blom, *The Name of the Game*, 17–18.

55 The Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition history for this work lists the PVI Gallery show as *Group Show of International Males* (reiterating Johnson's playful punning in the Wagstaff Papers), rather than using its official title *100 Man Show*, a mislabeling Johnson would have loved. Accessed July 10, 2018, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/701462.

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57 Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave*, 24–30, 170–75.

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59 Wagstaff Papers.

60 See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3.

61 See Michael Naas, "Derrida's Preoccupation With the Archive in *The Beast and the Sovereign*," *SubStance* 43, no. 2 (2014): 20–36.

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63 Buskirk, *Contingent Object*, 1–7.

64 Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 23.

65 Butler, *Precarious Life*, 131, 141–42.

66 Blas, "Face Cages" (2013–2016), accessed September 18, 2018, http://www.zachblas.info/works/face-cages/.

67 Blas, "Face Cages."

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69 Blas, "Informatic Opacity," in *Posthuman Glossary*, ed. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 198–99.

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73 On "lossy compression" and Blas's work, see Alexander R. Galloway and Jason R. LaRivière, "Compression in Philosophy," *Boundary 2* 44, no. 1 (2017): 125–47.

74 De Villiers, *Opacity and the Closet*, 6.