

# Student Writing Prompt & Critical Review of “How to Draw a Bunny”

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The 90 minute documentary about Ray Johnson titled *How to draw a Bunny* was awarded a Jury Prize at Sundance Film Festival. It is one of the few films I implement into my high school and college curricula. Ray Johnson was not a major New York player and was overshadowed by his contemporaries (i.e, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg). I use this film because it stimulates great questions. As art instructors we do much more than teach methods and materials. Critical thinking is an essential part of our curriculum. This film offers wonderful opportunities for discussion and higher level thinking.

(1) I offer 23 questions to get you started, or deduct at your own discretion. (2) Make copies first and pass out questions for students to process before watching the film. (3) Students are to select ten questions from the question list and write thoughtful and articulate responses. (4) They submit a two page typed paper, single spaced, 12 point, Times Roman. (5) Do additional research about the artists covered in the film to add depth to your responses; Billy Name, Roy Lichtenstein, Christo & Jeanne-Claude, Richard Lippold, Peter Schuyff, James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol. (6) Respond with appropriate assessment.

## THE FILM:

*How to Draw a Bunny*. A Film by John Walter & Andrew Moore. Directed by John W Walter. Produced by Frances Beatty, Andrew L. Moore, John Malkovich, Kevin J. Foxe, Lianne Halfon, Palm Pictures/Umvd. DVD released 2004.

## THE ARTIST:

**Born:** Detroit, Michigan, October 16, 1927 (D. January 13, 1995- dove off Sag Harbor bridge in Long Island and “backstroked” toward the Atlantic)

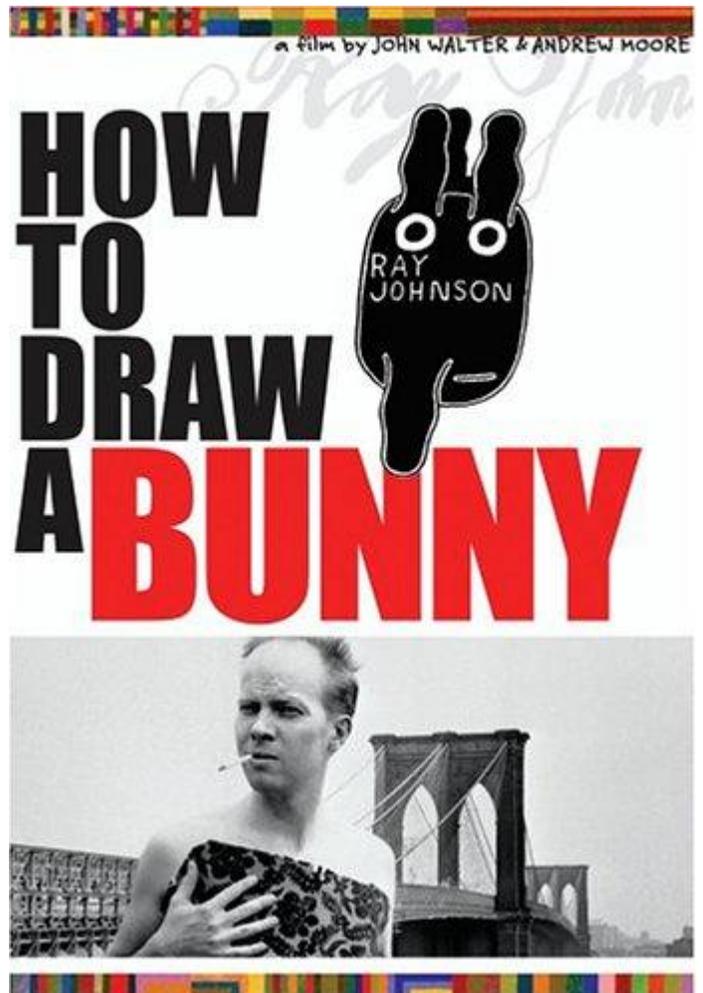
**Education:** Attended classes at Cass Technical High School, Detroit Art Institute, Ox-Bow School in Saugatuck, Michigan, Black Mountain College in North Carolina. Art Students League in New York City

**Residency:** Moved to New York in 1948

**Art Movement:** *Pop Art* (or what he called “Flop Art” or “Chop Art”) and *Performance Art*. He was a contemporary of Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, Chuck Close, and Robert Rauschenberg. Much of his work was collage.

## THE QUESTIONS:

1. In the introduction Ray Johnson recounts trying to remember the musician Al Green using the deductive alphabet strategy. He then references a restaurant called the Library. Give your opinion on how Ray navigates conversation and social interaction. [Background Info: Ray worked for a period at a Lower East Side book store]
2. How did Ray Johnson die at the age of 65 in 1995? Describe his personal history with floating bodies.



3. Ray told a curator that he would do “nothing” in the gallery when scheduling a show. What did he mean?
4. Andy Warhol and Ray Johnson expressed a similar simplistic and almost dim-witted persona when interacting socially and interviewing with journalists. The two artists were friends. Do you think this characteristic was natural or developed as an act?
5. [Ray participated in the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual New York Avant Garde Festival.] What did Ray drop from a helicopter over Long Island? How did this tie in with his studio work? Do you see the value in doing exercises outside of your studio, such as this, to add meaning to your work?
6. What is your opinion of the twenty-six Morton Janklo portraits?
7. Ray priced the work at \$42,400, then he made a deductions of 50%. Janklo offered \$13,000. Ray agreed to sell several of the portraits plus a new image for \$13,150. In the process of negotiating the portraits he would add other paintings and deduct some of the portraits. Later in the film Ray barter with Christo and Jeanne-Claude when selling them an image. Do you empathize more with the artist trying to secure a sale or with the buyer trying to attain the art? Explain?
8. Ruchard Lippold said that Ray Johnson’s whole life was like a game. Is this possible?
9. Garry Ayres inspired Ray to create the *Lucky Strike* collages? How? Describe a situation that pushed you creatively and artistic production.
10. Ray believed in employing “chance” in his studio practice. Does that fit into your artistic philosophy in any way?
11. Jim Rosenquist and Billy Name said that New York artists were hungry and poor. They lived on nothing [Monthly rent + utilities was \$28]. It was a very experimental time period in New York. Could that process happen in today’s more expensive New York environment? What happens to art when the dollar becomes the bottom line?
12. Roy Lichtenstein said about Ray that, “he was thought of as an artist, but very few people saw any of his art.” How prolific do you need to be to be considered an “artist”?
13. Christo & Jeanne-Claude made an art piece that Ray Johnson commissioned. Write a critique about the piece. Was it art?
14. Ray was either deliberately or unconsciously part of an anti-commerce art movement that was engaged in collaborating and making “happenings.” Ray reportedly walked to every mailbox in Brooklyn. Could you see yourself making artwork without fiscal reimbursement? How might that influence your current career plans?
15. Dorothy Podber walked into the Factory and shot a stack of serigraphs of Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe. These prints are known as the *Shot Marylins* and are now worth more money. In 1989 a repaired bullet hole, *Shot Red Marilyn* sold for \$4 million.
16. Ray contracted a videographer to tape him. This was pre-reality TV. Ray wanted film of himself living life. But, even more importantly, he likes the idea of being taped. Where is the boundary between self discovery and actualization, self expression, and narcissism?
17. How did Ray get additional artwork into the Museum of Modern Art collection? Do you see a synchronicity between an artist’s creative art practice and creative marketing ability and their resulting success?
18. Artist, Peter Schuyff negotiated down a collage price of Rays from \$1,500 to \$2,000. Ray cut out a square  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the size of the image. Knowing a little about Ray’s personality, why do you believe he did this?
19. In Ray’s “*Beat it, Eat it*” reading he beat a cardboard box with a belt. Compare entertaining an audience with exhibits of oddities and the freak show with the *happenings* that took place in NYC. Do you see similarities in the way *happenings* also titillate our human sensitivity to estranged social behavior and actions?
20. Richard Lippold said Ray Johnson was “indifferent”, “totally honest”, “incorruptible”, and “unmanageable”. What descriptions would people place on you after observing you live life and build artifacts?

21. Ray Johnson was mugged the same day Andy Warhol was shot. This prompted Ray to move out of the city and into safer seclusion. Yet, he committed suicide and made his death a type of exhibit. Is fame worth dying for? Discuss Ray's fear and embrace of death.
22. **Film Extras:** Interview with Judith Malina. "[Ray] always presented an off centered moment to you, just as his art does...He was always really there, and on the other hand it was almost impossible to interpret in some concrete form what the relationship was. He took that moment and put it over there. This is you and me, and now we are over there. And, created a situation in which the equilibrium had changed so rapidly that the person had to think, (1) do I except this, (2) do I reject this, (3) do I clink to sweet reason, (4) do I go with this metaphor, (5) am I dealing with a lunatic, (6) is he an autistic genius, (7) does he mean it, (8) is he pulling my leg, (9) shall I rise to a higher level with him, (10) all these things at once and many more. He took the simple encounter and both simplified and complicated it in a way that our tactful polite manners don't really allow for." Have you ever known anyone personally who operates outside of social conventions. Describe them and your relationship with them.
23. Critique Ray Johnson's collaborative mural for the Living Theater using children.