



Praneet Soi, spread from *Anamorphosis*, 2020

Over the past few years, Soi has segued from the more traditional studies of scale and form, exemplified by his miniatures and sculptures, to the use of time-based media, including moving images. For example, *Srinagar*, 2016, and *Notes on Labour*, 2017, based in artisan workshops in Kashmir and Kolkata, were digital works assembled through slide-show installations. *Third Factory*, 2018, deployed video projection as a substratum for Soi's drawings and stills from his visits to a storied 15th-century Srinagar mausoleum, a tile from which was replicated and manufactured in a Portuguese ceramic factory for the exhibition. *Anamorphosis* achieves similar effects through the revision and overlap of the exhibited film's stills and its processual matter. High-resolution tiles are juxtaposed with low-resolution film stills of the everyday, historical endurance intercut with the banality of life under occupation (shots of people spending a day by the sea, a glimpse of a residential neighbourhood or the long shot of a village waiting for a train to pass). Cinematic grammar, like close-ups of faces and objects and superimpositions of different archival moments, holds the reader's gaze while multiple iterations of the same scene on a page render duration in print form.

At the same time, the lack of narrative seriality within the structure of the book mimics a slide show. Soi, a student of the pioneering essay filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin, brings some of the genre's sensibilities to the artists' book form by way of gesture and montage. A logic of imbrication emphasises the coexistence of numerous perspectives, possibilities and linkages with seemingly faraway geographies. Outlines of one image hosting the details of another make apparent the connections between the struggles of the Kashmiri and Palestinian peoples. The 'freeze frame' aesthetic that converts the cinematographic into the photographic imparts a degree of certainty often missing in the story of conflict zones. Seeing has in many cultures been conflated with knowing, vision a method of substantiating belief. In *Anamorphosis*, iconicity becomes proof of presence in embattled regions, the visit itself a political act, as curator Reem Fadda has pointed out. The book provides an elegant coda to an artwork seeking to understand fundamentally unknowable pain by looking closely.

Praneet Soi, *Anamorphosis*, Bookworks and The Mosaic Rooms, 2020, 132pp, pb, £17.50, 978 1 912570 08 9.

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## Books

### Ray Johnson and William S Wilson: Frog Pond Splash

Trying to interpret Ray Johnson's collage-works can feel a bit like sketching on the surface of water. It might respond for a moment to the pattern you've imposed, but soon that feeling of order gives way to a sense of impervious organic forces playing beneath.

The untitled double-spread listed in the index as *Gertrude Stein with Judy Garland's Kitchen*, 1975, initially seems like one of the more easily parsed collages in this book: and not just because of the cumulation of queer signifiers in play, given Stein and Garland's status as lodestars for different forms of gay self-fashioning. Pinned to Gertrude's blouse is a cockerel badge, whose silhouette forms the basis for a pair of quirky pictographs placed in a speech bubble next to her face. Across the page Judy emits a similar set of avian symbols, meeting Stein's at the spine, but hers look more like ducks than chickens. Glancing down the photograph we see that the hem of her skirt is garlanded with the same duck pattern. She play-acts cooking at a sparkling pop-collage oven, whose curved knobs spark off some other association: with the handle of a disc-shaped palette a few pages back, converted by one of Johnson's goofy animal drawings into an elephant's trunk. The trunk, in turn, is reminiscent of the rabbits' noses sketched elsewhere on the same page (*Untitled [Lapin]*), which in turn look like the weird phallic silhouettes in *Untitled (Oedipus & Bunny with Clock)*, closer to the classic Johnson bunny head (surely also a male torso) from his hundreds of 'portraits'. And so on and so on, until the connections seem endless.

This new edition from Siglio, edited by Elizabeth Zuba, captures that play of meaning in flashes. Johnson's creative impulse seems to have had strongly genital, digestive, and scatological undercurrents, but it was also clearly rooted in a feeling for language: for its power and playfulness, its capacity to mean several things at once. Suitably enough, then, this non-chronological arrangement of artworks is



Ray Johnson, *Untitled (Shirley Temple with Robin)*, 1966

interspersed with excerpts from commentaries on Johnson's work by his long-time confidante, the poet William S Wilson. These texts, also placed out of temporal sequence, emulate the rhythm of logic in Johnson's work rather than explaining it: 'I am allowing myself to be cryptic in order to allow you the space to work out your own interpretations in accord with your own values and methods.'

Ray Johnson (1927-1995) came of age alongside the text-and-art avant-gardes of the 1950s-1970s, finding resonances and friendships within Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and the drama and poetry-oriented wings of Neo-Dada and Fluxus, brushing up against concrete poetics with his slip-slide language games. His peers in the postwar North-American milieu include Robert Rauschenberg, whose rough-hewn proto-pop assemblages of the 1950s still bore traces of the New York School's expressionist imprint. He was also a Black Mountain graduate. But Johnson seemingly evaded the grasp of any movement that might seek to contain him, opting out of patronage, financial security and fame in the same motion. A luminary of the postwar art world in his 30s, he committed suicide in 1995 in self-appointed obscurity, backstroking out into Sag Harbour on Long Island. He left behind an elaborately curated set of clues and a house full of carefully stacked artworks and portraits. His death was probably meant as his last performance piece, but it's ghoulish to interpret it as such. As Wilson puts it, the meaning of Ray's work was 'hypothetical', but his drowning was 'categorical': 'it is not a work of art.'

Elsewhere, Wilson refers to Johnson's need to be emptied out: 'an empty mind, and empty stomach, or any feeling of emptiness, might allow something unknown and unexpected to flow into the emptiness.' This was a western-Buddhist stance, but it also had literal, bodily connotations: 'Ray made many drawings about urinating, wrote that Jackson Pollock is Buddha urinating, and drew ... Andy Warhol's shit.' And, as Wilson's tidal analogy suggests, Johnson also needed to be filled up once he was empty: with words, ideas, interactions. That's seemingly where Wilson himself came in, amongst others, though he compares the effect to external pressure rather than inward flow: '[Ray] had a feeling of interior emptiness and if a weight bore down on him, flattening him, then the dimensions of the emptiness might be reduced. He was interested in flat fish because they were not hollow.' Zuba's afterword documents a friendship akin to the juxtaposition of elements in Johnson's collages: 'Ray would push a concept to bear upon another in a work, while simultaneously pulling it back into singleness with renewed meaning at its surface. This "push-pull", this pressurised bearing down-cum-bearing up, was exactly what ... Bill and Ray were for one another.'

It's Zuba, of course, who has captured that process in motion. Her dextrous arrangements of text and image frame the sense of logic lapping at the shores of perception that keeps the eyes and mind dancing across the pages of this book.

*Frog Pond Splash: Collages by Ray Johnson with Texts by William S Wilson*, ed Elizabeth Zuba, Siglio, 2020, 88pp, 37 col illus, hb, £27, 978 1 938221 27 9.

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## Conversations on Violence: An Anthology

Tidily packaged in these few hundred pages is a history of histories, each one shaped and structured by forms of violence, prevailing politics, aggressive systemic inequalities and the lived experience of them: conversations with 30 of the world's most informed voices on the diversity of violence and how it is understood today. And one conversation with Russell Brand.

The topics explored through these various conversations, from life in the unofficially segregated West Side of Chicago (the first discussion) to the political viability of pacifism (the final entry), give an insight into world views that are as intricately and politically connected as they are culturally distinct. They traverse the globe and cross academic, social and political boundaries to feed the reader just what is necessary to understand how violence applies to, for example, the history and legacy of slavery or the uses of algorithms within predictive policing. It would be an epic challenge to dive into the bibliographies and back catalogues of each of the invited interviewees, but the book comprehends its remit fully: meaningful conversations that cut through the weight of past achievements and the pleasantries of career highlights to illuminate unnoticed patches of violence in the world in order to bear witness to, and offer voices against, these violences.

Both editors, Brad Evans and Adrian Parr, have prodigious and multifaceted outputs that share remarkable similarities in the way in which they engage the public. Evans is the engine behind the Histories of Violence project, which aims to explore the violence of the human condition through books and essays, videos, a podcast series and published interviews. Parr is an eminent scholar, philosopher and activist in the fields of climate change and water security, using books and engaging conversations through the TAFTalks and H2Otalks webseries to communicate how pressing these issues are. While this collection easily slots into Evans's Histories project, the inclusion of Parr as co-editor demonstrates how violent climate degradation is, and how much violence is of global and ecological concern. What it also does is continue both editors' method of Socratic debate.

Long-form conversations are personal and are one of the few forms that favour anecdote, the uncitable and the unsubstantiated as much as they value deep academic research and theoretical insight. The editorial decision to present the 31 conversations without a framework of arbitrary or conceited themes works in the collection's favour. The tragedies and traumas of George Floyd's murder, the subsequent reignition of the Black Lives Matter protests and the social upheaval of the coronavirus pandemic hardly make mention; these issues aren't consciously ignored but are shown to be symptoms of a much longer history of violence.

To ask if the contemporary moment is an age of violence is to ask the wrong question. *Conversations on Violence* is not about quantifying or even defining something that – as is stated in the book's introduction – should be 'intolerable'. The correct questions, which this book does incredibly well to illustrate and strives towards, are: how can we view the scaffold that allows this violence to occur? Are there meaningful ways we can affect, resist and counter violence?

The two overarching figures here are Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin, whose works are referenced