

# Collaborative “Mail Art” Puts the Post in Postmodernism

Letters, envelopes and enclosures take center stage in an intimate new art show



Envelope decoration was always a staple of the mail art experience. This colorful letter was sent from performance artist Anna Banana (Anna Lee Long) to collagist John Evans in 2010. (John Evans papers, Archives of American Art).

By Ryan P. Smith  
JULY 30, 2018

In the era of instant messaging and FaceTime on the go, it can be easy to forget the pleasure of shuffling out to the mailbox in hope of discovering a thoughtful note from an old friend. Removing a letter from its envelope is a rich tactile experience, and marginalia, cross-outs, distinct penmanship and quirky enclosures combine to give epistolary exchanges a uniquely personal flavor.

In the experimental artistic simmer of the late 1950s, the everyday creativity of letter-writing gave rise to a veritable movement: that of “mail art,” an antiestablishment, anything-goes mode of serial imaginative expression whose inclusive nature has kept it alive even into the Digital Age. Now a new show, “Pushing the Envelope,” organized by the Smithsonian’s Archives of

# Smithsonian

## MAGAZINE

American Art and opening August 10 at the Lawrence A. Fleischman Gallery in Washington, D.C., promises to shine a spotlight on the medium.

The enigmatic Neo-Dada collagist Ray Johnson, a Detroit native who struggled with fame even as he appropriated images of movie stars for his art, pioneered in the field of mail art, weaving together an immense spider web of collaborators that would survive him following his sudden suicide in 1995.

Johnson's stock-in-trade was benevolent chain letters asking recipients if they would kindly add something to what was already enclosed and pass the updated artwork (often an irreverent collage) along to someone new. He didn't care about getting the letters back so much as giving them long and eventful lives, with many idiosyncratic transformations along the way. A simple absurd comic with a couple magazine cutout figures could in time become an entire alien scene, suffused with eye-popping colors and dreamlike in its surreal beauty.

Johnson's first known chain letter dates to 1958, but attributing the invention of mail art to a single person flies against its ethos. It was a communal concept from the start, and circles beyond Johnson's quickly began to bloom all over the United States, as well as overseas. Mail art was the democratic answer to the plutocratic art museum scene, the populist antidote to straitlaced criticism of "good" and "bad" art. Any person alive could write or add to a letter—mail art was empowering and welcoming, a space free from negativity in which all feelings and ideas could find a home. (Johnson even got post office employees in on the fun, inviting them to decorate his mail with wavy strings of red cancellation stamps.)

The exhibition, then, is not a celebration of Ray Johnson alone—though its guest curator, the University of Kentucky's Miriam Kienle, happens to be a Johnson expert. Rather, Kienle conceptualized this display as a wide-ranging celebration, a vibrant vichyssoise of individual perspectives.

"There are works by Ray Johnson," Kienle says, "but I wanted to move away from him and feature a lot of the other people who were really prominent in the movement but maybe not as visible." She also embraced the participatory spirit of the medium by taking input from her art students at the University of Kentucky. "We developed the exhibition together," she says, "and the students wrote some of the labels." Even the museumgoing public will have the chance to engage directly with the art: a tie-in event at the National Postal Museum will allow visitors to design custom rubber "artistamps" like those with which many prominent mail artists tend to adorn their letters.

The exhibits planned for "Pushing the Envelope" are as wild as one might expect, running the gamut from biting satire to radical politics to pure absurdist joy. A flier sent by mail artist Buster Cleveland to daily collagist John Evans advertises a fictional publication called *Art For Um*, poking fun at the elitist image of *Artforum* magazine. The contents of an envelope sent by queer advocacy collective Les Petites Bon-Bons to activist art critic Lucy Lippard include a stylized, scripty rendering of the group's name (red ink on pink paper), a bold black and white photo in which limbs and bodies flow together, and a simple textual exhortation to "imagine a Gay universe." Meanwhile, a Ray Johnson piece also sent to Lippard—by way of the artist Richard C—invites her to participate in a "face collage" and stick her tongue through the thick black lips printed on his letter.



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## MAGAZINE

This blend of serious and silly is part and parcel of the mail art experience. Kienle says gay rights groups in particular—like Les Petites Bon-Bons—found in the interactive theater of mail art an invaluable sense of community. “They could feel really connected to a wider movement that was also very accepting and loving,” Kienle says. She contends that the work of Ray Johnson and creative cohorts like Canada’s General Idea “reached out to people who were very isolated in the more provincial places where they lived,” people “not only remote from the New York art world, but marginalized in the communities that they lived in because of their sexuality.” An entire section of the new exhibition, titled *Queer Correspondence*, explores mail art’s impact on the fight for gay rights.

The mail art scene was likewise a forum for feminist thinkers. One piece featured in “Pushing the Envelope,” a photograph that provocative Australian artist Pat Larter sent to cartoonist John Held Jr., speaks to Larter’s feminist and gender-questioning artistic impulses. Clad in a flapper-like outfit featuring pearls and flashy stockings, Larter subverts the ideal of the flapper entirely with comical makeup around her eyes and a ridiculous mouth-agape expression. Graffitied on the white wall to her right are the words “Pat Says Get Arted in 1981”—the year she dropped her work in the mail. “Pat Larter coined the term ‘fe-mail art,’” Kienle tells me, “and made very interesting feminist work about the body.”

Kienle says that mail art and its countercultural cousins “widened the space in which we understand that art can be made, and really pushed boundaries. The expansion of the art world—mail art is a part of that.”

She hopes that visitors will be moved by the pieces going on display to open up creative correspondences of their own, as she wound up doing with artist Richard C in the course of putting the show together. Even in the realm of cyberspace, the appeal of mail art endures; Kienle recalls her students’ enthusiasm for Frank Warren’s wildly popular PostSecret blog, where anonymous postcards containing personal secrets are uploaded in photo form each week, and says she herself is a member of a mail art Facebook page where mail art can be shared instantaneously across vast distances. Other popular sites like DeviantArt and Etsy aim to mirror the mail art ideal of a shared, nonjudgmental expressive space without explicitly focusing on letters. “There’s a lot of contemporary practice that really speaks to the same ethos of mail art,” Kienle says, “being freely given, and collaborative, and having this kind of antiestablishment politics to it.”

With that said, for Kienle’s money, nothing beats the experience of sending and receiving classic, tangible mail art. The impact of receiving an envelope filled with dozens of tiny personalized enclosures—a letter of the sort Ray Johnson was known for in his 1960s heyday—can really never be replicated digitally, she says. “When you open it up, you are responsible. You’re the one drawing the correspondence. It’s like, *How do all these things connect?* And I think because you’re taking them out one by one and having that experience—of putting the puzzle together—materiality is really, really important.”

*“Pushing the Envelope: Mail Art from the Archives of American Art,” guest curated by Miriam Kienle from the University of Kentucky, will be on view at the Lawrence A. Fleischman Gallery from August 10, 2018 through January 4, 2019. The Fleischman Gallery is located on the first floor of the complex housing the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery, at 8th and F Streets NW in Washington, D.C.*



## John Evans, 79, artist whose collages were a diary

BY LINCOLN ANDERSON | October 25, 2012



John Evans. Photo by Clayton Patterson

John Evans, an East Village artist who created a collage every day for nearly 40 years, died on Oct. 5.

According to Pavel Zoubok, who represented him at his Chelsea gallery, Evans died of a sudden heart attack, following an extended battle with hydrocephalus. He was 79.

Evans was born in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and moved to New York in 1963, settling on Avenue B in a four-room apartment renting for \$35 a month.

Starting in 1964, he made a daily collage on a page of a bound sketchbook, date-stamping each work. Filling numerous books, he continued this practice through the year 2000. He chose to conclude the series on the millennium, which seemed to him an appropriate end date. A monograph, "John Evans: Collages," was published in 2004.

His collage materials ranged from newspaper clippings, business cards, product stickers and ticket stubs to bits of ephemera or random photos found on the East Village streets. He used colored inks to build upon the collage elements. He employed abstraction, typography, ironic juxtaposition and Dada and Surrealist sensibility in his pieces.

His collages are mini-time capsules that mark the end of the Vietnam War, New York City's 1970s fiscal crisis, the 1980s club scene and art market and the AIDS crisis and its devastating impact on the art world.

"It became not so much his diary, but a diary of everyday life — all the flotsam and jetsam of our lives," said Zoubok in an interview with this newspaper two years ago when the gallery was showing an exhibit of Evans's work. In that show, Evans wanted to focus on the Tompkins Square Park riots and gentrification. In addition to images of the clashes, his works of that period are interspersed with product labels of foods one would find in local bodegas.

"It was not just the East Village, but a particular slice of New York," Zoubok said of those collages, "a kind of experience that, unfortunately, the gentrification of the city has kind of altered."

In an interview two years ago, Evans told this newspaper that part of the reason he had remained on Avenue B was because his rent was still cheap — under \$200.

"I've lived here for 40 years or 50 years," he said. "Everything has changed so many times. When I first came here, Avenue C was like going to Europe. There were people with pushcarts; they were selling buttons, chicken or eggs, whatever. Then the hippies and Puerto Ricans came..."

Asked what the meaning of his diary of daily collages was, he said, "It's just my life."

He is survived by his wife, Margaret Evans, twin daughters, India Evans and Honor Evans, and their families.



A John Evans collage date-stamped July 7, 1989, including a newspaper clipping from the East Villager, on ongoing tensions a year after the Tompkins Square Park Riot. That East Villager, formerly published by Everything for Everybody, was not connected to the current East Villager and The Villager. Former Villager Publisher John W. Sutter and his wife, artist Kathleen Kucka, purchased the piece in 2010.

ArtSeen

## JOHN EVANS John Evans: 1984

By Valery Oisteanu

A LETTER TO JOHN EVANS  
FROM VALERY OISTEANU

Dear John,

WOW! Just got back from your opening at Pavel Zoubok's gallery, and once again your work took my breath away. *1984* invokes the ghost of George Orwell and the East Village of bygone times. These works, all created in that immemorial year, evoke streets littered with stories of our small corner of the city—and you found every one of them and transformed them into art. From stickers and labels to old photos, stamps, and packaging, your jazzy colors transform each page into a magical mystery land of avant-gardes.

The exhibition is a trip into a time tunnel filled with the Neo-Dada ghosts of Ray Johnson, Albert Fine, Edward Plunkett, May Wilson, Buster Cleveland, and Tom Wirth. "International Mail Art is the most important and most significant art movement in the world today," proclaims a manifesto rubber-stamped onto a green paper cut-up square. Who am I to disagree? The classic Lucky Strike cigarette logo becomes "Lucky Spike," and I want to smoke one! Each artwork has its own pun.

Your collages contain prophecies, mystical symbols, strange photos, and fragments of letters and textiles. A letter from an old newspaper, *The Sun*, from April 5, 1917, appears in your collage made on April 5, 1984. Another collage, "Oct. 30, 1984," frames a damaged photo of Ed Higgins surrounded by ducks staring at me under a headline that screams "SURVIVOR" by generation one. That prophecy came true; he is one of the few survivors from the mail art gang who is still active.

Another historical piece, "Jan. 18, 1984," features a call for a Mail Art show to be curated by Ronny Cohen at the Franklin Furnace (a downtown avant-garde collective founded by Martha Wilson). Wilson also is a survivor and keeps artists funded and honestly creative in a radical way today.

I appreciate your discreet thank-yous (handwritten on the bottom page) to those fellow artists who sent you cutouts, which you often appropriated. Of course, viewing so many collages (65 in all) reveals a prevailing common element—the "Ursuline ducks" appearing somewhere on every single page. I so enjoyed watching you work on them. Every day a new collage was born.

# BROOKLYN RAIL



John Evans, *January 18, 1984*, and *April 5, 1984*, 1984. Mixed media on paper. 8 x 5". Courtesy Pavel Zoubok Gallery.

My favorite “memory collages” are of your twins India and Honor, “April 4, 1984,” and another of your daughters with you titled, “Nov. 2, 1984.” I remember when they were born. The Irish green and the “Dakota gray”-blue mix with the pink ducks, with the sign that reads “EV2” (East Village twins); the colors complement sophisticated compositions that record personal art history, like your shows at Cordier & Ekstrom and/or Gallery Henoeh!

On the left front wall of this latest show, I observed five large collages that you made recently, with strong bright colors in India ink dominating the composition. One of them contained a cutout with a quotation from a review I wrote about you years ago. What a pleasant surprise. The back wall was a giant collage of collages, a mural illustrating the varied aspects of your encounters with stuff—a colorful installation that reads like a historical anthropological map of downtown New York City. Such works can also be absorbed as a contemporary Art History 101 of galleries in the East Village and SoHo, with their references to long-defunct sites such as the Castelli Gallery on Greene Street (“please close the door when exciting!”) or the departed gallery of St. Marks at 121 St. Mark’s Place and later at 411 East 9th Street.

John, this show is just great, and once again I proclaim you the All-Time Master of Collage!

With love,

*Valery*

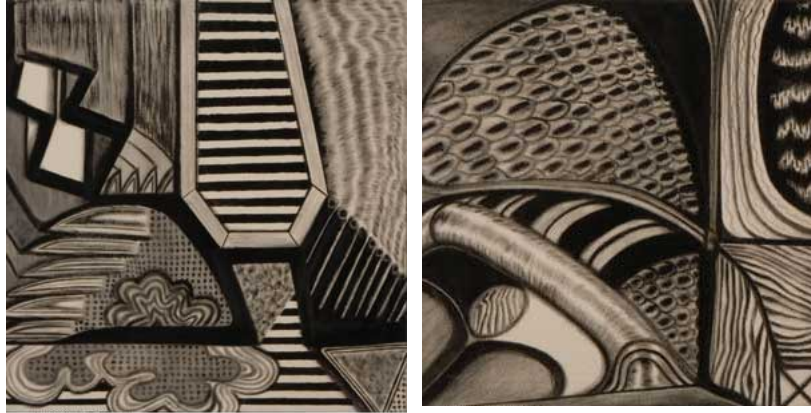


# The New York Times

Art in Review

## *John Evans -- Happy New Year!*

Pavel Zoubok Gallery  
533 West 23rd Street, Chelsea  
Through Feb. 3



Although known for a collage-a-day habit that began in 1964 and continued to the end of the millennium, John Evans has made paintings intermittently since his days as a student at the Art Institute of Chicago. This mini-survey of collages made from 1974 to 1987, all in the month of January, receives unexpected backup from five small, square canvases made in 1970, as well as a sixth, with color, from 1967.

The black-and-white works are especially noteworthy. Painted on raw canvas entirely in black that is modulated into an impressive range of dark grays, they resemble velvety charcoal drawings, but their compositions are barbed. Their claustrophobic patchworks of patterns and textures may bring to mind the flattened compositions of artists like Joseph Yoakum, Roger Brown and William Copley.

They mix the geometric and the abstract with suggestions of cartoons, wood grain, textiles, caning and shag carpet. Other motifs include part of a swastika (in "Swastika Rising") and a striped coffin (in "Smogscape"). Part of their force comes from the way they suggest details of something much larger. They presage much about the recomplication of form that was to strike painting in the 1970s and should be included in the definitive history of the subject.

ROBERTA SMITH

January 26, 2007



ArtSeen

## John Evans

FEB 2007

By Valerie Oisteanu

***Happy New Year!***  
**Pavel Zoubok Gallery**  
***January 5-February 3, 2007***

Nearly 40 years after they were painted, John Evans has finally unveiled his mysterious canvases of geometric designs at the Pavel Zoubok Gallery, where they are hung alongside Evans' colorful paper collages, each medium aesthetically complementing the other.

From afar, Evans' square black-and-white paintings form labyrinthine patterns recalling wood grain, architectural blueprints, and even anatomical illustrations of muscles and veins. But closer examination reveals these works as post-surrealist, dry-brushed acrylics on raw canvas, mazes within mazes. The painting that dominates the entire room is an abstract, yet surreal color oil portrait entitled "Françoise Premiere" (1967).

Precedents for John Evans' vintage works can be traced to George Braque, Paul Klee and Kurt Schwitters, among others. Their titles—"Swastika Rising #16," "Justice? For Shame!" and "Payola #19"—express Evans' disdain for the corruption and police state tactics of the Nixon administration. He takes an early "green" stance toward pollution in "Smogscape" featuring the outline of a coffin; and he renders the crowded streets of "Nueva York" as a cubist-geometrical abstraction.

The playful title of the show, *Happy New Year*, refers to the show's opening in early January and to the fact that the collages on display were chosen exclusively from January dates in the artist's long artistic diary. John Evans has been a collagist since



John Evans, "January 18, 1978" (1978). Mixed-media collage, 11" x 8 1/2". Courtesy of Pavel Zoubok Gallery.

# BROOKLYN RAIL

1964 (a year after receiving his MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago), and for nearly 40 years he has created a collage per day from fragments of the myriad ephemeral items (stamps, labels, photographs and fabrics) found on the streets on that date. The result is a multicultural anthropological document and a visual-art record of Evans' walks up and down the byways of New York City during the closing decades of the 20th century.

As a collagist, John Evans was influenced by Joseph Cornell, May Wilson and Ray Johnson, using techniques that recall Schwitters and Hoch. Evans often adds India ink, and watercolor, and printmaking elements (like rubber stamps) to his already elaborate artwork, giving the finished piece feeling of a modern-day illuminated manuscript. At the bottom of most pages Evans has painted a pattern of stylized duck heads, tilted as if they were observing their own behavior and either smiling or crying.

The show's catalogue includes a mail-art piece packaged in an envelope, an introduction by Pavel Zoubok and an essay by Valerie S. Komor, curator of the *New York Diary* show at the New-York Historical Society, where Evans had his famous mini-retrospective in 2002-2003.

Evans uses the tool of collage and the philosophy of inclusion to express his personal sense of irony, humor and shifting aesthetic and socio-political ideas. Shirt buttons, denim pocket flaps, playing cards, a bus ticket to Montclair N.J., a tattered American flag— found objects mixing the alchemical elements of memory and happenstance. Evans' collages seek the unknowable as they whimsically record the unraveling of our culture and its fleeting ecstasies.

# The New York Times

## *Art in Review; 'Constellation'*

By Grace Glueck

May 5, 2006

May Wilson, Ray Johnson, Al Hansen, Buster Cleveland & John Evans  
Pavel Zoubek Gallery  
533 West 23rd Street, Chelsea  
Through May 27

Don't expect a Motherwellian gentility from the quirky collagists May Wilson, Ray Johnson, Al Hansen, Buster Cleveland and John Evans in "Constellation." Subversiveness is their stock in trade. They were chosen for this show because they formed a kind of friendship nexus while also being part of the larger alternative scene that encompassed Pop, Fluxus, performance and mail art. Dada and Surrealism helped form their irreverent sensibilities; shared ironies about life and particularly the art world quickened their work.

The art of May Wilson (1905-1986) on view here includes odd juxtapositions of objects like a silver-painted toy puppy in a toaster, dolls wrapped like mummies and painted a single color, and several "Ridiculous Portraits" that collage Wilson's head onto the bodies of women in well-known paintings. These only hint at her wide-ranging talent for creative discombobulation.

A selection of faux-naïve natterings and constructions from the ingeniously obsessive Ray Johnson (1927-1995) includes a letter to Joan Crawford, on a large wooden board with a dirty white slingback shoe attached, beginning, "It is a nice day so & there for I thought I should write you."

Al Hansen (1927-1995) is felicitously represented by several collages that make word play from Hershey bar wrappers, and by examples of his erotic dolls and Venuses, fashioned from cigarette butts. From Buster Cleveland (1943-98) there are works of poured plastic studded with colored beads over collaged reliefs that home in on consumer products like Coke or that josh the art world, like his altered Artforum magazine covers.

The most prolific talent here is John Evans, who was born in 1932. For nearly 40 years until he quit in 2000, he kept a daily diary in the form of a collage, cryptically assembled from bits of paper, fragments of photos and such, brightly tied together by colored inks. His long-running visual monologue comments in lively fashion on the real and the art worlds (a sample, shown here, embellishes a polite rejection letter from the Whitney Museum). His work, along with that of his pals, makes this a show to see and remember.

GRACE GLUECK



# The New York Times

## BOOKS

### *Making Art From Bits and Pieces*

By John Strausbaugh

Jan. 26, 2005

In a tiny side room in a small, neat apartment on East Third Street near Avenue B, the artist John Evans stores the fruits of 37 years of quiet, obsessive labor. Every day from 1964 through 2000, Mr. Evans collected flotsam and jetsam that caught his eye on the streets of the East Village. He picked up playing cards, business cards, ticket stubs, cigarette packs, fortune cookie fortunes, leaflets advertising rock bands and escort services, and labels for products like Cry Baby Table Grapes and Fitrite ("the Underwear of Modesty"). He also gathered political fliers, scraps of newspapers and magazines, ripped-up snapshots, matchbooks, foreign coins and bills, postcards, an angry note to an incense-burning neighbor, shreds of fabric and wrapping paper.

And every day, Mr. Evans would sit down with an inexpensive notebook, turn to a blank page and paste some of this discarded ephemera against a painted background, creating a collage. Then he rubber-stamped the day's date on it.

By the end of 2000, Mr. Evans, now 72, had created more than 10,000 daily collages, filling more than 100 notebooks. With a curatorial nonchalance that would give an archivist the willies, these volumes are crammed tightly into a small bookcase in that tiny room, with more in trunks under the bed in the next room.

A year's worth of these works are beautifully reproduced in a new book, "John Evans: Collages," the first ever dedicated to Mr. Evans's work, published by the small art press Quantuck Lane. Selected to span the almost four decades of their creation, the 364 images (with one blank page representing a day -- Feb. 11, 1996, to be exact -- when Mr. Evans felt too sick to work) form a pictorial diary, documenting both the artist's life and that of his neighborhood.

In rescuing and dignifying scraps of local life -- a matchbook from a bar, someone's tossed-off photo-booth portrait -- Mr. Evans can be thought of as a historical preservationist, operating on an unusually intimate scale. Yet his own moods seem reflected in how he handles the materials. In one day's collage, ticket stubs and candy wrappers explode like fireworks against an ebulliently bright background. In another, juxtaposed images of Hitler and Oliver North make a grim political statement.

Although Mr. Evans seems to lack the self-promotion gene that makes artists into wealthy celebrities, his abstract paintings and collages have been regularly exhibited and well received over the years, most recently in the fall at Pavel Zoubok Gallery in Chelsea.

# The New York Times

Writing in The New York Times in 1976, the critic Hilton Kramer likened the collages to the work of Joseph Cornell, noting that Mr. Evans created "a world of romantic invention conjured out of odd juxtapositions of weird and familiar things."

Announcing a 2002-3 exhibition of selected collages, the New-York Historical Society called the work "a stunning visual record of Evans's journey and our own through the last four decades of the 20th century."

Still, Mr. Evans's art has probably been most appreciated by other artists. His name is often associated with that of his friend Ray Johnson, another "artist's artist," whom he met at a rooftop party in Greenwich Village in the mid-60's. (Mr. Johnson's life as an artist-provocateur and his apparent suicide in 1995 were documented in a 2002 film, "How to Draw a Bunny.") Mr. Johnson introduced Mr. Evans to the international underground of "mail art," correspondence passed from one artist to the next, with each adding some embellishment before mailing it on.

To supplement his income from gallery sales and the occasional grant, Mr. Evans said, "I've always had some kind of part-time job that paid the rent."

His first job was in 1964 for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where young artists sat at long tables, opening mail and processing orders for the museum's line of Christmas cards. He also drove a cab, framed paintings and in the late 80's answered a want ad in The Times for a "horticultural technician." To this day, he works three days a week, watering plants in Manhattan offices.

"It keeps me going," he said with a shrug.

Mr. Evans grew up in Sioux Falls, S.D., and Redondo Beach, Calif. After earning an M.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1963, he came straight to Manhattan. "I love New York," he said. "When I got here, I said: 'This is it. I want to be here.'"

His first apartment was on Avenue B near East Sixth Street. The rent was \$35 a month. The neighborhood was still mostly Jewish; his landlord ran Izzy's Luncheonette on the ground floor, where the bar Manitoba's now operates. Except for a brief stint in Vermont and two artist residencies in Europe, Mr. Evans has lived in the East Village ever since.

He has been in his current apartment since the early 70's, and as a consequence of his long residence, pays a rent so low it would make most Manhattanites weep with envy. He and his wife, Margaret, raised their fraternal twin daughters, Honor and India, in this apartment. "They were real L.E.S. girls," he said, using the shorthand for Lower East Side. They are now 26; Honor lives and works in New York City and, Mr. Evans said with a smile, "hates art," while India is an artist living in Rome.

For Jim Mairs, publisher of Quantuck Lane Press, the new book is a labor of love that was 20 years in the making. Mr. Mairs was an editor at W.W. Norton & Company when

# The New York Times

a friend introduced him to Mr. Evans and his collages in the early 80's. Norton passed on publishing a book of the work, because the artist wasn't famous enough to justify the expense, Mr. Mairs said.

Three years ago, after 39 years as a full-time editor at Norton, Mr. Mairs went to part-time editor-at-large status, sold some Norton stock he'd been saving and used the funds to start his own press. Producing about 10 titles a year, he has published books by the magician Ricky Jay, the African-American activist Dorothy Sterling, and the photographers Alice Attie, Rosamond Purcell and Charles Traub. But, he said, his experience with Mr. Evans is "the most fun of any book I've done."

Mr. Mairs spent lavishly to produce it. Last year he flew Mr. Evans and the selected collages to Verona, Italy, where the venerable firm Mondadori photographed the work and printed the four-color book in an edition of 5,000, with another 100 deluxe boxed copies. Without citing a figure for this lush production, Mr. Mairs conceded that at a cover price of \$75, "If I sell all of them, I won't make money." He sounded unconcerned.

Asked why he stopped making the collages at the end of 2000, Mr. Evans said: "It's like when you're doing a painting, you have to know when to quit. I thought the end of the 20th century seemed like a perfect time to not be doing this anymore. Now that it's been a while, I think maybe I'll start painting again. But it's sort of been nice not to. I'm kind of lazy."

He hasn't been able to resist collecting things from the street, however. Scraps of discarded paper stuff a desk in that side room, and on the bookcase a row of jars hold buttons, beads, dice, keys, subway tokens and coins.

"I still am almost always looking," he said. "But I've got to get rid of stuff, not collect more. I'm getting older. What if my daughters and my wife had to deal with all this?"

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 26, 2005, Section E, Page 1 of the National edition with the headline: Making Art From Bits And Pieces.



## East Village Collage

Valery Oisteanu

### **John Evans: As Days Go By**

Oct. 14 - Nov. 13, 2004

Pavel Zoubok Gallery  
533 West 23rd Street  
New York, N.Y. 10011

The neo-Dadaist and East Village mail artist John Evans made a collage a day from 1964 to 2000, mostly using things he found on the street that day. He embellished each collage with watercolor, and added the image of a duck's head, which he called "Ursuline Duck" in tribute to his friend Ursule Molinaro (1914-2000). These neat, almost architectonic works move from the personal to tales of social and political discontent.

Evans, who was born in 1932 and attended the school of the Art Institute of Chicago before moving to New York, recently displayed a selection of his collages at the Pavel Zoubok Gallery, which has relocated to a storefront space on West 23rd Street in New York's Chelsea art district. The show was accompanied by *John Evans: Collages*, a lavish art book published by the independent Quantuck Lane Press and featuring a year's worth of Evans' "daily mixed-media chromatic explosions."

Like Kurt Schwitters, Evans collected "chance encounter objects" -- correspondence with other artists, photobooth self-portraits, clothes labels, business cards, coasters, postage stamps, cigarette packages, maps, ticket stubs, wrappers and rubber stamps.

Mail-art debris and mysterious black calling cards from Gypsy Illuminati co-exist with harmonious India-ink washes. Rubber-stamp monkeys appear frequently on Evans' pages. The simple explanation is that he and his wife Margaret were born in the Chinese year of the monkey.

His other rubber stamps include "Avenue B School of Art" (which appears on his business card), "Insufficient DADA," "Save Sex" and images of butterflies and dancing ducks.

In works spanning almost 40 years, we see self-portraits in which the artist's long dark hair turns to white and then disappears from his head only to reappear as a big white mustache. Our transitory throw-away culture is poignantly reflected in the traces of the artist's own biography.



John Evans, Dec. 16, 1982, 1982, Pavel Zoubok Gallery.

Evans' visual diary -- each collage is presented on 8 1/2 by 11 inch paper with a stamp of the day's date -- frequently shades over into concrete poetry. The text in one entry, stamped Nov. 13, reads "urgent, real zone, don't even think of poetry here, thirteen, up, caution keep upright, arrow must point to top."

And though Evans' collage diaries are rather more than commonplace scrapbooks, they do document his own art history, including invites to his exhibitions and reviews of these shows cut out from magazines and newspapers.

The collage dated Mar. 28, 1981, for instance, is a confection of announcements of Evans' show at the New York gallery Cordier & Ekstrom, with the central phrase "The Wild Duck" cut from the *New York Times*. Another work incorporates an announcement for his show at Gracie Mansion Gallery in the East Village as well as colored ink washes and the ubiquitous Ursuline ducks.

The collage from June 26, 1976, features a short review by Hilton Kramer of one of Evans' shows. Kramer calls his work: "a delightful discovery. These (collages) belong to the world defined by the genius of Joseph Cornell. . . a world of romantic invention conjured out of odd juxtapositions of weird and familiar things."

Evans was a member of the New York neo-Dada community that included Buster Cleveland, Albert Fine, Ray Johnson and May Wilson. All died prematurely and suddenly. Their images and work occasionally appear in Evans' collages. Some of the other artists to whom Evans pays homage are the Italian collector and Fluxus artist Guglielmo Achille Cavellini (1914-90), the SoHo pioneer George Maciunas (1931-78) and the New York mail artist Ed Higgins.

Some of his more moving collages are dedicated to Evans' friend and neighbor, Tom Wirth, who died in 1987. Wirth brought Evans' work to the attention of Jim Mairs, the publisher of *John Evans: Collages*. The book features several pages in the book dedicated to Tom and his untimely death.

For the book, the publisher chose 364 collages, one for each date of the year (save one) -- spread over Evans' entire oeuvre. The collage of July 14, 1989, for instance, is followed by one from July 15, 1980. And in true diary style, one page is all but blank, bearing the inscription, "Bad Cold + Dreadful Inventory for Rentokil. No Collage."

One of Evans' political works is *Dump Koch for Dinkins*, dated Sept. 12, 1989. It includes a picture of Clayton Patterson, the Lower East Side artist and activist who gained local renown when he videotaped a police riot in Tompkins Square Park and subsequently was sentenced to 90 days in jail for civil disobedience. In another one of Evans' social commentaries, a photo of riot-gearred cops on Avenue B is complemented by another sticker that says "Defective" and followed by the image of an American flag.

From my personal observation of John's opening at Pavel Zoubok Gallery, his magical "accumulages" -- accumulation-collages -- are a hot property, with hundreds of art-books autographed and sold and collectors snapping up almost 50 original works. May he repeat his success again in another 40-plus years.

# The New York Times

## *Art in Review*

By Vivien Raynor  
October 4, 1985

**John Evans**  
**J. N. Herlin Inc.**  
**68 Thompson Street**

Using torn paper, stamps, labels, fragments of photographs and fabrics, watercolors and pen line, John Evans is a painter who never lets a day go by without making a collage. Some he binds into volumes that are well known in the relatively small and select field of artists' books. But though they are displayed in a bookstore doubling as a gallery, the 33 examples here are unbound and represent the artist's first solo appearance in New York City since 1981. A recurring element is a vertical shape which, in a landscapelike setting, variously suggests a rock form, the pedestal of some monument that has long since vanished and, once in a while, a figure. Another trademark is the drawn head of an Ursuline duck which, when repeated in rows, suggests a distant mountain range.

In one especially handsome 1985 piece, the main shape in ultramarine paper zigzags like a dancing figure against a pale umber and olive background. At midriff level is a piece of gold foil with slanting eyes drawn on it in red and black while behind loom the heads of two large ducks in muted yellow with blue beaks. No less stunning is a 1975 composition where the vertical - now a tapering black shape decorated with painted foliage - stands alone with the row of black duck-head hills in the background. In a recent work, the shape has metamorphosed into a blade made of gold brocade with a "hilt" that's a tiny landscape with the head of a Japanese woman reflected in a mirror. Evans is an intensely visual artist with a superb color sense, but his collages are not lacking in wit or, for that matter, social comment. One work is built around a printed emblem requesting food for famine victims and, below it, the news that the population bomb keeps ticking. Tacked to the wall as it is, this is the show not to be missed. (Through Oct. 26.) John Fekner (Semaphore Gallery, 462 West Broadway): In a recent book on street art, Allan Schwartzman distinguishes between the graffitist born and the convert, but he says they regard each other as "kindred spirits." Chances



# The New York Times

are, though, the grassroots defacers will rise up against their art school-trained rivals and if they do, John Fekner should be a prime target because he is as close to disinterested as a graffitist can get. A Master of Fine Arts who has "written" on many a derelict building in the boroughs, Fekner does not artistify his concern over the poisoning of the world for gallery consumption. But he does change his medium, substituting the landscapes sold by schlock art stores for walls and derelict automobiles. After worsening these ready-made wastelands wherever possible, the artist stencils on them black pictograms of smoking factories and words such as "toxic."

Sometimes he overdoes it, as in the scene of two little girls in a field full of daisies to which he has added a black sky, a pink mushroom cloud and arrows pointing to the cloud and the children. Otherwise, the artist makes his point pungently - in murals involving junk items steeped in tar and in photographs of his outdoor efforts framed in borders of the same substance. He even brings a new twist to the well-worn theme of stacked television sets by displaying them against an enlarged "screen" of blue and pink stripes painted on the wall. Unfortunately, this show closes tomorrow.

VIVIEN RAYNOR

# The New York Times

## *Art in Review*

By Vivien Raynor  
March 6, 1981

### **John Evans**

Cordier and Ekstrom  
417 East 75th Street

In two dozen or so collages, John Evans gives the impression of an artist just reaching his peak - and a very lovely peak it is, too. He uses a few found objects - labels, logos, scraps of print and so forth - and usually joins them by lines and by washes of clear watercolor into monolithic or treelike images. One of the very best involves a faded old photograph of Thomas Mann and his family in California, its torn edge rimmed in bright purple. Supporting the shape are two narrow golden brown shafts - vertical and oblique - and at their feet a row of small scalloped shapes, each half purple, half raw umber. Below them is a horizontal band of gray.

Though treated flatly, the designs have connotations of landscape dominated by a central, portentlike mass. All incorporate a date, rubber stamped, and in each there are those scalloped shapes that can suggest the snouts of particolored, whalelike creatures (most have marks suggesting eyes) or, as in the composition of two oval brownpaper labels, a distant range of stylized, turquoise and yellow mountains. This is another very beautiful piece, with the ovals, laid on a pale tangerine-color ground, each stamped with the word "produce" in green and edged in the same color.

Used sparingly, the collage exists in close harmony with its surroundings, except in one work featuring a reproduction of Picasso's signature. An atypically busy work with satirical overtones, it includes a circular blue-and-white sticker from the Whitney Museum and other printed items referring to art commerce; though amusing, it doesn't quite come off. Mr. Evans is, otherwise, a seductive colorist, whose images are half mysterious emblems, half visions of - who knows? - a personal Badlands (he comes originally from South Dakota). They are quite marvelous. (Through March 28.)

VIVIEN RAYNOR

# The New York Times

## ***Art in Review: An Outpost Of Modern Art***

**By Hilton Kramer**

June 25, 1976

### ***Works on Paper***

Kornblee

20 West 57th Street

This is a very pleasant show of artists new to the gallery. Of particular interest are Paul Linfante's pastels of giant apples—oversize portraits of apples, really, that have mysterious power without resorting to Surrealist invention. There are some very delicate abstract drawings by Lee Shulman, and a series of delightful landscapes by Paul Nankiewicz.

Perhaps the most delightful discovery here are the collages of John Evans. These belong to a world defined by the genius of Joseph Cornell and the talent of Joe Brainard—a world of romantic invention conjured out of odd juxtapositions of weird and familiar things. Mr. Evans has a real gift for this sort of thing.

Through July 16.