The Special Collections at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) contain a small but revealing portion of the correspondence between the British critic Lawrence Alloway and mail artist Ray Johnson. The majority of the items are postcards, letters, and collages mailed by Johnson to Alloway and his wife, Sylvia Sleigh. The material prompts reflection not only upon the relationship between Johnson and Alloway but also upon their attitudes toward the shifting contours of the art world at the time. In fact, there are striking convergences between the ideas of Alloway and the nature of Johnson’s practice. The playfulness of Johnson’s work, with its wry wordplay and oblique references to both the art world and the field of popular culture, chimes with Alloway’s inclusive notion of the “long front of culture,” a term he coined in 1958 to designate a heterogeneous continuum rather than a binary opposition between “high” and “low” culture. Further, in 1972, Alloway proposed the concept of the art world as a network in which the art itself is subject to dispersal within a complex, self-sustaining system of distribution and reproduction. In a similar way, Johnson’s New York Correspondence School (NYCS) used the art world as a network to distribute his collages and mail-art pieces.

The networked system described by Alloway formed part of a broader shift toward the “information economy” that characterizes the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Mail art reflects this change, prefiguring the emergence in the 1990s of the World Wide Web and its expanded possibilities for connection and communication. It is important to note that while there is a tendency to view this shift in a somewhat celebratory manner, this essay discusses the anxieties that subtended the changes in both the act of communication and the increasingly interconnected art world. Although Alloway described the network with characteristic sobriety, he, as an inhabitant of that very system, nonetheless harbored reservations about its complexities. Likewise, Johnson’s difficulties within that network—specifically with museums, other artists, and buyers of his work—are well known. The shared interest in the network in Alloway’s writing and in Johnson’s practice might at first indicate that both figures accepted the expanded art world as benign or beneficial, yet closer examination reveals that their attitudes were not quite so straightforward, and that a more nuanced reconsideration of their reactions to changes in the art world is required. Alloway’s published remarks on Johnson’s work suggest further study on this matter would be valuable and illuminating.

A Poet of “Non-ressentiment”?
Lawrence Alloway, Ray Johnson, and the Art World as a Network

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Getty Research Journal, no. 8 (2016): 161–76 © 2016 Stephen Moonie

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Alloway’s two most important pieces of writing on Johnson are his review of the exhibition *The Ray Johnson History of the Betty Parsons Gallery*, published in *The Nation* in February 1973, and his contribution to a special feature on the NYCS in *Art Journal* in the spring of 1977. In the latter piece, Alloway remarked that “Ray Johnson can be regarded as a poet of non-resentment.⁵ The use of the term “poet” is notable, as Alloway wrote in his review from 1973:

> In Ray Johnson’s collages words and images are inextricable: the denotation of proper names and the chains of visual associations unravel. These collages are not designed to be seen in a single, all-encompassing glance, like a Motherwell collage; on the contrary, they are intricate and discursive, a nest of clues that solicit close attention. They are to be read.⁴

The use of the term “poet” thus refers not only to the linguistic functions of Johnson’s work, with its cultural references and visual-verbal play, but also to Johnson’s participation in poetry and Fluxus-movement events, and in poetry publications, including *Mudfish* and *The Unmuzzled Ox.*

The discursive nature of Johnson’s work will be discussed more later in this essay, but what is perhaps most interesting about Alloway’s remark is his use of the term ressentiment, taken from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887). If there was any doubt about its significance, the term appears three times in Alloway’s short piece. The word has no exact equivalent either in Nietzsche’s German or in English: “resentment” is too limited to capture the more protracted sense of injustice as defined by ressentiment. Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* ascribes the birth of ressentiment and its “inversion of values” (*Umkehrung der Werte*) to the emergence of Judeo-Christian morality, which provided a moral code for the oppressed. Judeo-Christian morality is described by Nietzsche as “the ressentiment of those beings who, being denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge.” This revenge is fought via “the Word,” led by the priestly caste of whom Nietzsche writes with trepidation. The oppressed say “no” to the world, scorning the transience of its material pleasures and embracing instead the righteousness of moral superiority and its promise of salvation. In the same passage, he adds, “Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying ‘yes’ to itself, slave morality says ‘no’ on principle to everything that is ‘outside,’ ‘other,’ ‘non-self’: and this ‘no’ is its creative deed.”⁶

What is revealing about Alloway’s use of the term is that its slippery meaning exceeds his intentions. Alloway’s original meaning is not difficult to infer: he implies that the artist of ressentiment is the archetypal New York School painter who, whether defined by Clement Greenberg or Harold Rosenberg, is alienated from mainstream society. For Greenberg, the artist’s oppositional stance took the form of the preservation of aesthetic value threatened by capitalist instrumentality. For Rosenberg, as put forth in his famous essay “The American Action Painters” (1952), opposition resided in the act, or gesture, of the artist as a liberating sociopolitical metaphor.⁸ Both notions, however, say “no” to
the “other” of mass culture and its complacent audience, which, for the modernists, were both indissolubly linked with the emergence of industrial capitalism.

On the other hand, Alloway regarded Ray Johnson’s practice as exemplary of a different attitude—one that was discernible among the generation of artists who succeeded the New York School. This attitude was characterized by the broad range of practices emergent at the turn of the 1960s. In contrast to modernism, Johnson and his generation cast off the alienation of the 1950s by saying “yes” to mass-cultural imagery (if not to mass culture itself). Take, for instance, Johnson’s early moticos—the artist’s anagram of “osmotic”—and in particular Elvis Presley #1 (ca. 1956–57) and Untitled (Hand Marilyn Monroe) (1958). These were among the first artworks to use pop imagery. The latter, which evokes the obsessions of a teenage fan pinning Marilyn to his bedroom wall, especially bears out the poet and painter Adrian Henri’s remark that “Ray Johnson was, in the 1950s, very much an equivalent of Richard Hamilton.” Of course, Johnson’s work precedes the British artist Richard Hamilton’s My Marilyn (1965) by several years.

Johnson’s early moticos exemplify the breadth of the heterogeneous “fine art–pop art continuum” advocated by Alloway in 1958. Here, popular culture was not symbolic of the threat of homogeneity, as it was characterized by modernist critics; rather, it was a means by which individuals could share common signs and symbols and then construct unique identities through appropriating pop cultural products and tailoring them to their own interests. In this respect, Alloway’s views parallel those of sociologist David Riesman, who in 1954 made a similar critique of modernist attitudes toward mass culture.

Aside from this broader cultural definition, Alloway also remarked upon the ways that movements as diverse as Pop and Assemblage took objects with practical uses in the world and brought them into an artistic context in a way that created a participatory relationship between the object and an audience. If the viewer shares in the same world of signs and objects as the artist, it is but a small step to the more explicitly participatory nature of mail art. Johnson’s practice of “on-sending” involved mailing drawings or collages to be modified by the recipient and then passed on to another member of the network, who would add further modifications before ultimately returning the piece to Johnson. This method was described by scholar William S. Wilson as an art “not of social comment, but of sociability.” This term dovetails with Alloway’s notion of “commonality,” which he used to describe the “shared” nature of Pop and Assemblage art.

The idea of “sociability” also reflects the new sensibility Alloway discerned among Abstract Expressionism’s successors. Alloway’s essay “Network: The Art World Described as a System” (1972) provides a more comprehensive account of the structures entwined with Johnson’s practice. In the “Network” essay, Alloway adopts aspects of systems theory, describing the art world as not a straightforward hierarchy but a complex, self-sustaining organization—a shifting multiple goal coalition,” to use the phrase Alloway borrows to describe this fluid, malleable structure. Within this complex system, the production of art objects is almost incidental to the apparatus within which the artwork has become enmeshed. As Alloway notes, the system’s “output” is not the artwork itself,
which “exists prior to distribution”; instead, the output is the system itself, which exists to produce and distribute objects, whether physically, through reproduction, or via critical and scholarly publications. The artwork’s dispersal through this interconnected system of distribution separates the work’s meaning from the artist’s original intention, as layers of meaning are accreted through different interpretations by viewers, critics, and curators. Alloway calls this the “alienation by distribution effect.” Although “alienation” had a pejorative connotation in the 1950s (and often still does today), Alloway uses the term as a neutral description of the process, and elsewhere in his writings he asserts that the dispersal of meaning is a beneficial consequence of widening access to culture.

Although Johnson’s collages and moticos can be placed fruitfully within the expanded distribution system defined by Alloway, this is not to say that Johnson’s work is disposable or lacking internal complexity. Instead, his work is often very carefully constructed, and some pieces took many years to create. In addition to collaged elements—some of which were physically excised from previous works—they often include detailed drawing and lettering in India ink. In the case of his more elaborate works, the results are richly textured and decorative pieces of art, as one sees, for instance, in Henry Fonda Foot Dollar Bill (1970) and other works from the series of “portraits” Johnson created in the early 1970s. By contrast, Johnson’s mail-art pieces took on a simpler format: postcards or sheets of letter paper containing drawings, instructions, stamped insignias, or collaged elements. These correspondence pieces lack the dense materiality of the singular art objects that were subject to the art world network’s traditional systems of reproduction and interpretive multiplicity; instead, they were influenced by the networked art world and distributed through the postal system. Since mail-art pieces were often coauthored by Johnson and a chain of recipients/senders, they cannot always be attributed to a singular artist or author, or to particular times and places of origin.

This complexity, and the dispersed nature of Johnson’s work, creates difficulties for those who wish to write about it. In 1977, Alloway expressed regret at not having written more extensively on the artist, conceding that the proliferation of meaning and reference in Johnson’s work was simply too confusing to delineate. Although Johnson himself has claimed that mail art originated in 1943, its origins cannot be so clearly pinpointed, and he himself gave up on keeping track of mail art, conceding in 1984 that “this natural generosity of image and idea and information is something I can only extend so far. I don’t have the time any more. And the information by itself would just keep on accelerating, it just keeps on accelerating and expanding.”

Further, the complexity of Johnson does not just extend outward; the works themselves can be equally complex internally, especially those that revel in visual and verbal puns. For instance, Pals Slap (1968) contains a newspaper photograph of presidential grandson David Eisenhower kissing his wife, Julie Nixon: Eisenhower’s hand caresses his wife’s cheek, but the image can be read alternatively as a “slap” in the face, which is played upon further by the palindromic title. Johnson also reuses visual signifiers that may only obliquely refer to the subject. William S. Wilson has written of Johnson’s capacity to pick
up an aspect of a person that “might be central or marginal” and to then accumulate or build an image around the associations that this characteristic initiates.\textsuperscript{17} To take one of many examples, \textit{Mondrian Comb} (1969) (fig. 1) displays a series of adjacent “snake” motifs, which recur throughout Johnson’s career. Here they resemble a comb, which is played off against a photograph of Piet Mondrian in his New York studio. From an art-historical perspective, the wavy lines might be read as a visual joke about Mondrian’s rejection of curvilinear forms in his painting. But there is a more straightforward joke here: the balding man with a comb. This incidental relation is crucial to Johnson’s eccentric worldview. Wilson adds: “Ray Johnson is a realist for whom reality is in designed or coincidental resemblances, a tissue of correspondences, a fabric of metaphors. These correspondences imply no ‘higher’ reality.”\textsuperscript{18} Johnson’s “reality,” according to Wilson, rests upon metaphor, similarity, or correspondence between visual or verbal signifiers: it is a self-contained reality. In this respect, it parallels the self-contained nature of the networked art world as described by Alloway.

Yet there is a further similarity. Wilson remarks elsewhere that Johnson’s practice “constructs a structure that has no foundation.”\textsuperscript{19} Wilson’s remark refers to the deconstructive linguistic play at work in Johnson’s collages, but it also refers to the decentered nature of mail art as it circulates around its chain of senders and recipients. The fluid nature of mail art mimics the processes of the networked art world, especially in its poetic rendering of gallery invitations and other forms of correspondence. Those processes are “intimate bureaucracies,” to use scholar Craig Saper’s apposite phrase. Further, the

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{mondrian_comb}
\caption{Ray Johnson (American, 1927–95). \textit{Mondrian Comb}, 1969, mixed-media collage on cardboard panel, 63.5 \times 69.8 cm. © The Ray Johnson Estate, Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co.}
\end{figure}
phrase captures the ambivalence of mail art, which can either parody or render poetic the structures of bureaucracy while nonetheless working within those very structures. Alloway was not the only critic to write about the networked art world. In his essay “The American Art Establishment” (1965), Harold Rosenberg noted that the decentered nature of the art world’s social scene often confounded the ambitions of newcomers and hangers-on eager to make their way to its center. He writes: “Outsiders who have made their way into the core of the establishment discover in bewilderment and consternation that the center is no different from the outer edge—in short, that there is no center, only individuals and institutions without a dominant authority or etiquette.”

The fluent, nonhierarchical nature of the network is schematized in Johnson’s piece The History of Art News (fig. 2), mailed to Alloway in 1970. The work consists of a uniform grid of identical rabbit heads drawn onto paper. Each is accompanied by the name of an artist, critic, or curator. The selection by Johnson is eclectic: this piece includes Vito Acconci, Barbara Rose, Gene R. Swenson, and Marcia Tucker, among others. The interconnection of the participants is symbolized by the fact that each name corresponds to an identical visual signifier. However, although the rabbit heads suggest equivalence, one cannot help but notice while “reading” the piece that some names are more noticeable than others, although which ones depends on the personal and/or professional interests of the reader/viewer and his or her knowledge of, or participation within, this history. Viewed in this light, an implicit hierarchy is at work, even if it is a fluid, mobile hierarchy rather than one “frozen in layers like a pyramid,” to use Alloway’s phrase from “The Long Front of Culture.”

This fluidity was later remarked upon in Alloway’s “Network” essay, in which he notes the increasing fluidity of the distinctions between critics, curators, dealers, and collectors—something he experienced himself as a curator, teacher, and art critic, “usually two at a time.” He offers the example of Henry Geldzahler as someone who “typifies the interconnections of roles in the system very well.”

Not everyone was sanguine about this development, however. Alloway and Geldzahler were satirized by Dick Higgins in his essay “Intermedia” in 1965. He attacked them for their association with Pop art, which he condemned for its “aridity,” adding, “None of the ingenious theories of the Mr. Ivan Geldoway combine [a conflation of dealer Ivan Karp, curator Geldzahler, and critic Alloway] can prevent [it] from being colossally boring and irrelevant.” In 2010, Martin Patrick called this chimera a “mythical beast” and unpacked it into its three apparently distinct parts—dealer, curator, and critic—although in doing so did not address the overlapping of roles that is intrinsic to the networked structure (that is, for instance, Geldzahler as both curator and dealer, and Alloway as both curator and critic).

Higgins and Johnson knew each other (the former set up Something Else Press as a vehicle to disseminate the latter’s work), and the Dick Higgins papers at the GRI contain mail-art pieces sent by Johnson. Taken together, the pieces suggest a shared antagonism toward Pop and its advocates, including Alloway. Among the correspondence are two versions of a mail-art piece (figs. 3, 4). The earlier drawing consists of a
compound image and is framed by Johnson’s trademark rabbit heads. Within this nested structure is the shape Johnson would use in his parodic classifications of female breasts, seen in works such as Mark (1969) and Henry Fonda Foot Dollar Bill (1970). The image has been further modified to look like a pair of underpants, which includes a design of flaccid, nested L-shaped lines reminiscent of a distended right-angled Frank Stella painting such as Creede II (1961). This “melted” L-shape is derived from a “swan neck” motif found elsewhere in Johnson’s work, notably the collage Chuck Close with Swan (1974–90). Beneath is the compounded legend “Stellawrence Alloway’s underwear”—the prefix “Stel” clearly a later addition, perhaps when the connection between Alloway and the Stella L-shape became apparent.

Alloway had curated the show Systemic Painting in 1966, which exhibited the painting Wolfeboro 4 (1966), from Stella’s Irregular Polygon series (1965–66). These paintings were prized by critic Michael Fried in his landmark essay “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons” (1966) for embodying an aesthetic transcendence that allayed the
threat of Minimalism (or, indirectly, the commercialism of Pop).27 From the current historical perspective, the lines between Pop and abstraction are less clearly drawn, although Alloway recognized this from an early stage, placing Stella within a broader framework of abstract painting in his essay for the exhibition catalog.28 However, the critique of the Higgins-Johnson combine suggests that such convergences are complicit with the mechanisms of the burgeoning art market. Stella’s paintings were valuable commodities, where value may be conferred by either the modernist critic or the curator who places an artwork in a particular context.

Johnson’s History of Art News, with its nonhierarchical structure, suggests that the names of prominent figures, as they circulate within the art world, function as signifiers of value. John Coplans remarked that during his tenure at Artforum, visibility for an artist in the magazine was not enough; to make an impact, an artist required a “big name” critic to write about the work.29 It is not coincidence that Johnson’s piece focuses not on Artforum but on Art News, which by 1970 had long been usurped by Artforum as the major contemporary art magazine in the United States. In his choice of Art News, Johnson betrays his ambivalence toward the New York School, which was associated with the journal. This problematizes the broader shift toward a new sensibility in the 1960s; although Johnson’s
mail-art practice correlates with the decentered structures of the expanded network, his *History of Art News* harkens back to a smaller, less career-oriented art world.

Alloway, too, expressed reservations about this new condition, even if he took a largely favorable attitude toward it. The art world, he writes, exhibits an “unsettling connectivity.” This phrase is curious for its use of the adjective “unsettling” in conjunction with the kinds of processes Alloway otherwise described as benign. In this way, he points to more wide-ranging concerns. These were also noted by Rosenberg, who highlighted that the fluidity and decentered nature of the art world engendered a certain degree of anxiety among not only its participants but also those observing from outside its immediate sphere of influence. Those who do not consider themselves part of the art world (or, indeed, those within it who do not wield as much influence as they would like) are prone to imagine a degree of conspiracy involved in the establishment of reputations, and the conflation or interconnection of roles described by Alloway might be seen as a conflict of interest. Geldzahler, for instance, was noted for socializing with artists while practicing as a prominent curator, a breach of boundaries that could be viewed as unprofessional.

This point about Geldzahler, where the distance between the curator and artist is abolished, is related to a more pressing issue: the abolition of the time lag between historical and contemporary art in museum policy. Whereas retrospectives were once reserved for artists near the ends of their careers, during the 1960s Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, for instance, enjoyed retrospectives at the relatively young ages of thirty-four and thirty-eight. **31** Taken in tandem with the overlapping of roles among those in power, one might suspect that strings were being pulled. Yet, in the art world, no one can be certain that pulling strings can guarantee a desired outcome. As Rosenberg writes: “The sum of it is that no dealer, curator, buyer, or critic, or any existing combination of these, can be depended upon to produce a reputation that is more than a momentary flurry. The result is widespread anxiety—the anxiety of individuals and groups concerning both their own status and that of the art which they exhibit, deal in, comment on, create.” **32** The fluid structure described by Alloway and the playful nature of Johnson’s practice are subtended by this anxiety over status, which at that time felt more unstable and impermanent than it ever had.

These anxieties also formed part of broader debates in the postwar United States, most notably in sociological works such as Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956), the latter of which inspired the name “Orgman criticism” for Rosenberg’s discussion of the topic. Although Rosenberg was very critical in his reviews, he noted that at the heart of the subject was a particularly valuable concern: “Among the grand metaphysical themes of [the 1950s], the one that has proved perhaps the most fascinating and persistent has been that of ‘alienation’—the loss by the individual of personal identity through the operation of social processes.” **33**

Riesman claimed that a shift had taken place in the postwar period, from the “inner-directed” individual allied with the Protestant work ethic to the “outer-directed”
individual who was more attuned to, and more reliant upon, the social network within which career and life were now subsumed. This new outer-directed sociability was a function of the expanded postwar middle class as the postindustrial economy took shape. Many commentators interpreted Riesman’s study either as a lament for a lost individualism or as a warning about the threat to the autonomy of the self, a reading that Riesman himself was at pains to correct. For Riesman, the shift was simply a different orientation to the world, one that compelled an appropriate social adjustment. It is worth noting that Alloway met Riesman during his first trip to the United States, and that the term “antagonistic cooperation,” coined in the catalog for This Is Tomorrow (1956), was derived from Riesman’s study. This term captures the ambivalence of both Riesman’s interpretation of contemporary society and Alloway’s conception of the cultural field, where alliances are continuously forged and broken.

As for how these theories operate in a practical context, it is apparent that an outer-directed individual stands to benefit from the network more than does an inner-directed artist; in the new professionalized, career-oriented art world, artists must be increasingly social—attending gallery openings and events, making themselves visible, and working to achieve advantageous positioning within the community. This social performance becomes an increasingly important part of decisions made in the art world. In particular, gossip can have a major influence on an artist’s career; Rosenberg remarks, “One substance overlies all the elements of the establishment, from museum personnel to dinner hostesses. That substance is talk. The art establishment subsists on words—much more, in fact, than it does on pictures. Talk within the establishment has more power than elsewhere because decisions are less sure and the consequences of acting on them more uncertain.”

The focus on “talk” is particularly relevant to Johnson’s practice. Not only did both Alloway and Wilson describe his work in linguistic terms, but Johnson’s mail pieces also engage in this discourse, in which information is circulated, reputations are formed, and gossip is shared both strategically and simply for enjoyment. Mary Josephson, in a perceptive review in 1973, claimed that “gossip . . . is, after all, Johnson’s medium.” Although the artist was rarely seen at gallery openings, he remained remarkably well-informed nonetheless, his mail art operating, in a way, as a surrogate by which he gleaned information about his community. One card Johnson sent to Alloway (fig. 5) is an invite to a Johnson show at the Woodpecker Gallery, but it also functions as one of Johnson’s “face/fake collages.” Johnson cites a remark Alloway made in a piece about the installation artist Christo in which he said, “Christo is preoccupied with the mystery of same-size.” This quote is undercut by Johnson’s vulgar note on the left side of the card that puns on both the reference to size as well as the hard and soft “c” sounds in his self-titled face/fake collages. Johnson writes, “My C is a tiny bit longer than your K.”

This parodic use of the convention of gallery mailing demonstrates Johnson’s use of the art world network as an inspiration for his poetic interventions. In doing so, it bears out Saper’s notion of “intimate bureaucracy,” not least because of the ambivalence
Fig. 5. Ray Johnson (American, 1927–95). Mail art sent to Lawrence Alloway, 1968, ink and stamp on postcard, 15 × 10 cm. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 2003.m.46, box 8, folder 18. © The Ray Johnson Estate, Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co.
Johnson betrays here toward his correspondent. As Lucy Lippard has remarked, Johnson’s is a “curiously inverted and even at times misanthropic kind of sociability.” Johnson does not neutrally embrace the communication network but rather acknowledges the complexities and difficulties that human interaction entails. In The Paper Snake, he writes: “At one point, I gave up on communication with people, and decided that my correspondence art existed for only one person—me. I previously thought that it existed only for you—me and you—and then I decided that you were no longer necessary.” Another example of this hostility might be discerned in a fake check for a million dollars that Johnson mailed to Alloway in 1965 (fig. 6). Johnson is signatory to both the check and the work—a Dada gesture of artistic nominalism. The elision of the distinction between the work and its nominal value might be read as a critique of the market for contemporary art as objects of investment. But given that Johnson’s art is not primarily that of “social comment,” one might instead discern resentment in the gesture. Grace Glueck has remarked that Johnson was “New York’s most famous unknown artist.” Johnson himself did not appreciate the label, since it acknowledged a painful truth. Seen in this context, Johnson’s check can be read as an act of wish fulfillment. The gesture is playful, yet it nonetheless reveals ambivalence; it is Johnson’s grievance against his lack of success and his simultaneous wish to be recognized by the very system he is criticizing.

Johnson’s complicated feelings were also revealed in his behavior toward potential buyers of his work. As David Bourdon recalled in his open letter after Johnson’s death, “Anyone who attempted to buy or sell your work without your knowledge risked offending you.” In fact, anyone attempting to buy with Johnson’s knowledge also risked causing offense. Johnson was known to enter into protracted negotiations with prospective buyers, constantly changing the terms and conditions. Bourdon remarks in the same passage quoted above that Peter Schuyff offered 25 percent less than the asking price for a $2,000 collage (a silhouetted portrait of Andy Warhol), and Johnson agreed . . . then neatly excised precisely 25 percent of the work. This kind of behavior was Johnson’s way of asserting his own terms, but it also functioned as an act of self-sabotage.

Johnson’s strategies of resistance and obstruction, allied to the ephemeral nature of his mail-art correspondence, align him with Fluxus figures such as George Brecht and Robert Filliou. In a recent essay on La Cédille qui Sourit, the artist-run space in Villefranche, Natilee Harren claims that the space was “an alternative to the high-market art commodity along with its attendant notions of uniqueness, material integrity, and cultural and monetary value.” Instead, Brecht and Filliou made “a concerted effort to construct other models for the art object and its distribution.” Johnson’s distributional method, in addition to his uncompromising posture, suggests a similar inclination toward cooperation or sociability as an antidote to the alienation of capitalism. However, Johnson’s sensibility opens up a chasm between himself and Filliou’s notion of intersubjectivity.

As Harren remarks, the illustration that accompanies Filliou’s Poème invalide (1965), published in the Belgian journal Phantomas, depicts a schematized figure with...
limbs in the shape of cedillas. The hook-like cedillas reach out for connection to others, suggesting, in Harren’s words, “a fully relational model of subjectivity that, while individual, desires to be fulfilled or made able by connecting to others.” Johnson’s “misanthropic sociability” does not reference the same fruitful connection. Nor did he share the utopian aims of Fluxus. Instead, Johnson’s work acknowledges a more fraught interconnection: more broadly, it proposes that the theme of alienation in relation to social processes was not wholly superseded by the changed social and cultural attitudes of the 1960s.

Alloway’s “Network” essay was written in the aftermath of the art world’s heyday in the 1960s; by 1972, he described it as “exhibit[ing] numerous dysfunctions.” The recession of the 1970s impacted the art world, as exemplified by strikes at the Museum of Modern Art by disgruntled curatorial staff, museum budget deficits at institutions such as the Pasadena Museum of Art, and an overall downturn in the art market. Alloway followed these matters closely, as evidenced by the copious files in his archive, which include internal memos from museums and clippings from the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. A handwritten manuscript that predates the “Network” essay contains some of Alloway’s thoughts on the dysfunctions of the museum system.

Similar ideas appear in the closing section of the essay, where Alloway muses upon the future development of the gallery and museum system, particularly given the ephemeral, transient, or inaccessible nature of much radical art in the 1960s. He describes these developments as indicative of a “crisis of confidence . . . in the distribution system.” He writes that future innovation is unlikely to come from within the institutional confines of museums and galleries themselves, given the general trends of development over the previous three centuries. Alloway briefly sketches a history from the distribution of prints in the seventeenth century to the emergence of public exhibitions in the eighteenth and...
nineteenth centuries, and then through to the heterogeneous, networked system of the postwar period.

Johnson’s mail art was a function of this networked system, and his relationship with it was complex. His mailings to artists and critics including Alloway and Higgins might be considered part of art world discourse, but they were not limited to this sphere. Indeed, the very nature of mail art is continually expansive. Further, we have seen that Alloway’s notion of Johnson as a “poet of non-ressentiment,” while apt, requires qualification. The term neatly differentiated between Johnson’s “outer-directed” sociability and the “inner-directed” attitude of the New York School; however, Alloway failed to account for the latent hostilities and anxieties that subtended Johnson’s communications. In doing so, Alloway anticipated some of the more celebratory accounts of mail art, even as Johnson’s work itself is never as straightforward or benign as many advocates of communication theory claim.

Having teased out the wider implications of Alloway’s brief remarks on Johnson, the following issues might be worthy of further attention. First, we might wish to reconsider whether the anxieties of the self common to the 1950s were wholly superseded by the emergence of the new “cool” practices and attitudes of the 1960s. Second, given that Johnson did not neatly align with the social or political positions of his Fluxus contemporaries, we might also reconsider our assumption that the avant-garde occupied a necessarily oppositional relationship to the emergent networked system of the 1960s. In short, Johnson’s attitude might be best described as one of ambivalence, a stance succinctly encapsulated by an undated mailing sent to the Whitney Museum. It reads simply: “Dear Whitney Museum, I hate you. Love, Ray Johnson.”

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Notes An early version of this paper was delivered at a workshop at the GRI in November 2012 as part of the GRI’s Lawrence Alloway research project. I would like to thank organizers Rebecca Peabody, Courtney J. Martin, and Lucy Bradnock for inviting me to speak. Further study was conducted during my stay at the GRI as a project researcher. I would like to thank the GRI for providing the opportunity for this research trip.

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4. Lawrence Alloway, “Art,” The Nation, 5 February 1973, 190.
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, “First Essay,” On the Genealogy of Morality, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), sec. 10, p. 21.
6. The very complexity of what is meant by “action” has been recently discussed by Robert Slifkin in “The Tragic Image: Action Painting Refigured,” Oxford Art Journal 34, no. 2 (2011): 227–46. See
also Christa Noel Robbins, “Harold Rosenberg on the Character of Action,” *Oxford Art Journal* 35, no. 2 (2012): 195–214.

7. Adrian Henri, cited in Michael von Uchtrup, “Ray Johnson: Biography,” *Journal of Black Mountain College Studies* 2 (2012).

8. For Alloway’s views on mass culture, see “The Arts in the Mass Media,” *Architectural Design* 28, no. 2 (1958), republished in Kalina, *Imagining the Present*. For Riesman’s similar views, see “Listening to Popular Music,” in idem, *Individualism Reconsidered and Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954).

9. Alloway writes, “Proximity and participation replace distance and contemplation as the communicative style of the object.” From Alloway, “Junk Culture,” in Kalina, *Imagining the Present*, 80.

10. William S. Wilson, in Ray Johnson, *The Paper Snake* (New York: Something Else Press, 1965), unpaginated.

11. Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 7.

12. Lawrence Alloway, “Network: The Art World Described as a System,” *Artforum* 11, no. 1 (1972): 29. Alloway cites the phrase from Derek S. Pugh, David I. Hickson, and C. R. Hinings, *Writers on Organizations* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1971), 81.

13. Alloway, “Network,” 29.

14. Alloway, “Network,” 28.

15. See Alloway, “Art and the Expanding Audience” and “Systems of Cross-Reference in the Arts: On Translation,” in Kalina, *Imagining the Present*.

16. Ray Johnson, cited in Henry Martin, “Should an Eyelash Last Forever? An Interview with Ray Johnson,” in *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, ed. Donna de Salvo and Catherine Gudis (Columbus, OH: Flammarion and Wexner Center for the Arts, 1999), 198. Originally published in *Lotta poetica* 2, no. 6 (1984): 2–24.

17. William S. Wilson, “NY Correspondance School,” in *Ray Johnson, Ray Johnson* (New York: Between Books, 1977), unpaginated.

18. Wilson, “NY Correspondance School.”

19. William S. Wilson, “Reference and Relation,” in *Ray Johnson, Ray Johnson* (New York: Between Books, 1977), back cover. Cited in de Salvo and Gudis, *Ray Johnson*, 28.

20. Craig J. Saper, *Networked Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991), 16–19.

21. Harold Rosenberg, “The American Art Establishment,” *Esquire*, January 1965. Republished in idem, *Discovering the Present: Three Decades in Art, Culture and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 115.

22. Alloway, “The Long Front of Culture,” 61.

23. Alloway, “Network,” 29.

24. Dick Higgins, “Intermedia,” in *foew&ombw: a grammar of the mind and a phenomenology of love and a science of the arts as seen by a stalker of the wild mushroom* (New York: Something Else Press, 1969), 13–15.

25. Martin Patrick, “Unfinished Filliou: On the Fluxus Ethos and the Origins of Relational Aesthetics,” *Art Journal* 69, no. 1–2 (2010): 54.

26. Dick Higgins, “The Hatching of the Paper Snake,” *Lightworks* 22 (2000): 26–28.

27. Michael Fried, “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons,” in idem, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

28. Lawrence Alloway, *Systemic Painting*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1966), 19.

29. Coplans adds, “In a sense the article is not important at all. It’s who wrote the article that’s important.” Cited in Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962–74* (New York: Soho Press, 2000), 448.

30. Alloway, “Network,” 29.
31. Alloway, “Network,” 29.
32. Rosenberg, “The American Art Establishment” (1973), 112.
33. Harold Rosenberg, “The Orgamerican Phantasy,” in idem, The Tradition of the New (New York: Da Capo, 1994), 270.
34. Riesman claimed that he did not consider the “outer-directed” society as a simple threat to the self’s autonomy; see David Riesman, Faces in the Crowd, abridged edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 12. For a discussion of Riesman, see Robert Genter, Late Modernism (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 73–89.
35. See Courtney J. Martin, “Art World, Network and Other Alloway Keywords,” Tate Papers 16 (2011): 39n. For comments on Alloway’s use of the term “antagonistic cooperation,” see Nigel Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 90n427. See also David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), and William H. Whyte, The Organisation Man (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956).
36. Rosenberg, “The American Art Establishment” (1973), 113–14.
37. Mary Josephson, “History of the Betty Parsons Gallery,” Art in America 61 (May–June 1973). The pen name “Mary Josephson” is a pseudonym of curator Brian O’Doherty.
38. Lucy Lippard, “Special Deliverance,” in de Salvo and Gudis, Ray Johnson, 147.
39. Ray Johnson, cited in Nancy Princenthal, “Artists Book Beat,” Print Collector’s Newsletter 23 (January–February 1993): 237. Also cited in Lippard, “Special Deliverance,” 147.
40. David Bourdon, “Cosmic Ray,” Art in America 83 (October 1995): 109.
41. Bourdon, “Cosmic Ray,” 110.
42. Natilee Harren, “La cédille qui ne finit pas: Robert Filliou, George Brecht, and Fluxus in Villefranche,” Getty Research Journal, no. 4 (2012): 129.
43. Harren, “La cédille,” 134.
44. Alloway, “Network,” 31.
45. The clippings include articles such as “Troubled Museums: Many U.S. Exhibitors Reel Under Burden of Own Popularity; Institutions Face Growing Security Costs, Inflation, Militancy from Employees,” Wall Street Journal, 1 November 1971; Barbara Isenberg, “Pasadena Museum ‘Ambition vs. Endowment,’” Wall Street Journal, 30 August 1971; and Joshua C. Taylor, “Why Should Anyone Go to a Museum Anymore?,” New York Times, 30 September 1973. Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, Lawrence Alloway papers, 1935–2003 (2003.m.46), box 15, folder 5.
46. Lawrence Alloway, untitled, undated ms., Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, Lawrence Alloway papers, 1935–2003 (2003.m.46), box 15, folder 14. Alloway notes such factors as “[director] and trustee indifference,” the “expansion of museums,” and “inflation and recession.”
47. Alloway, “Network,” 32.