

OFF PARADISE

NOTHING OF THE MONTH CLUB

January 27 – April 27, 2021

Opening Wednesday, January 27, 4-8pm



Off Paradise is pleased to present NOTHING OF THE MONTH CLUB, a group exhibition under the sign of Ray Johnson, curated by Randy Kennedy and Natacha Polaert, featuring works by Matt Connors, Scott Covert, Olivia DiVecchia, John Fahey, Robert Hawkins, Richard Hell, Ray Johnson, Karen Kilimnik, Erik LaPrade (David Hammons), Nicholas Maravell, Marlon Mullen, Peter Nadin, Richard Prince and William S. Wilson.

Elephants and Castles

"It was announced that I was an artist, a poet, and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller purchased one of my early paintings. I was suddenly somebody that I hadn't been before. So I decided to play the role of 'Artist in the Art World,' which I never wanted to do, and I've been playing it ever since." — Ray Johnson, Interview magazine, 1972

Ray Johnson elided so many different registers of artmaking — formal, conceptual, performative, linguistic — it's easy to forget that his work was fundamentally narrative. It was narrative because the work was the life and the life the work. Among postwar American artists, barely a handful, Warhol included, managed a separation between living and art-making so vanishingly thin. Ray stories, those told by him and about him, represent part of the fabric of his career and are almost as plentiful as the pieces of mail art that continue to radiate like secret pentacles deep within the closets and desk drawers of his recipients throughout New York City and beyond.

My own favorite Ray story, related by his close friend William S. Wilson, takes place in the late 1960s and concerns Ray and Bill driving to an art party on the Bowery, pulling up to discover that the function, unlike most below 14th Street in those years, had a formal guest list, administered by an efficient-looking woman with a clipboard.

"My heart sank," Bill told me. "I knew there was no way we were on the list. Ray walked right up to the woman and when she asked his name, without missing a beat, said, 'Norman Mailer.' She scanned the list, smiled

and waved us in. What this meant was several things: that Ray was sufficiently steeped in the particulars of art society to predict that Mailer would be on the list; that the woman was young enough to have no idea what Norman Mailer looked like because he already didn't mean much for her generation; and that in choosing Mailer's name Ray would be able to enact in real time an absolutely brilliant pun on his own activity as a founder of the school of mail art."

I love the story because it apprehends in the form of a fable Johnson's essential relation to the art world: working by choice and temperament outside the walls of power while possessing the skeleton key to the back gate, allowing him to slip inside at will and wander surreptitiously around. "Insider-outsider" has, in recent years, become a well-worn and dubiously applied descriptor in the art world. But Johnson can be credibly said to have invented the authentic archetype, and since his death in 1995, its example has grown steadily in importance with each year and each passing art-fair cycle that enlarges the inside, bringing the very meaning of an outside into question.

NOTHING OF THE MONTH CLUB gathers a group of artists who work in Johnson's spirit in wildly different ways, following widely divergent paths in their negotiation of the mainstream art world's machinery — its expectations, needs, tastes and value systems. Among the artists are a multitude of refusals, denials, dropouts, disappearances, evasions, feints, infiltrations and subversions, propelled by what Richard Prince (a special case in this lineup) calls "the unnamable motors and dangerous impulses that occupy our thoughts."

In place of a thesis statement, Lucy Lippard's 1999 observation about Johnson could serve as a shibboleth: "... Johnson regarded the center as both attractive and repellent. The enormous energy of his art may well have derived from that tension."

The exhibition is not so much a commentary on the conformities of the center as it is a tribute to the kinds of artists who create and preserve obsessively articulated worlds of their own practically in its teeth. Great art has been made, after all, in the orbit of great political and economic power since long before Thutmose sculpted for Akhenaten or wall painters spun their volute wonder through the palace at Knossos. But, to borrow a metaphor from the painter Peter Nadin — who all but stopped showing in the commercial gallery world for more than two decades — the artists arrayed outside the palace in the huts, working primarily for themselves and their fellow hut-dwellers, have always been far more plentiful and multifarious, which is to say closer to the grain of daily human existence in whatever era they lived.

The critic Manny Farber framed this distinction poetically as a divide between white-elephant art ("an expensive hunk of well-regulated area, both logical and magical") and what he called termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art, inching its way "forward eating its own boundaries," leaving "nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity." In the latter company Farber counted such odd bedfellows as Laurel and Hardy, John Wayne and Paul Klee and down among the white elephants he cast Truffaut, Tony Richardson, Motherwell and even Cezanne.

A few distinct qualities mark the Johnsonian turn of mind. One is (to borrow another Farber adjective) a "squandering-beaverish" intensity toward forming communities —the better for self-protection, perhaps?—an impulse through which, as the painter Matt Connors once described it, "networks of elective affinities are constantly materializing, offscreen, on the ground, in unlikely, but actual places," creating "collaboration, expansion, connection, creation, and love that are not directly tied to big money or the market" but suggest the ethos of the record-store counter and "that enthusiastic guy playing you his favorite new song." (As Richard Prince reminds us: "Certain records sound better when someone on the radio station plays them than when we're home alone and play the same records ourselves.")

Another commonality, delivered with deadpan verve and Duchampian linguistic flair, is humor, too scarce a commodity in contemporary art; to be funny in art requires uncommon confidence. Robert Hawkins' three watercolors depicting the last dodo on earth — each dodo bearing the dignity of the thoroughly doomed — echo Johnson's trademark serial bunnies, which hold themselves out individually as the real McCoy, lampooning the illusion of certitude, like contestants on a surreal version of the game show "To Tell the Truth." ("Will the real last

dodo please stand up?") Glenn O'Brien, a benevolent shadow presence in this show, called Hawkins an "initiate in the brotherhood of sacred folly and transcendental schtick ... William Blake as Johnny Rotten," an endorsement that could apply just as easily to many of the other artists.

A final bond to be mentioned, especially now, is an almost Buddhist ease in the company of death — a clear-eyed view of mortality not so much death-haunted as death-hospitable, holding the end to be indissoluble from the span. Scott Covert, whose paintings and drawings derive from direct rubbings of gravestones, based on a vast personal necrogeography of the United States and other parts of the world, serves as a something of an ambassador for this disposition, having survived addiction and the AIDS epidemic. "I'm not afraid of death," he likes to say. "It makes life so much more interesting."

Johnson ended his own life at the age of 67 by leaping from a low bridge in Sag Harbor, N.Y., one January evening and backstroking out to sea, having left a scattering of equivocal clues as to this manner of death in his art and correspondence for years, a posthumous hide-and-seek collage, his final work.

"Ray was on his way to drowning when I met him in 1956," wrote Bill Wilson. "It just took 39 years for him to do it."

Twenty-six years after his death, his presence on the periphery remains powerful, exerting what physics calls "spooky action" on the interior, indicating on maps dominated by highways the plenitude of wandering sideroads still available, if one just looks hard enough for the signs.

"Are you an artist?" the critic David Bourdon asked him in 1963.

Johnson demurred.

"I'm a listening, measuring, looking, killing, opening, giving, squooshing, eating flag maker."

— Randy Kennedy, January 2021



Off Paradise is a new project space on Walker Street founded by Natacha Polaert in the fall of 2019. The name evokes the old neighborhood of Five Points, at the center of which was a small, triangular park, full of hope and grime, called Paradise Square. It also invokes Paradise Alley, the artists' and poets' colony on the then-godforsaken corner of Avenue A and East 11th Street that is referenced in Jack Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans*. Off Paradise is a fictional place, right off Paradise, adjacent to it, but not exactly it.

Randy Kennedy is a writer, editor and curator. His first novel, *Presidio*, was published by Simon & Schuster in 2018. For 25 years he was a staff writer at *The New York Times*, more than half of that time covering the art world. He is currently director of special projects at Hauser & Wirth and the editor of *Ursula*, the gallery's magazine.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Gina Nanni; to Frances Beatty, Alexander Adler and Maria Ilario at the Ray Johnson Estate; and to Alison Gingeras, Matthew Higgs and Bob Nickas for introducing us to the work of some of the vital artists in this exhibition.

Images from left to right:

Ray Johnson, *NOTHING OF THE MONTH CLUB*, n.d.; Ray Johnson, *Jackson Pollock Artforum*, 1972-86-87-88, 9.14.86; Marlon Mullen, *Untitled*, 2015; Richard Prince, *Untitled*, 2020.

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Clockwise



Ray Johnson

Jackson Pollock Artforum, 1972-86-87-88, 9.14.86

Collage on cardboard panel

20 x 15 in. (50.8 x 38.1 cm)

© The Ray Johnson Estate



William S. Wilson

Untitled Clip, 1965

Super 8 transferred to digital video

38 seconds

© The William S. Wilson Estate.

Courtesy The Art Institute of Chicago



Nicholas Maravell

Ray Framing Himself, excerpt from Ray at Hofstra, January 3, 1987

Video (black and white, sound)

58 seconds

Courtesy of the Artist



Nicholas Maravell

Ray Bunny Walk, excerpt from Ray at The Heckscher Museum, April 1987

Video (black and white, sound)

1 minute 39 seconds

Courtesy of the Artist



Marlon Mullen

Untitled, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
24 x 18 in. (60.96 x 45.72 cm)

Courtesy of the artist, JTT, New York
and Adams and Ollman, Portland



Karen Kilimnik

My Judith Leiber bag, the royal house of Scotland, 2012
Glitter and archival glue on canvas
20 x 24 inches (50 7/8 x 61 cm)
Signed, titled, dated verso

Courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery, New York



Robert Hawkins

The Last Dodo, 2020
Watercolor on paper
22.83 x 16.53 in. (58 x 42 cm)

Courtesy of the artist



Robert Hawkins

The Last Dodo, 2020
Watercolor on paper
22.83 x 16.53 in. (58 x 42 cm)

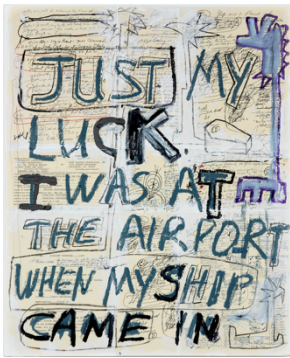
Courtesy of the artist



Robert Hawkins

The Last Dodo, 2020
Watercolor on paper
22.83 x 16.53 in. (58 x 42 cm)

Courtesy of the artist



Richard Prince

Untitled, 2020

Collage, acrylic, ink jet on paper on stretched canvas
27 x 22 in. (68.58 x 55.88 cm)

Courtesy of the artist



Peter Nadin

First Mark; Thumb Imprint, 2002-2005

Thumb and forefinger imprint in clay, cast in bronze
2 3/8 x 2 1/2 x 2 in. (6.03 x 6.35 x 5.08 cm)
Private collection

Courtesy of the Artist



Peter Nadin

Stu Sugar Standing in the Water, 2020

Oil on panel
34 3/4 x 32 in. (88.26 x 81.28 cm)

Courtesy of the Artist



John Fahey

Untitled, c. 1998-2000

Tempera and acrylic paint on paper
9 5/8 x 7 3/8 in. (24.44 x 18.73 cm)

Courtesy of Eastern Conference Editions



Richard Hell

Untitled ("for a long time I used to go to bed"), 2021

Ink jet on linen typing paper

11 x 8 ½ in. (27.9 x 21.5 cm)

Edition of 3

Courtesy of the artist



Ray Johnson

Taoist Pop Art School, 1994

Two-sided drawing, marker and Xerox on paper

11 x 8 ½ in. (27.9 x 21.5 cm)

Collection of Gina Nanni and the Estate of Glenn O'Brien



Scott Covert

I Had A Wonderful Life, 1997-2020

Acrylic and wax oil crayon on muslin

50 x 56 in. (127 x 142.24 cm)

Courtesy of the artist



Scott Covert

Family Affair, 2015-2017

Acrylic and wax oil crayon on muslin

38 x 37 in. (96.52 x 93.98 cm)

Courtesy of the artist

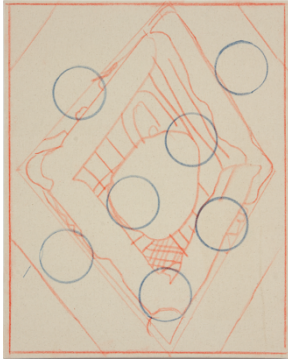


Erik LaPrade (David Hammons)

THIS IS NOT DAVID HAMMONS' PHONE #, c. 2013

3 x 5 lined piece of paper torn from a notebook, with ink handwriting
5 x 3 in. (12.7 x 7.62 cm)

Courtesy of Erik LaPrade



Matt Connors

Clarice Three, 2020

Pencil on canvas

22 ½ x 18 inches (57.15 x 45.72 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Canada, New York



Ray Johnson

HA HA HA, c. 1970

Mail art, Xerox

11 x 8 ½ in. (27.9 x 21.5 cm)

Collection of Gina Nanni and the Estate of Glenn O'Brien



Olivia DiVecchia

is not Aristotle's metaphysics, 2019-2020

Two unbound copies of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, gouache, repair tape, music recording

8 in. x 150 feet (20.32 cm x 45.72 meters)

Courtesy of the artist

Ray Johnson, *Jackson Pollock Artforum*, 1972-86-87-88, 9.14.86

A complex work that was still in the artist's collection at his death in 1995, *Jackson Pollock Artforum* is structured around a highly personal lexicon of friends, peers and artworld fascinations, including Johnson's mentor Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, Agnes Martin, Eduardo Paolozzi, V.V. Rankine and Paul Feeley. The composition is ringed by a stele-like motif roughly in the shape of Michigan, Johnson's home state. A keen eye might pick out the December 1968 cover of *Artforum*, as well as the half-abraded form of a handwritten letter that reads: "Dear Whitney Museum — I hate you. Love, Ray Johnson."

William S. Wilson, *Untitled Clip*, 1965

A scene of a youthful, almost buoyant Johnson shot on Super-8 by his greatest chronicler and close friend William S. Wilson, whose collection forms the basis of a Ray Johnson survey opening November 26 at the Art Institute of Chicago. Johnson is shown entering the gate of a *jardin à la française* during a trip back to New York from Tilghman Island, Maryland.

Nicholas Maravell, *Ray Framing Himself*, excerpt from *Ray at Hofstra*, January 3, 1987

Outside looking in, inside looking out — a brief impromptu performance in which Johnson puts his Delphic face to full use, filmed at the Hofstra University Museum of Art on January 3, 1987.

Nicholas Maravell, *Ray Bunny Walk*, excerpt from *Ray at The Heckscher Museum*, April 1987

A short, impromptu collaborative performance at the Heckscher Museum in Huntington, New York, involving a sheet of paper emblazoned with Johnson's trademark bunny head. Johnson instructs a young, bemused museum worker in how to walk along the banner, a kind of dance upon a drawing.

Marlon Mullen, *Untitled*, 2015

Mullen, who has worked for almost three decades at the NIAD Art Center in Richmond, California, takes the images for his paintings from the covers of art history books and art magazines such as *Artforum* and *Art in America*. Mullen often subtly transforms his source material, eliding words and imagery to create new meanings and readings. The adjoined words "in" and "art" were possibly taken from a page in a Time-Life history of Van Gogh.

Karen Kilimnik, *My Judith Leiber bag, the royal house of Scotland*, 2012

For this painting Kilimnik re-appropriates the Scottish coat of arms as previously appropriated by the cult purse designer Judith Leiber for one of her kitsch-couture bags. The work's delicately rendered red-glitter lion claws menacingly at the confines of its composition.

Robert Hawkins, *The Last Dodo*, 2020

A fabled figure of the 1980s and early 1990s East Village art and punk scene, Hawkins is known for a lyrically realistic surrealism that blends humor with biting social commentary and a devious sense of the absurd. In recent years, the tragic figure of the extinct dodo bird has become a motif, each portrait conveying comic resolve in the face of utter hopelessness.

Richard Prince, *Untitled*, 2020

This is the first of an entirely new series based on the jokes of late Borscht Belt comedian Rodney Dangerfield, whose standup archives Richard Prince acquired after the comedian's death in 2004. The Dangerfield jokes, alternatively handwritten or typewritten, are collaged onto the canvas and painted over in the artist's hand, extending and personalizing Prince's longstanding interest in paintings as jokes and jokes as paintings. A slight variant of this joke was taped by Prince to a side door of the Metropolitan Museum of Art during the height of the 2020 pandemic shutdown.

Peter Nadin, *First Mark; Thumb Imprint*, 2002-2005

A key figure of the downtown art world in the late 1970s and 1980s and a founder of the experimental art space 84 West Broadway, as well as the collective known as the Offices of Fend, Fitzgibbon, Holzer, Nadin, Prince and Winters, Nadin dropped out of the commercial art world in the 1990s, devoting himself to a years-long project of reconceiving his notions of painting. This sculpture originated as a piece of clay Nadin carried in his hand on his upstate farm. He cast the clay in bronze, buried it and left it in a stream for months before retrieving it. *First Mark; Thumb Imprint* is a patinated portrait of a hand and a portrait of the land.

Peter Nadin, *Stu Sugar Standing in the Water*, 2020

Stu Sugar Standing in the Water marks Nadin's return to unconditional painting after the completion of the conceptual cycles *First Mark* ("Unlearning How to Make Art"), *Second Mark* and *Third Mark* over the course of more than a decade. Depicting a lone, masked, ambiguously forbidding figure whom Nadin has embodied in performance and films, the painting plays on themes of animistic landscape and primitive human mark-making for which Nadin, whose work is held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has been known.

John Fahey, *Untitled*, c. 1998-2000

Cult guitarist John Fahey (1939-2001) is best known as the pioneer of fingerpicking style he called "American primitivism," whose roots reach back to the antebellum Deep South and earlier, to African and European folk traditions. In his hands, the music possessed contemporary resonances with Minimalism and punk. In the last years of his deeply unsettled life, Fahey began to draw and paint, sometimes offering works for sale at his concerts. The pieces, made with tempera, acrylic, spray paint, magic marker and even anti-freeze, migrated from motel bed to motel bed, ending up eventually in the bedroom of a rental home in Salem, Oregon.

Richard Hell, *Untitled ("for a long time I used to go to bed")*, 2021

One of the progenitors of punk rock, Hell (born Richard Meyers) has worked primarily as a poet, novelist and publisher since moving to New York in 1966. This glyph print, rendering the first lines of an English translation of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, revisits one of Hell's first literary works, *uh*, an experiment in visual poetry published under the heteronym Ernie Stomach by his own *Genesis : Grasp Press* in 1971. The font, created by Hell using X-Acto-knifed mylar templates and a felt-tip pen, is intended to mystify the alphabet and make it "sexy," transforming reading into a more performative act, a dance of the eye and mind.

Ray Johnson, *Taoist Pop Art School*, 1994

Taoist Pop Art School is thought to be the last work exhibited during Johnson's lifetime. He donated it to a charity auction of pieces that all featured the color red, organized by Barneys New York for the benefit of the Children's Storefront in Harlem. The piece remained in Barneys' windows for the month of December 1994 before being auctioned by Christie's on January 1, 1995, purchased by Glenn O'Brien, a friend and frequent correspondent of Johnson's. Johnson took his own life two weeks later, on January 13, 1995, in Sag Harbor, New York.

Scott Covert, *I Had A Wonderful Life*, 1997-2020

For more than three decades, Scott Covert, a pioneer of the East Village's Club 57 theater and music scene, has made deeply personal vanitas-memento-mori paintings and drawings based on direct rubbings of gravestones in cemeteries he frequents across the United States and around the world. *I Had A Wonderful Life* mimics an ascension painting, featuring Brooke Astor, the grande dame of New York society, as the Virgin Mary, surrounded by putti comprised of Warhol superstars Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis and Holly Woodlawn. The anarchic poet and painter Rene Ricard, one of Covert's mentors, was added to the painting as a final touch, at the bottom, perhaps at the virgin's feet, perhaps in hell.

Scott Covert, *Family Affair*, 2015-2017

This spectral gray painting incongruously pairs the names of the members of the Clutter family, whose 1959 murders formed the basis of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, with the name of the Gwynnes, in their day the most famous family of American magicians, whose ornate headstone sits in Lakeside Cemetery in Colon, Michigan, resting place of more magicians than anywhere else in the world.

Erik LaPrade (David Hammons), *THIS IS NOT DAVID HAMMONS' PHONE #*, c. 2013

David Hammons, a patron saint of generative absence and artworld elusion, gave this telephone number to the writer and photographer Erik LaPrade during a chance meeting about eight years ago in the painter Ed Clark's studio. LaPrade had asked to visit Hammons' studio to photograph him. The number, written hastily by Hammons in LaPrade's pocket notebook, turned out, when called, to be disconnected, as it remains to this day.

Matt Connors, *Clarice Three*, 2020

Connors' paintings and drawings are deeply informed by his engagement with the world beyond painting — avant-garde music, conceptual photography, design and architecture, and poetry. Of the ethereal work *Clarice Three*, which is presented in the gallery in its own liminal space, like a portal between parts of the room, Connors wrote: "From time to time I make a painting that has no paint, that is more like a drawing on canvas, and usually they are some of my favorite works. I made this one and stopped right where I was because it's so mysterious and open to me."

Ray Johnson, *HA HA HA*, c. 1970

A piece of embellished mail art sent to the writer, editor and gentleman-about-town Glenn O'Brien, a frequent recipient of Johnson's correspondence. The visual equivalent of a cartoon laugh, and also an exercise in deadpan minimalist seriality, the work holds its own corner, chuckling away.

Olivia DiVecchia, *is not Aristotle's metaphysics*, 2019-2020

Composed of two unbound copies of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* re-assembled with repair tape into a long frieze, this is a conceptual work that functions as a drawing. Over more than a year, the artist painstakingly combed through the pages of the *Metaphysics*, covering in off-white gouache every word except for 'is' and 'not'. Working from two copies so that every page was allowed to face forward, she then extracted a musical score based on the placement of the words 'is' and 'not,' using the binaries as notes, translating language and space into rhythm and tone in a way in that evokes John Cage, one of Ray Johnson's teachers at Black Mountain College.