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‘Every letter I write
is not a love letter’¹

Inventing sociality with Ray Johnson’s postal system

Ina Blom

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¹ Ray Johnson, in a letter to Bill Wilson, 21 January 1958.

If any one tendency could be said to have marked art of the last decade, it would surely be the return of the notion of ‘the social’ as the master trope for critical art practices. An increasing number of works are conceived, performed and received within a framework that describes artworks primarily in terms of the social relations they engender or operate within.

The essence of this shift is a certain literalist impulse that somehow guarantees that this perspective does not remain at the level of conceptual analysis only (a sociological form of analysis encircling an object already defined as ‘aesthetic’), but is performed as the very content of works themselves. In a very real sense such works may provide a reflexive methodology in that they serve to objectify the relations between the persons, groups or institutions that get involved in them, deploying social rather than primarily visual technologies, and engendering social rather than primarily visual scenarios or projections. However, a different approach emerges once one pays attention to the idiosyncratic postal performance of American artist Ray Johnson, also known as the inventor of the mail art network: using the postal system as an artistic medium this approach was focused less on objectifying social relations than on inventing sociality.

I

One of the worst days of my life. I went down for mail and in the box were two thin post cards and a letter to Jeremy Anderson, Dilexi Gallery, San Francisco, that has been kicking around stamped insufficient address since Sept. 1964 Sayville Cherry Grove and San Francisco Feb., 1965. One post card was from Lila Goodman saying there’s hope under separate cover something is arriving for me. Other post card is the third I have received this week from Something Else Press about my own book Paper Snake. The other two post cards from them were to other people care of me.

It was almost like receiving no mail at all to receive these three items. There are days like holidays or Sundays when there is no mail delivery and the box doesn’t function. But that’s very philosophical. I think I’m going to sit right down and write myself a letter.

On this worst of all days, on 8 August 1965, the American artist Ray Johnson, seeking to connect with the outside world, got nothing but futile returns and dead ends. His mailbox was not exactly empty, but it might as well have been: all he found was misplaced mail, announcements of possible future mailings, redundant mail, mail to other people. As his status and function as a proper addressee thus appeared to be in doubt, self-addressing was the only option left. The disappointment of that particular day, which could hardly have been all that different from the possible disappointment of, let’s say, 13 June 1963 or 29 September 1964 (to pick some random dates), is in fact a direct effect of the promise

of the modern postal system, as expressed in the inscription on the building of the former Washington D.C. City Post Office:

*Messenger of Sympathy and Love, Servant of Parted Friends, Consoler of the Lonely,
Bond of the Scattered Family, Enlarger of Common Life, Carrier of News and Knowledge,
Instrument of Trade and Industry, Promoter of Mutual Acquaintance and of Peace and
Goodwill Among Men and Nations.*

...or in the lyrics of a hundred pop songs...

*The Letter
Please Mr Postman
Sealed with a Kiss
Signed, Sealed, Delivered
Return to Sender*

...the promise, that is, of a type of connectedness that transcends the daily experience of social division, a type of ecstatic, boundless togetherness for which the correct name is either utopia or love. But for all its heartfelt pathos, this notion of boundless togetherness is, as Bernhard Siegert argues, mainly the product of a feverish circulation of communications that masks the power relations created and maintained by the modern postal system. In fact, the modern postal system that appeared towards the end of the eighteenth century is primarily a technology of the control engineering that characterises modern government, a surveillance instrument designed to tie all parts of the nation together in one postal empire. And, as it happened, this postal empire soon became a self-regulating network of connections existing beyond or above the actual physical distances of the territories it traversed. The postal system, then, belongs to a mode of governing that designed its subjects as subjects of the mailing system, that is, as *addressees* – potential senders and receivers. To be a modern individual essentially means to have a postal address or a mailbox. It means, furthermore, that you identify yourself as a potential writer or reader, and on this identification rests both the idea of individual authorship, and the new conception of literature as an extension of letter writing – that is, as a transmission that reaches out from one soul to another, never missing its destination, the inner person. (Good government ensures that the post *will* be delivered, i.e., that things will not lose their proper meaning.) This is the discursive configuration of a postal society in which the function of letters/literature is less that of communication than of assigning positions. The positions of the sexes, for instance: positing men as writing and women as reading/understanding. But it is the feverish imagination of a perfect hermeneutic circle of sending, receiving and understanding that remains in the light: the postal system as the essential scenario of romantic love.²

² Bernhard Siegert, *Relays. Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*. Trans. Kevin Repp. Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999.

To this ecstatic scenario could be added the fact that the circulation of letters implied not just a hermeneutics, but – as importantly – an erotics. For letters are not just messages, but also bodies that connect or fail to connect with other bodies. As John Durham Peters points out, the trope of ‘dead letters’ and the existence of the so-called Dead Letter Office (the name of the American office for mail with address problems) attest to such an imagination. The pathos of ‘dead letters’ is not that two persons fail to exchange signs, but that mortal beings – bodies – miss getting in touch. Letters that fail to communicate are like dead bodies, corpses.³ Thus, letters are not neutral carriers of spiritual content, but material bodies (sprayed with perfume, hiding glistening locks of hair or pressed flowers) charged with the drama of erotic contact. Now the full implications of the unfortunate postal events of 8 August 1965 appear in all their pathos: the promise of a connection at once spiritual and physical had been frustrated – and what other forms of contact are there?

However, the conclusion of Ray Johnson’s little report on these events attests, above all, to the purely systemic, or technological, operations of the postal. The option to self-address – to ‘write myself a letter’ – essentially confirms Ray Johnson’s position within the discursive field of senders and receivers. The postal system – a series of operations that precede the category of meaning – simply *works*, disregarding the success or failure of communications. Johnson’s desires may have been frustrated, but he is still connected. The little diary-like report – itself a sort of letter to himself – confirms this connectedness as well as the fact that there is, apparently, no escaping the postal regime.

II

Yet the drama of Ray Johnson’s postal connection is played out not in the context of romantic literature or education, but within an entirely different mediascape, connected to an equally different mode of artistic production. It is a mode of production for which the postal system is not the silent vehicle that orders reality, but a highly visible and autonomous media technology by means of which some of the most central tenets of twentieth century artistic imaginations are continually probed or tested. In a sense, all Ray Johnson does (during the course of an obstinately eccentric artistic career that spans more than 40 years) is to make literal, or to materialise, the centrality of this media technology to the new forms of self-reflection within the field of visual arts. By shaping his entire artistic practice as a postal system, he seems to make literal the way in which this media technology has become a *dispositif* by means of which art can

³ John Durham Peters, *Speaking Into The Air. A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

rework its tacit status as a particularly pertinent case of postal ‘communication’ – the harbinger of either social utopia or love or both. He quite simply presents the postal system as the framework that allows modern art to articulate its desires to inscribe itself, as concretely as possible, in ‘the social’ – with all the ambivalences that these desires entail.

Initially, such articulations appear in terms of what would at the outset seem to be a specifically visual space or format – the space of collage. Within the field of visual arts, collages in particular constitute a space where the very materiality of artistic communications or media technologies is foregrounded. In fact, Ray Johnson seems to play off the fact that the bits and scraps of modernist collage often consist of various kinds of postal dispatches: postcards, stamped and addressed envelopes, newspaper clippings, banknotes, checks and calling cards, etc. The newspaper clippings of Synthetic Cubism are of course the famous case in point, and Johnson once told James Rosenquist that his work was an extension of Cubism because he ‘put things in the mail and they got spread all over the place’.⁴ If the postal system takes on a certain presence within the spaces of collages, this is related to the fact that the question of the materiality of artistic media is now raised to a principle due to the presence of new communication technologies that all highlight the materiality of communications. With the proliferation of letters and postcards in the collages and photomontages of the Dada movement, the connection between collages, the postal system and media technologies is underscored. Here, the postal reference plays along with the tendency to imagine new modes of artistic production and reception in terms of technologies such as gramophony, film, photography, radio or telegraphy. Collages, then, were identified with communications media in general – but this identification was formulated from a postal perspective that, at one point, had the Dada movement describe itself as ‘a postage stamp’. Dada did, in other words, seem to identify itself quite specifically with the automatised and anonymised of the postal system that took place as the 1847 invention of the postage stamp allowed for prepaid mail to be stuffed in communal street letterboxes by masses of anonymous letter writers.⁵ Here, the avant-garde explicitly presents the systemic nature of communication technologies as its own productive framework.

But the presence of this framework was only made literal at the moment when Ray Johnson started to use collage strategies as the basis for what would seem to be a social practice in the most concrete sense of the word. In fact, from 1955 onwards he managed to create a functioning international postal network of hundreds of active senders and

⁴ Lucy Lippard, ‘Special Deliverance’, in De Salvo, Donna and Gudis, Catherine, (eds.), *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*. Paris and New York: Flammarion, 1999, p. 142.

⁵ Galerie Montaigne, Salon Dada, Paris 1921 (exh. cat.).

receivers, by starting to send works of art (mostly small collages or dispersed bits and pieces that could be read in terms of a collage aesthetics) to a list of recipients. As the network started to grow, gradually engaging all its participants as both receivers and senders, the notion of an endless collage activity informed the whole of its activity: from the contents of mailings to the notion of disseminating messages more or less at random. In the course of the seventies and eighties, the network developed into what became known as the international mail art movement – a system of exchanges that far exceeded Johnson’s sphere of influence. And of course the manifest social dimension of this project would seem all the more convincing with the withdrawal of any one master signature. The mail art movement simply seemed to have made real the old dream of a social utopia modelled on artistic exchanges. The postal system is the media technology that makes the realisation possible, on a level at once theoretical and practical.

But what actually happened here was that the essential duplicity of the modern postal system (where the new freedom of individual authorship is primarily a function of a more thorough regulation of society) was collapsed into one single positive framework – a framework that presented its ‘loving’ circle of exchanges and its control engineering as part of the same *overt* logic or operation. It seemed as if the use of the postal system within the sphere of visual art first and foremost served to directly transfer the romantic discourse of understanding from the ecstatic but ephemeral realm of souls or interiorities to the far more ‘grounded’ realm of social organisation or governing. The authenticity of artistic exchanges forms the basis for new modes of governing – as expressed in this statement by John Held, Jr.:

*Mail art is changing the way we think about art and about living in the world. After decades of erecting a worldwide structure of global interaction, mail art and now e-mail art continues to evolve as a stimulus for increased understanding and co-operation among a global constituency.*⁶

In fact, the conflation of the ideal of ecstatic togetherness with the notion of actual, here-and-now sociality necessarily calls for its own particular mode of not-so-overt control engineering. For the agreed-upon principles of the international mail art movement – its social contract – display all the double binds that mark any attempt to organise utopia in actual social space. Each and every one of its techniques to engender new forms of social unity expresses a utopian desire to be released from the ordinary constraints and power relations of the art system. But the implementation of such freedom is in fact based on a closely policed system of ethical rules that essentially express the fear of all-

⁶ John Held Jr., ‘From Moticos to Mail Art: Four Decades of Postal Networking’, accessed through <http://www.artpool.hu/RayJohnson.html>.

too-likely falls from grace. To engage in the principles of the mail art system is to agree to a number of musts and must nots (do not judge, get rid of your vanity, try not to think about a work after you have sent it, do not expect returns, etc.). In the social contract of mail art participants, this ethics of ego-denial is rooted in the central principles that any object received through the mail should be received 'guilt-free, with no reply expected'; that exhibitions of mail art will entail no fees, no juries and no rejection and, finally, that 'all senders receive'.

The central idea here is that of the free give – a response to the evident fact that the modern art system makes an interesting case for the study of social antagonism, with the fears it produces of 'feeling inferior' due to comparison and competition – an oedipal scenario that informs both the teaching of art practice and the writing of its history.⁷ For not everyone is allowed to be an artist, and only the products of certain artists – those said to 'measure up' to art's history – are accorded high value. Mail art, in contrast, not only attempts to sanction the free reception of gifts of art without obligation (in a sense to restore the symbolical division between gift and exchange in an increasingly commodity-oriented society). More importantly, it accords to *each and every one without exception* the power of the giver who gives the most and thus obligates the others – a social impossibility if there ever was one and perhaps the purest expression of the many avant-garde dreams of an existence beyond social division (from Dadaist and Surrealist notions of collective creation and the politics of the subconscious to Joseph Beuys's dictum 'everyone is an artist'). But the constant policing of ethical rules that supports the dream of this social impossibility of course also casts long shadows of unspoken social obligations and power relations. If the dream manages to live on despite these contradictions, it is probably because the fragility of its utopianism is somehow *covered up* by the efficiency and apparent pragmatism of the medium that gives the mail art movement its shape. For the attempt to democratise or generalise the ability to give the most (i.e., to give art) could perhaps only be imagined on a large scale through a medium that is proper to modern democracy since it shapes all of its subjects into both senders/givers and receivers. The modern postal system is precisely such a medium. And the central role played by the postal medium in this context is supported by the fact that the overt discourse of the mail art movement was not so much focused on the concept of gifts (or exchange) as on the concept of *communication*. A discourse that was technically proper to the pragmatics of the postal medium, but essentially expressive of the social/aesthetic longing that fuels the movement – the longing for the restoration of a lost social unity, sealed with the gift of art.

⁷ One example of this set of rules is given in Melanie Sage-Enkoff's *Mailart – An Introduction*, http://pages.map.com/rclark/tabloid_trash/asjartcl.htm. This is her introduction: 'Mail art can mean different things to different people, but above all it should give one the freedom to create and send whatever they feel is on their mind without feeling inferior or that their work is being compared by others receiving it.'

III

The little note on that worst of all days, 8 August 1965, contains no reference to this particular type of sociality. It expresses longing, yes, but only in terms of the strictly personal. It attests to the systemic nature of the postal, but never as a productive framework for a utopian mode of governance. In fact, Ray Johnson's own particular use of the postal system is a strange and double-edged kind of performance. For right from the start it seems to undercut every single one of the 'social' ideals and achievements of the mail art movement he himself appears to have initiated. And yet, it is precisely in this double capacity that his take on the postal manages to frame the ambivalence of a twentieth century art system suspended between formalist visual practices and social ideals. It is interesting to note, then, that in the mailing network conceived by Ray Johnson, the discourse of gifts and giving becomes the vehicle through which a reflection *on the postal system itself* becomes possible.

To take one example. In 1958, Ray Johnson receives a letter from the grateful recipient of a gift of one of his works, a certain Frederick St. Abyn. Picture him sitting down at his table to interrupt almost every single statement of gratitude in this letter with his own acerbic comments (writing between the lines in a tiny handwriting), and then sending the overwritten letter off to a third party, his friend William S. (Bill) Wilson:

6 October 1958

(does he know my birthday is 16 October? I hope he sends me his wall)

Dear Ray

I didn't remember (*forgot to remember*) until after you (*me and Suzy*) had left last night (*there's always night*) that it was you (*I remembered it was me*) who did the wonderful Rimbaud (*me and Rimbaud*) cover for New Directions! I have of course known it, since practically the moment (*does he know the story of my signature erasure*) it appeared for I did my dissertation (*that's his business*) on Rimbaud and have been carrying on a bookish love affair (*sounds like me and Suzy*) with him ever since.

I was so impressed (*watch out, he shoots to kill*) with your work and flattered that you (*was it me?*) gave me (*was it me?*) a piece (*no*). For the moment (*always the moment*) it's propped on a shelf with a Nymphenburg vase (*Mu* is the state of absolute spiritual poverty. (Blyth)*), a piece of contemporary German sculpture and a 15th to 18th century Buddha head and disciple, waiting for me (*yes him, not me*) to find time (*hope he finds it*) to get it to the framer.

It was a pleasure (*the pleasure's all mine*) to meet you and see (*did he see it*) your work (*the work's all mine*). I can hardly wait to get my Ray Johnson on the wall (*he's not the only one*). I shall continue (*he'll have a long wait*) to watch for your signature (*I'm changing my name to Ray Johnson*) and hope that I'll meet you again sometime (*he didn't seem to realize that my giving was the again. Maybe he wants to come to my funeral*).

My sincere thanks,
F. C. St. Aubyn

To retrace: Frederic C. St. Aubyn has received a work of art from Ray Johnson, and seems fully aware of the value of the gift he has received. A work of art belongs to that particular type of gift that can be categorised as *invaluable* – meaning that they are supposedly exempt from the ordinary forms of economic speculation that always threaten to turn gift-giving into simply a more dignified and symbol-enhanced form of trade. Yet, works of art are also subject to intense economic speculation based on the way in which precisely their status as *invaluable* may, at some unpredictable moment, be translated into pure cash value. A work of art could then perhaps be called the essential gift – at least from an anthropological perspective – that pays attention to the way in which (in every known culture) the gift must always appear to exceed the immediate economic framework, at the same time as it establishes obligations of debt or credit that serve to reinforce or redistribute the power relations in that particular economy.⁸

Because of this gift, a deep relation has been forged between St. Aubyn and the giver, and this is why he is effusive: a mere 'thank you' is not enough. He suddenly remembers an earlier work by Johnson that centred on a mutual interest (Rimbaud), proving that the two of them were, in a sense, already connected. And so, now that a relation has both been established and proven to have a history, he wants to see both the giver and his work again. But there is of course nothing extraordinary about this exchange. St. Aubyn never strays beyond the etiquette of gratitude. What is extraordinary is Ray Johnson's response to the letter, which is nothing less than a dismissal of the whole idea that a gift has been given. And this dismissal has nothing to do with the etiquette of giving, which demands that the giver always underplay the value of the gift in order to defuse the potential hostility of placing someone in debt. Instead, Johnson's writing between the lines systematically pinches and probes every single element in St. Aubyn's letter that support the very logic of the gift, i.e., the notion that one person can in fact *give* something to another person.

What is then opened up here are the questions of 1) the identity of the giver, 2) the identification between giver and the gift, 3) the notion of property, 4) the notion of a proper reception

⁸ Marcel Mauss, *Gaven. Utvekslingens form og årsak i arkaiske samfunn*. Trans. Thomas Hylland Eriksen. Oslo: Cappelen, 1995.

of the gift, 5) the moment of exchange, and 6) the narrative structure within which all of these elements are contained. And, last but not least, 7) the reciprocal relation between the one who gives and the one who receives. For, crucially, Ray's response to St. Aubyn's letter is not sent back to St. Aubyn, but forwarded to a third party. The response to St. Aubyn's letter is then not really a response at all, but rather a redistribution of the very terms of the exchange – a redistribution that breaks open the bilateral relation between giver and recipient that St. Aubyn's letter works so hard to affirm.

This 1958 letter – a piece of ephemera among the thousands of Ray Johnson mailings dispersed all over the world – presents a model: a model of the structure of his postal performance. And, through this, a different model of what is usually imagined as the social dynamics of communication arts. For if Johnson interrupts the very ground of the gift logic that subtends St. Aubyn's letter, it affects, above all, Johnson's own artistic practice of giving, which was developed in the most literal sense of the word through the medium of the postal system with its limitless network of givers (senders) and receivers. And so it will necessarily also affect all the terms and all the ideals that would come to surround what was later called *correspondence art or mail art*: that of art as communication, of art as an act of ritual generosity, of art as social networking, and last but not least the new ideal of interactivity or democratic participation in the arts.

It is therefore significant that, at the end of his strange non-response to St. Aubyn, Johnson indulges in a more direct reflection on the complexities of giving:

Bill: There is that moment in giving. It has nothing to do with what or how, to whom or why. It is the same as any other moment. Since it does not exist, it escapes, and is not seen. We contain it by description, actions, realization. Ray.

This additional note actually seems to engage head-on with the complex question of the timing of gifts or giving that is at the core of some of the most influential discussions of the function of gifts within social systems. In Marcel Mauss's discussion of the role of the gift within the perspective of the 'total social fact', the timing of the gift is what distinguishes it from mere exchange. Gifts are ruled by a time limit that determines that 'giving back' is only possible after a certain time has passed. It is this time limit that creates the illusion of the spontaneous free give, which has the power to reinforce or rearrange social bonds (and which makes gift discourse such an apt instrument for grasping that thing called 'the social'). However, in his rereading of *The Gift*, Jacques Derrida focuses on Mauss's notion of the time limit as a symptom of the exclusionary mechanisms of a sociological language that makes social totality or 'the social' itself an object of description and definition, as if it was an *a priori* category. For such time limits are invariably understood in terms of the fullness of presence, and will then only serve to testify to the eternal cycle of meaningful exchanges that subtends the notion of the social totality and its guarantees of returns and

response-ibility. Derrida's own effort to think the time limit of the gift in terms of a potential non-presence – that is, in terms of potential death, absence or dispersal – is an attempt to think the 'madness' or 'impossibility' of the gift. For what would the excessive or non-economic force of the free give be if it could simply be communicated and recognised *as such*? From such a perspective, the gift that is not *the* guarantor of the social, but, rather, an excessive and duplicitous force that seems to destroy the circle of social exchanges just as it also frames or encircles this circle. It is then perhaps first of all a force that has the capacity to *initiate sociality anew*, in that it seems to continually reset the terms of exchange. The phenomenon of the gift may, above all, direct our attention to the eventual becoming of 'the social'.⁹

When Ray Johnson brings up the question of the potential lack of reality of the 'moment in giving', he contributes to reorient our conception of 'the social' in precisely this way. The postal system, which automatically provides the time delays necessary to make responses appear as spontaneous or 'unexpected' gifts, seems to presuppose the never-ending presence of a sociality that never fails to stay connected in a continual and authentic communication above and beyond all forms of antagonism or misunderstanding. To point to the uncertain 'reality' of the moments of exchange that keeps the system going is then to point to the loss and dispersal, straying and misreading that necessarily threatens such a system. But most importantly, it points out that the prevalent impulse to change the terms of *art production* from the formal to the social – i.e., to consciously produce artworks *as gifts* or moments of authentic communication – is not a guarantee of any heightened access to the reality of the social as such. At a time when the notion of the social was about to be raised to a principle in the practice of a number of artists, Johnson refuses to see it as a category that modern art can simply latch on to when tired of its own devalued or overvalued forms. If 'the social' exists in his work, it is only as something extremely elusive, almost non-existent, impossible in the here and now.

The utopian *dream* of sociality is certainly there: the longing for the ecstasies of authentic communication and the erotics of actual contact between bodies, suggestively staged in terms of the actuality of an ever-expanding social network. But it is as if this dream can only be fulfilled through a strategy that continually undoes the bonds that these networks were supposed to reinforce. As Johnson's postal performance plays up the effects of miscommunication and antagonism *at the very scene of social bonding*, it becomes clear that authentic communication, if it happens at all, happens at a different speed – the speed of becoming. It is, in other words, a performance devoted not to the 'reality' of the social in art, but to the duplicitous strategies of initiating sociality anew.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

IV

This is perhaps also why the identities of senders and receivers seem take on a strange double status in Ray Johnson's postal performance. As a technology for governing, the modern postal system is based on the stability of proper names and addresses – the very guarantee that meaning will always be assigned to its right place. The proper names of the modern postal system support what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe call a political imaginary 'peopled with universal subjects and conceptually built around History in the singular' – in short, the political imaginary fuelling the conception that there is some essence or given that can be called 'the social'.¹⁰ But in Johnson's postal system, the social space of actual addressees (the mailing network) is doubled by an ecstatic space where a profusion of proper names seems to float around as if disconnected. For the names of the participants in his mailing system no longer occupy only the space of envelopes and letterheads, but more and more seem to become the *very content* of mailings and messages themselves. And here they take part in a complex and exhausting naming game that continually subjects them to pseudonymy, cryptonymy, paleonymy, metonymy, anonymity... in fact to all the accidents that can possibly happen to a name. How to address such a community – a community that does not simply exist but is continually being invented? And how to understand a community that exists not in terms of postal connections or communication, but in a principle of postal disconnection or bifurcation or uncontrollable spreading – a kind of sociality that can only be approached in terms of what Ray Johnson called 'collage analysis'?

Here I do not want to conclude absolutely but just suggest a model or direction for understanding the basic intuition underlying Ray Johnson's take on 'the social' in or through art. Such a model may perhaps be found in the sociological subfield known as actor-network theory, as presented in the work of Bruno Latour, among others. What distinguishes this approach is, on the first hand a critique of the standard idea of the social as a *field* or *domain*. As Latour puts it, in standard sociology the social is invariably presented as a specific domain of reality that always encompasses the agents that are 'inside it', and it can be used as a specific type of causality to account for the residual aspects that other domains (psychology, law, art, etc.) cannot completely deal with.¹¹ This is why boundary problems arising in the field of art tend to be referred to the problem-solving domain called 'the social'. In order to think beyond this conceptual framework, sociology has to open up its own concept of the social, and Latour presents the contours of such an opening when he contrasts the Émile Durkheim's 'sociology of the social' with the example of nineteenth-century sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who thought of the social as a kind of circulating fluid

¹⁰ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985, p. 2.

¹¹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 3-17.

that should be followed by new methods and not a specific type of realm or context. The social is here not a thing among things, but a principle of connectivity between things that are not themselves social. For sociology the focus may then be on the ever-new configurations or assemblages of elements. While this might seem like a very vague type of proposition compared with the relative fixity of the notion of a social domain or context, Latour argues that this principle of connectivity actually lies behind the most common experience we have in 'encountering the puzzling face of the social':

A new vaccine is being marketed, a new job description is offered, a new political movement is being created, a new planetary system is discovered, a new law is voted, a new catastrophe occurs. In each instance, we have to reshuffle our conceptions of what was associated together because the previous definition has been made somewhat irrelevant... Thus, the overall project of what we are supposed to do together is thrown into doubt. The sense of belonging has entered a crisis. But to register this feeling of crisis and to follow those new connections, another notion of the social has to be devised. It has to be much wider than what is usually called by that name, yet strictly limited to the tracing of new associations and to the designing of their assemblages.¹²

A similar methodology is, I believe, at work in Ray Johnson's idiosyncratic postal system. Using the operations of twentieth-century visual art as a point of departure for moving through and then beyond the concept of the social defined in terms of postal connection and communication, Ray Johnson's collage analysis is ultimately nothing less than an outline for a new ontology of the social itself.

¹² Ibid.

Quaderns portàtils
ISSN: 1886-5259

© of the text Ina Blom
Proofreading by Keith Patrick
Design by Cosmic <http://www.cosmic.es>
Typography: Clarendon and Trade Gothic



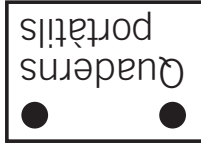
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In November 2009, Ina Blom was a guest lecturer at the MACBA in the context of the exhibition *Ray Johnson. Please Add to & Return* and she also contributed to the MACBA exhibition catalogue with the essay 'How to (Not) Answer a Letter: Ray Johnson's Postal Performance'.

Quaderns portàtils (*Portable Notebooks*) is a line of publications available free of charge through the Internet. In general, the texts proceed from lectures and seminars that have taken place at the MACBA, as well as from exhibition catalogues. This and other issues of the Quaderns portàtils collection are available on the Museum website.

Quaderns
portàtils

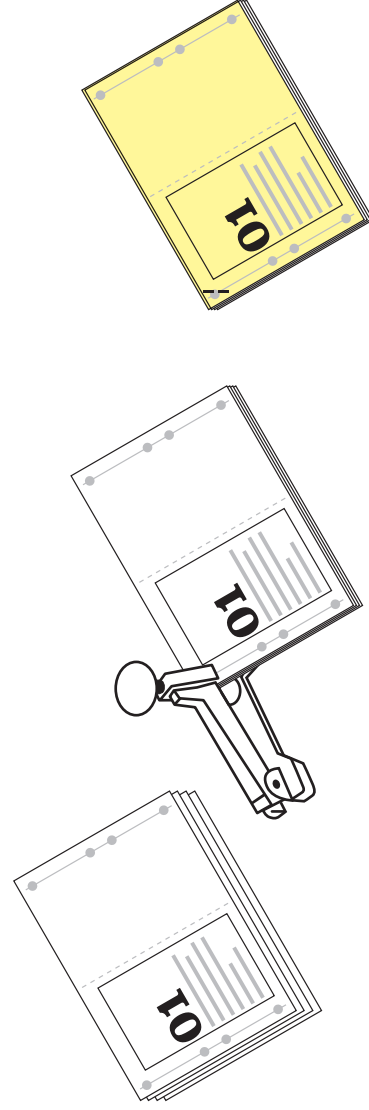


Tres maneres d'enquadrernar els teus Quaderns portàtils

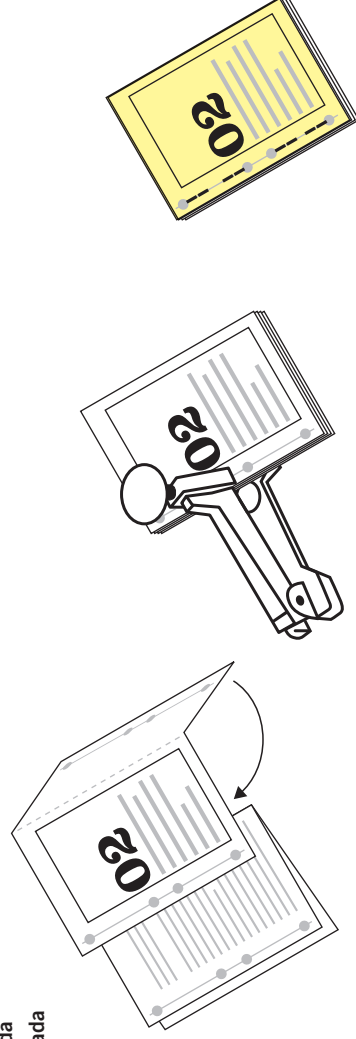
Tres maneras de encuadernar tus Quaderns portàtils

Three ways of binding your Quaderns portàtils

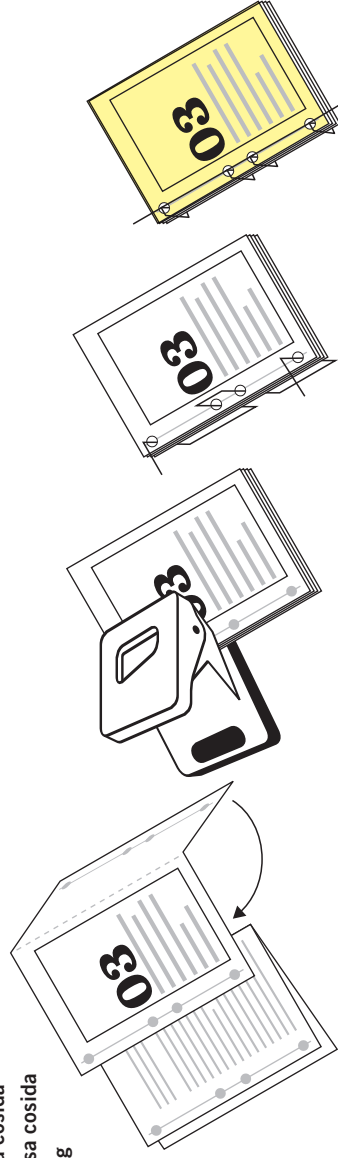
Dossier grapat
Dosier grapado
Stapled Dossier



Enquadrernació japonesa grapada
Encuadrernación japonesa grapada
Stapled Japanese Binding



Enquadrernació japonesa cosida
Encuadrernación japonesa cosida
Sewed Japanese Binding



Llenceu aquest manual d'instruccions una vegada utilitzat (no enquadrernar).
Desechar este manual de instrucciones una vez utilizado (no encuadernar).
Throw away this instructions manual once used (do not bind).