

MARTOS GALLERY

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GOTHAM ART & THEATER
by Elisabeth Kley

[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 Alguus 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.



"Ecstatic Peace Poetry Journal" Clearly on a similar wavelength, Sonic Youth founder and publication collector Thurston Moore once asked, "Can you find someone to pay me to draft a script about the lives of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and their intersecting relationship through the countercultural 20th century?" Although Moore is best known for ferociously atonal noise rock, he is also a major poetry fan and a cultural historian, having written histories of Grunge and '70s No-Wave rock.

"Ecstatic Peace Poetry Journal, Issue #10," an exhibition held in honor of the tenth edition of a magazine Moore began publishing yearly in 2001, is on view at White Columns. Inspired by the homemade mimeographed poetry magazines from the '60s, EPPJ is an eponymous publication (often co-edited by Byron Coley) that includes poetry and a few images from pioneers like Bill

Berkson, Tuli Kupferberg, Gerard Malanga and Richard Hell, side by side with offerings from younger contributors including [Jutta Koether](#), Jocko Weyland and Georganne Deen. Blown up covers and pages from EPPJ can be seen on the entry walls, but the bulk of the show is a raucous gathering of vintage publications from Moore's collection displayed in vitrines. Reproduced posters of covers and inner pages hang on the walls, along with some poetry LPs. Most of the books and zines were mimeographed and given away or sold for a dollar or less. Free love, drugs and marijuana are celebrated in a trip back to the psychedelic era, a time when uninhibited poetry sprouted as freely as weeds in an empty lot. Cover images range from vaguely Egyptian doodles to Warhol photos, sex scenes, nudes, and abstract stripes and dots. Wonderful titles include *Sick Fly*, *Suction*, *Drainage*, *Purr* and *Meatball*. The summer 1967 issue of *The Willie*, "promoting ACID in the Maggot Eye" was edited by "willie the snort gobbler w/football hair for earmuffs," and "dirty poems for your suicide lives" are by Neeli Cherry and Charles Bukowski. The exhibition closes on February 20.



"Double Bill" Rather than juggling phrases and words, Rafael Sánchez and Kathleen White rearrange entire publications on tables. *BOOKS RECORDS TAPES*, a year-round situational art piece and street sale they've been curating on the sidewalk in front of his apartment for years, can now be seen indoors at Art in General in a show called "Double Bill," was curated by Redmond Entwistle.

The project by Sanchez and White at first resembles other motley collections of scavenged items often peddled on sidewalks, but closer inspection reveals that this arcane assemblage of books and magazines seems to be engaged in an animated silent dialogue.

A flyer from [Mark Morrisroe](#)'s posthumous 1994 exhibition at Pat Hearn gallery is placed in front of a book about stain removal, bringing the scribbles and chemical blotches that often appeared on his photographs to mind, as well as their sexual content. Nearby is a collection of all five issues of *Dirt*, the Xeroxed magazine made by Morrisroe and Lynelle White from 1975-77, as reproduced by *LluPiNiT*, a non-profit organization founded by Sánchez and Kathleen White in 2007.

A pamphlet called "Bats need friends" sits by a vintage cross-dresser's newspaper called *The Tranvestian*, conjuring Transylvanian drag. Magazines and music scores hang diagonally from the front of the tables, including a publication on doll collecting, a manual for "safety and security for older Americans" and the score for a song called Mitzi's Rendezvous, or "Pussy." And in the collection of maps and guidebooks below, "Journey into the Universe" is opposed by "One Big Prison: Freedom of Movement in Gaza."

Sánchez is also a visual and performing artist who starred (wearing diapers) in his 1999 full-length version of Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers* (performed to lip-synced tunes from the rock band Queen's early catalogue). His stencils sometimes make stealth appearances on various publications. A pile of books on Che Guevara, Castro and revolutionary Cuba, for example, is near an elementary science textbook with a gold silhouette of Castro on the cover over a cloudy sky.

An edition of William Wordsworth poetry published in 1970 has a worn spine touched up with gold leaf. The slipcase is stenciled with a silhouette of Wordsworth, after a tracing from the Bewick engraving on the frontpiece inside -- turning the English Romantic's face into a jagged black mask. This artist's book is available for only \$80, and the rest of the items can also be bought during gallery hours at prices ranging from \$2 to \$2,225 for some very rare items. The exhibition also features Suzanne Goldenberg's rickety sculptures made from fragile bits of cardboard balanced on a framework of scrap wood, some black and white text paintings by Mary Billyou and *Monuments*, a film by curator Redmond Entwistle that recreates a visit to New Jersey's industrial wasteland by [Dan Graham](#), [Robert Smithson](#) and [Gordon Matta-Clark](#). The show is up until Mar. 20, 2010.