

GOTHAM ART & THEATER

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Installation view of "Rip It Up and Start Again" at Artists Space
Panoramic view of William S. Burroughs' bedroom in "the Bunker" at 222 Bowery, New York City (2010), Photo by Daniel Pérez

William S. Burroughs, the inimitable literary master of hard living and apocalyptic horror, was a heroin addict who cut off his own pinkie, worked as an exterminator, and accidentally killed his common-law wife in 1951 while attempting to shoot a cocktail off the top of her head as they were playing William Tell. Nevertheless, he retained a lifelong affection for firearms and continued target practice for the rest of his life.

What does this have to do with art? Find out at Artists Space, where "Rip it Up and Start Again" can be seen until Feb. 20, 2010. Curated by an impressive assortment of presenters, including poet **John Giorno**, gallerist Mitchell Algu and fictional artist Claire Fontaine, this fascinating show brings together works by Burroughs, artist Ray Johnson, poet Charles Henri Ford, musician Arthur Russell and Philippe Thomas (who started a fictional public relations agency called readymades belong to everyone®). All of them shared an interest in collaboration, collage and breaking down the boundaries between visual, written and musical art.

In 1958, Burroughs's friend Brion Gysin accidentally sliced up some newspaper words and rediscovered the idea of scrambling text into writing. Burroughs began using the technique to disorient the reader in a full-length 1961 novel, *The Soft Machine*. Johnson, the father of mail art, founded his New York Correspondence School in 1962, sending cryptic combinations of images and words on far-flung peregrinations. Two years later, Ford began assembling phrases from ads and headlines into evocative poems packed with double entendres.

A long diagonal wall in the center of Artists Space's open gallery is adorned on one side with a row of practice targets peppered with bullet holes and signed by Burroughs. The other side features a life-sized panoramic photograph of Burroughs's New York loft, where he lived from 1974 to 1980, and kept until he died of a heart attack in 1997 at the age of 83. More used targets can be seen hanging on the walls, along with a piss-colored, bullet-holed painting, the famous hat, a manual typewriter and a Burroughs cash register (his father invented the adding machine).

While Burroughs was killing household insects in Chicago, Charles Henri Ford (1913-2009) was in New York publishing *View* (1940-47), an avant-garde magazine with contributions from luminaries including Duchamp, Picasso, Dali, Henry Miller and Jean Genet. He also wrote poetry, and in the '60s he made an eye-popping series of "poem posters," large-scale photo silk-screens of collages combining images and words that worked as visual art and poetry at the same time, resembling ornamental Andy Warhol ransom notes.

Photo-offset faces and figures are layered over and under collages of abstract shapes and words cut from magazines and newspapers. Plates appear in different combinations, with text hiding behind images, or image hiding behind text, depending on the colors of the ink -- ranging from hot reds and oranges to moody purples and browns.

Contrasting typefaces and aggressive cropping are vintage '60s pop, and Ford's contrary aphorisms and puns are equally subversive. *Fallen Woman*, for example, is an image of a female figure sprawling on her back with her arms stretched out. A hand holding a knife is poised above her body, and the words "Plan now" issue like a flower petal from a central circular image of an unplugged drain, perhaps a reference to the victim's life draining away. The word on another petal completes the phrase: "plan now for nowhere."

Ray Johnson (1927-1995), youngest of the three, was recognized as a genius only after he died, probably by suicide. A posthumous 1999 retrospective at the Whitney and a popular 2002 film have since appeared, along with regular exhibitions at Richard L. Feigen & Co. uptown, the gallery representing his estate. "Ray Johnson. . . Dali, Warhol and others: 'Main Ray, Ducham, Openheim, Pikabia," an in-depth collection of homages, parodies and dialogues with modernist artists and works of art, was on view there just last spring.

At Artists Space, six vitrines contain a more heterogeneous smattering of the letters, lists, drawings and collages Johnson tirelessly spewed out, weaving an impish web of interrelationships that turned 20th-century culture into a single extended personal salon filled with wacky encounters. Engineering an imaginary meeting between Jacques Derrida and Harpo Marx, for example, Johnson sent a letter to Derrida (really his friend Alan Bass) recounting an envelope's attempt to find Marx in "Jacquesonville" Florida.

Another vitrine is filled with a series of riffs on ships attacked by giant octopi, and the next is devoted to the poet Marianne Moore. A yellowed newspaper photograph features Moore in her signature hat sitting stiffly between two empty chairs. A heart has been cut from her upper torso, and "Marianne Moore's lapels" is scrawled below. Nearby is a photocopy of note cards from Moore refusing visits, showing that rejection never slowed down Johnson -- the ultimate fan. "Thank you very much," one says, "but I am compressing myself rather than expanding."

Other highlights include a drawing called *256 Spanish Stuffed Queen Olives*, resembling a herd of goggling eyes, and a calligraphic invitation to send for a free copy of Ray Johnson's new book *Cannibal Piss*. *Ray Johnson's history of Lucy Lippard* (1966-71) includes "Lucy trips over Montgomery Clift's fingernails" and "Teeny Duchamp has damp shoes" -- wonderful bits of poetry showing that Johnson's genius was as literary as it was visual.