

MOVERS &

SHAKERS



Eighties Mail Art Networking by John Held Jr.

One of the great ironies of mail art is that its acknowledged pioneer, New York artist Ray Johnson, is something of a hermitic loner, whose "happenings" would as often as not turn into "nothings". And yet this many of poetry possessing a natural generosity has paved the way towards the creation of an international network of artists.

As early as 1955, Johnson was quoted in the inaugural issue of the influential *VILLAGE VOICE* as having a mailing list of two hundred. "I send lists either to people I think would be interested or to people I think won't be interested." His correspondents at the time included socialite and noted party-giver Elsa Maxwell and James Barr, of the Museum of Modern Art.

Johnson was a product of the legendary American art school, Black Mountain College. It was there that such artists as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Robert Rauschenberg and Buckminster Fuller, as well as many others, nurtured themselves in each other's company. Johnson was in direct contact with the beginnings of a new movement in American art, which eventually eclipsed the predominant Abstract Expressionist School of Art. Johnson's large circle of artworld friends were drawn together by his enigmatic use of the postal system around which the New York Correspondence School of Art was initiated. Although other artists had preceded Johnson in the use of the postal system for artistic means, most notably Marcel Duchamp and members of the Italian Futurist movement, it was Johnson's vigor and ability to manifest poetry from everyday life which led to his becoming the center of a gathering storm.

Throughout the fifties and sixties mail art, very much under the direct influence of Johnson, remained a closed mechanism of communication between artworld intelligentsia. But the slow spread of mail art during this period, often from person-to-person through the instructions of Johnson to "add and send to" an often unknown third person, led to the eventual public display at the Whitney Museum of Art of the New York Correspondence School exhibition curated by Johnson and Marcia Tucker.

In the November, 1970 issue of *ARTFORUM* magazine, author Kasha Linville wrote:

Johnson is concerned with loosely structured interactions, but not as a conceptual artist. Instead he is more a solicitous host who like to provide the opportunity to meet, by mail or in person at one of the NYCS meetings, and to watch what happens. The only sad note about Johnson's Whitney diversion is it seems a shame to catch such a living thing in flight, to pin it down and make a museum piece of it.

But this "living thing" was not yet "in flight". In truth it was still a caterpillar and it was evolving into something very different from the schoolyard of the New York artworld intelligentsia.

Indeed, this first mail art show at the Whitney Museum of American Art was the beginning of a revolution in art. Because it was through the mail art show that a previously fractured network was linked. Invitations to mail artists were distributed in mass

mailings from names gathered from newly emerging sources. Mail art exhibitions flourished throughout the seventies and into the eighties. In my book, *INTERNATIONAL ARTIST COOPERATION: MAIL ART SHOWS, 1970-1985*, the growth of mail art shows is documented having increased from 2 in 1970; 46 in 1976; 58 in 1977; 75 in 1979; until in 1981 there are some 281 shows accounted for.

In the middle seventies, the mail art show came to mean "all work shown", "no fees to enter", and "documentation to all participants". Sensing that something important was happening, yet receiving little support from the art establishment, mail artists took it upon themselves to curate their own shows, and thus insure the growth of their preferred medium. I documented 1,335 mail art shows between 1970 and 1985. No doubt there were many more than this.

The network began to echo the sentiments of Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, who began to develop the concept for an Eternal Network of artists. In a 1973 issue of *FILE* magazine he wrote:

If it is true that information about the knowledge of all modern art research is more than any one artist could comprehend, then the concept of the avant-garde is obsolete. With incomplete knowledge, who can say who is in front, and who ain't. I suggest that considering each artist as part of an Eternal Network is a much more useful concept.

Throughout the seventies the Eternal Network gathered strength. Former participants with established art reputations dropped out while isolated emerging artists from throughout the world drew strength from an ever-increasing brotherhood of artists who utilized the postal system for its connecting fabric.

The evolution of mail art was also aided by publications which took up its cause and became central clearinghouses of information. The first major publication linking the newly emerging network was *FILE*, published by the Canadian art collective General Idea. Included with *FILE* was the work of another Canadian art group, Image Bank, which began compiling "image request lists". But by the middle seventies General Idea turned its attention elsewhere, mirroring the movement of well-known artists away from mail art. Stepping in to fill the void was *UMBRELLA* magazine, edited by art librarian Judith A. Hoffberg.

During the late seventies and until the mid eighties, *UMBRELLA* became the publication of record for the mail art movement. A growing list of mail art shows and projects were announced in each issue swelling the ranks of newcomers to the network. And a glance at the issues published by Hoffberg leaves a trail of mail art activity in the early eighties.

1980:

Fluxus collection at Ecart bookshop in Geneva, Switzerland.
Mohammed Center for Restricted Communication, Genova, Italy.
Other Books and So bookstore, Amsterdam, Holland.
ARTE POSTALE #10, by Vittore Baroni.
COMMONPRESS 33, edited by Russell Butler (BuZ Blurr).
Des Moines Festival of the Avant-Garde announces the formation of the Performance Bank (Fred Truck).
Mail art show to free Buster Cleveland from a California jail.
AU requests mail art for Japan Modern Art 80.

RUBBERSTAMP MADNESS begins publication.

"Electroworks" exhibit of photocopy art at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York.

Bern Porter states he was doing mail art in 1920.

Anna Banana completes her second Banana Olympics.

Xerox exhibition curated by Ginny Lloyd at La Mamelle, San Francisco, California.

Lon Spiegelman raises questions concerning the paying of fees for mail art catalogs.

Mail art show by Michael Duquette (Toronto, Canada) is censored.

Ulises Carrion's **SECOND THOUGHTS** is published.

LIBELLUS, a monthly mail art publication by Guy Schraenen.

Johan van Geluwe begins his Museum project (**COMMONPRESS** 40).

1981:

Postage stamp exhibition at Artpool, Budapest, Hungary.

C.D.O. archive in Parma, Italy active.

Carlo Pittore opens La Galleria dell'Occhio in New York City.

John Held Jr. shows "Letters to Mohammed".

VEC audio archives.

RUBBER continues publication from Stempelplaats Gallery, Amsterdam, Holland.

Jean Brown Archives, Tyringham, Massachusetts, featured in **UMBRELLA**.

E.F. Higgins auctions off his Stamp Paintings.

David Cole and Paul Zelevansky create MC magazine.

Lon Spiegelman holds a workshop on mail art for children at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Harley announces the First International Mail Art Congress (never takes place).

Henk Fakkeldij holds a "mail art performance" called The Meeting in Utrecht.

1982:

Communication to Poland disrupted by political activity.

Chuck Stake celebrates his tenth anniversary in mail art.

Rimma and Valery Gerlovin issue a collection of envelopes called "Letters to the USSR".

Edgardo-Antonio Vigo of Argentina issues number 8 in the series "Our International Stamps Cancelled Seals".

Nattovning (Night Exercises) being organized by Peter Meyer for Swedish National Radio.

INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY OF COPY ARTISTS QUARTERLY begins publication.

Bookworks 82, a conference on artists' books, is held in Philadelphia.

Geza Perneczky active in conceptual book publishing.

Mike Bidner seeking information on "artistamps" for a forthcoming catalog.

Modern Realism gallery opens in Dallas, Texas, to show mail art, xerox, artists' books, rubberstamps and Fluxus.

FIRST INTERNATIONAL MAIL ART MANIFESTO issues to mark the Twentieth Anniversary of the New York Correspondence School (c.d.o., Parma, Italy).

New York Cavellini Festival.

Michael Mollett distributes his VW bus through the mail.

Peter Horobin (Scotland) visits Jurgen Olbrich in Kassel, West Germany.

NATIONAL STAMPAGRAPHIC begins publication.

Third National High School Postal Art Exhibition in Washington, D.C., organized by the Cracker Jack Kid.

1983:

"Correspondence as Art: An Historical Overview" curated by Mike Crane is exhibited at San Jose State University, California.

Anna Banana tours "Why Banana?" a performance artwork in Canada and the United States.

Ginny Lloyd opens The Storefront Gallery in San Francisco for mail art and performance activities.

ABOUT VILE published by Anna Banana.

Press Me Close produces t-shirts by Lon Spiegelman, Carlo Pittore, Bern Porter and others.

TRAX published by Piermario Ciani, Italy.

Maine Mail Art Exhibition events feature Carlo Pittore, Steve Random, R. Saunders, and others.

"Mail Music", an international mail art project by Nicola Frangione is released as an album with 47 artists represented.

The film "Mail Art Romance" is shown, documenting the marriage of mail artists John and C. Mehrl Bennett.

Mail Art for Peace catalog by Peter Kustermann.

1984:

Guy Bleus organizes the European Cavellini Festival 1984 in Brussels.

World Art Post catalog distributed by Artpool, Budapest.

"Mail Art Then and Now" curated by Ronny Cohen is shown at Franklin Furnace, New York City, from January 18 through March 10.

ND 2 is published by Daniel Plunkett.

"Injury by Jury Mail Art Show" curated by Cracker Jack Kid.

"Works by Ray Johnson" shown at Nassau County Museum opens February 7.

H.R. Fricker in New York.

Two panel discussion on mail art at 22 Wooster Gallery, sponsored by Artists Talk on Art, generate a storm of controversy.

Cavellini changes his address.

Piotr Rypson shows his retrospective mail art archive in a Polish exhibition.

TAM begins a monthly bulletin of mail art activities.

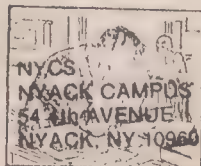
"Mail Art About Mail Art" published as **COMMONPRESS** 55.

While this essay deals primarily with the state of mail art and its explosive growth in the eighties, to better understand the present situation it is necessary to draw upon our knowledge of the past. From increasing research on mail art, it becomes clear that mail art is not so much the progeny of Ray Johnson as it is a parallel development of the modern art movement, and that an understanding of this fuller history of mail art can give us a better perspective of eighties mail art networking.

Duchamp's prototypical postal action of attaching four postcards to each other and sending them to his neighbors, the Arensbergs, is becoming well-known. Less understood is the impact of the Italian Futurist movement on international postal activity. The group developed not only manifestoes, for which they are famous, but stationary, postcards, and decorated correspondence for the purpose

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of connecting its far-flung membership and to publicize the group's positions. Two books have been published in Europe devoted to the subject of Futurist postal activity, one in France and another in Italy. At one time the Fluxus contribution to mail art was overshadowed by Ray Johnson, and now it appears that both Ray Johnson and Fluxus have been overshadowed by the Futurist factor.

By now the Fluxus contribution to mail art has been well established. Not only in the development of newsletters to link the diverse participants, and the joint projects conducted through correspondence, but especially Robert Watts' use of the postage stamp as an artistic medium, various members' use of the rubber stamp, and Ken Friedman's role in the compilation of mailing lists.

It should be noted that both Futurism and Fluxus had very strong performance art elements in their repertoire, and this we will see also sheds light on the current state of mail art. And like Futurism, Dada, and Fluxus, mail art is as much attitude as artform. At times this attitude explodes into a public display of emotion.

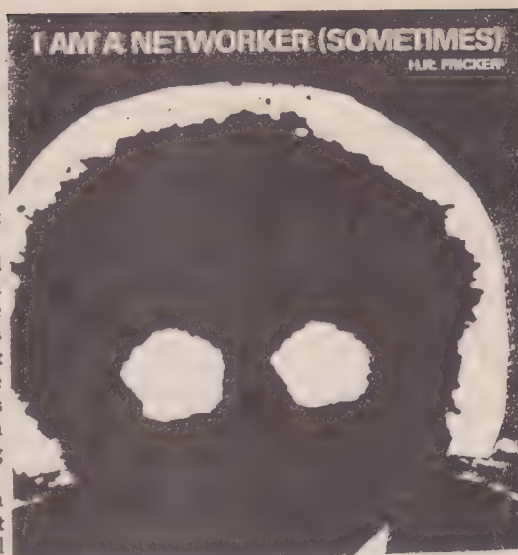
Such was the case during the Franklin Furnace/Artists Talk on Art controversy in February of 1984. This event galvanized the mail network and forced it to examine itself. This same period of self-reflection saw the publication of the first major anthology of mail art writings, **CORRESPONDENCE ART: SOURCE BOOK FOR THE NETWORK OF INTERNATIONAL POSTAL ART ACTIVITY**, edited by Michael Crane and Mary Stofflet. It remains the landmark work documenting the field. The same year saw an unprecedented number of mail artists drawn together at Interdada '84. The last few years have been active ones in mail art.

1986 saw the implementation of the Worldwide Decentralized Mail Art Congresses, a concept developed by two Swiss artists, Gunther Ruch and H.R. Fricker. I personally consider this to be the most important development in the fifteen years I have been active in mail art. More than 70 Congresses were held with over 500 participants from 25 countries. Each Congress was encouraged to explore networking concerns (the nature of interpersonal contacts, the art market, archives, mass mail art versus one-to-one communication, cooperation, etc.) and to report the conclusions to the two Swiss organizers. Gunther Ruch has published the Congress Book, which unites the various opinions expressed.

One of the most important effects of the Mail Art Congresses is the fact that many mail artists, who had previously only corresponded with each other, were given an opportunity to meet. This is certainly not a new development, for Ray Johnson was the host of many a New York Correspondence Club meeting in the sixties, but this was a widespread series of meetings of unprecedented scope.

Before the initiation of the Worldwide Decentralized Mail Art Congresses, it was perfectly legitimate for a mail artist simply to stay at home and write letters, never having to meet any of his correspondents to function at an international networking level. But since the Congress year of 1986, to be truly involved in mail art is to confront the greater world in extended discussions. This was a mistake previous to the Franklin Furnace debates. Mail artists thought they were in agreement, only to find in a face-to-face confrontation that there was a wide gulf between them. It seemed that only by meeting and intensive discussion could many of those disputes be resolved.

As a result of the Congress Year, 1987 saw a number of collaborative projects. Jurgen O. Olbrich, who was invited to participate in the prestigious documenta performance section in his hometown of Kassel, West Germany, invited fellow mail artists to participate in his "City Souvenir" project. This "expanded performance" took the form of the various artists preparing storefront window displays to reflect the various manufactured products, or souvenirs, of their respective hometowns, and a cooperative display in a department store, whereby these "souvenirs" were given away free to the unsuspecting shoppers. By going to where the people were, Olbrich and his collaborators (including Chuck Stake from



Canada) reflected the theme of the 1987 documenta, which sought to stress the blend between art and life. Documenta was almost universally denounced as having failed its stated mission and instead portrayed the art world as art-market. But Olbrich's concept of an expanded performance bringing art to where the people were remains a bright spot.

Again in West Germany, this time in Minden, Jo Klaffki, better known as Joki Mail Art, continued a series of mail art meetings in an attempt to establish Minden as a mail art mecca. "Mailart-Station-Minden" was held in conjunction with the Minden Arts Festival from September 26 to October 4, 1987. It featured the participation of mail artists Dobrica Kamperelic (Yugoslavia), H.R. Fricker (Switzerland), Ruggero Maggi (Italy), A. Dudeck-Durer (Poland), and West Germans Achim Schnyder and Peter Kustermann, among others.

Joki writes, "There may be over 1000 mailartists serving in different links of the international network to inspire each other.

The simplest way to do this is per post. Were one to discount the transported art pieces there would still remain a highly qualified correspondence-art as the most important feature of the Mailart movement. Above and beyond the Postal communication would be the next step of communicative works, the personal contacts."

We also see this urge to communicate a live art manifested in Uruguay. Clemente Padin, an active mail art participant, has served as an inspiration to a whole generation of South American artists. He had been involved with mail art and visual poetry since the late sixties, and was jailed for a time in the seventies for his postal activities. This precipitated a widespread campaign for his release through the mail art network, along with that of his fellow countryman Jorge Carabello. Mail art in South America takes a political stance in response to prevailing conditions. So it was not surprising that in September 1987 a collaborative work supported by the Uruguayan Mail Art Association and featuring Antonio Ladra was held in which Ladra marched in a parade with a sandwich board making known his concerns for the Peruvian people on the anniversary of the establishment of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship. Padin writes, "The question is not only to take the art (as it is understood) to the street, but transform its social meaning in actions and works that have to be actively inserted in its development, referring to those problems that are specially concealed, sensitizing people, trying to give them courage to change their views. And such a modification would change the art work, its consumption, but even more, the artist-spectator relationship."

Two of mail art's most indefatigable "tourists" are Shozo Shimamoto and Ryosuke Cohen of Japan. "Tourism" has become a whole sub-genre of mail art developing from the concept of H.R. Fricker that extends the postal experience into a life experience. Cohen and Shimamoto came to the United States in 1987 after successful tours of Eastern and Western Europe in 1986. Cohen is well known for his Brain Cell project, in which he gathers specific design elements of his correspondents and combines them on one sheet. Shimamoto is one of the most respected figures in mail art. In the fifties, he was active in the Gutai movement, which had an enormous impact on bringing progressive art concepts to Japan. Today he directs AU, an artist union for unidentified art. Their North American tour included stops in Baltimore, New York, Portland (Maine), Dallas, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Calgary. In each city they met with mail art contacts and performed Shozo's "Networking on the Head", in which his shaved head served as a projection screen for slides of mail artists that were sent to him from around the network.

In Dallas, his appearance on July 28, 1987, coincided with the one-hundredth birthday of Marcel Duchamp. To recognize this date of importance, we performed an act to honor Duchamp at a Dallas club appropriately named Club Dada. I had Ryosuke cut off my hair, which I then pasted on the back of Shozo's head in the shape of a star. This paid homage to Duchamp's action of 1919 (or 1921, depending on the source), and sometimes called the "Tonsure", in

which he shaved a star on the back of his head. This was one of the first instances of what would now be considered "body art".

This act points out once again what has become an integral part of the mail art network in the last few years—the extension of the postal experience to live cooperative action by networkers.

If this aspect of mail art has roots in Futurism, Dada, and Fluxus, we must remember that there are other elements of creativity common to these precursors of mail art. These movements also had a strong influence on the written (and printed) word. And mail art too has its share of literary figures—Jack Saunders, Al Ackerman, David Zack, John M. Bennett, Joel Lipman, and George Myers—to name but a few.

This literary aspect of mail art illustrates the ties that mail art has with other alternate, underground, marginal or counter-culture genres (call them what you will). The above named artists have ties to the small literary scene as well as to mail art. Nowhere is this illustrated as well as in the writings of NATION columnist Stewart Klawans, who has an occasional column in the magazine called the "Small Scene". In 1988, Klawans mentioned mail artists Saunders, Ackerman, Anna Banana's BANANA RAG and the Crackerjack Kid's NETWORKING CURRENTS in his exploration of the small press scene.

Another sub-cult which has increasingly strong ties to mail art is the music cassette underground. Dan Plunkett's ND magazine has its roots in this genre. And mail artists Monty (Istvan Kantor) Cantsin, VEC's Rod Summers of Holland, and Italy's Vittore Baroni and his TRAX project have long been involved in sound and audio artforms which appear to be converging with underground music. There are many other mail artists involved in this: Peter Mayer of Sweden, Minoy in Los Angeles, James "Six-Fingered Nunzio" Cobb in San Antonio, Gerald Juppiter-Larsen and his group the Haters in Canada, and Nichola Frangione of Italy who produced the album "Mail Music" to name but a few.

The proliferation of mail art publications is also finding it has strong links to the fanzine and publishing underground. Editors of mail art publications like Dobrica Kamperelic of OPEN WORLD, Daniel Plunkett of ND, and Vittore Baroni of ARTE POSTALE have much in common with other publishers in the science fiction, music, anarchist, and libertarian fields.

And pseudo-cults like the Church of the SubGenius have strong affinities for mail artists, who share the Church's dada lifestyle. Mail art's own cult-within-a-cult, Neoism, is attracting adherents both from within and from outside the strict boundaries of mail art.

And maybe that's the whole point: there are no strict boundaries any more. I was surprised when Lloyd Dunn, the editor of the excellent photocopy journal PHOTOSTATIC, wrote to me that he was *not* a mail artist, but a networker interested in photocopy. It just so happened that photocopy interests and mail art issues overlap.

These various special interest groups, and I haven't meant to exclude the rubber stamp enthusiast, who has enjoyed a long history of involvement in mail art, are finding that mail art has established networks and strategies (like the mail art show structure or the mail art publication where each contributor of a certain amount of pages receives a free issue) that work for them as well.

With all the merging going on, it becomes a distinct possibility that mail art could lose its own identity, fracturing into a myriad

of sub-genres. But mail art has established a strong history: Futurism, Dada, Nouveau Realism, Fluxus, Ray Johnson. And international mail art networking's great strength has been to serve as an umbrella for these diverse fields such as audio, rubber stamps, artists' postage stamps, photocopy, artists' publications, poetry and literature, computer art, and so on.

So far, at any rate, mail art is proving itself eternal. It has extended itself upon such publications as FILE and UMBRELLA, yet when these publications reconsidered their support, the artform adapted and found new avenues of making its voice heard. Currents rise and fall in mail art. Artist postage stamps, mail art shows, rubber stamps, tourism; each fluctuates according to particular concerns and fashions of the moment. Even countries rise and fall in the mailstream of postal activity. Italy has traditionally been an active voice in mail art. Shozo and Ryosuke's frenzied activities on behalf of mail art have caused Japan to take a prominent role in current mail art networking. The Soviet Union is currently embarking upon the seas of mail art. But Australia, while it still has die-hard enthusiasts like Pat and Dick Larter, has lost much of the energy it seemed to possess in the early and mid-seventies.

Themes in mail art come and go as well. In recent years, the Neoist philosophy has swept mail art. Tourism has become an integral part of the networking experience. And in 1988, "Plagiarism" became a prominent concept with Festivals of Plagiarism being held in London, San Francisco, and Madison, Wisconsin.

There are concepts in mail art that are currently being questioned and revitalized. For the past several years, the question of mail art archives has been raised. Who really owns them, the receiver or the artists that created and mailed the works away? And can they be sold? (And more importantly, does anyone want to buy them?). In 1987, Vittore Baroni in a special issue of his influential ARTE POSTALE magazine dared to state that mail art and money *do* mix. And many agree that there are times when indeed they do.

Another controversial concept is the integration of mail art into the framework of the traditional art establishment. In the catalog accompanying the exhibition "Corresponding Worlds—Artists' Stamps", curator Harley (a long-time mail artist) wrote:

I realize that this is a controversial approach to the mail-art network that prides itself on its origins as an alternative to the labyrinth of the highly politicized "art world" of galleries, museums and collectors. Personally, I feel that the integration of the traditional art world structure and the mail-art network is inevitable. My response is that the mail-artist should play the pivotal role in this integration.

The one thing that can be said in confidence about mail art is that its history has never been dull. This vibrancy is what distinguishes mail art from other more static forms of art. The Eternal Network marches to a drum beat of its own, toward a future of undetermined promise.

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