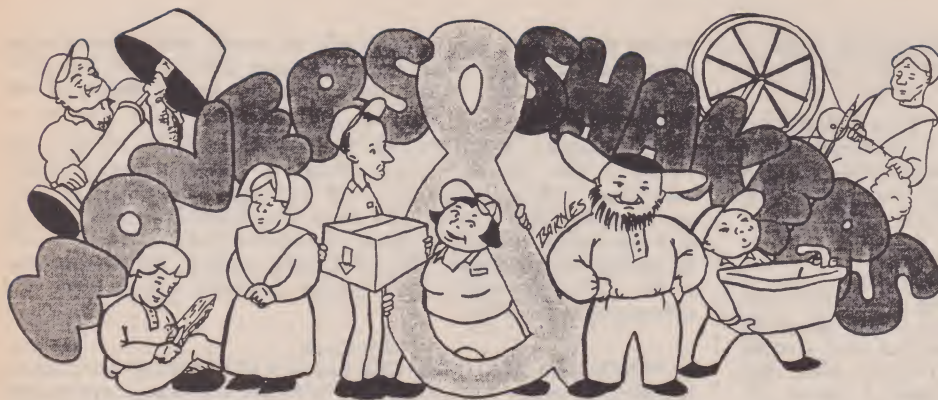




NETWORKING THE NINETIES

by John Held, Jr.

In this follow-up article to the previously published *Eighties Mail Art Networking*, I have attempted to show how various recent occurrences such as political events, topics of interest, specific exhibitions and new communication technologies are pointing toward directions the international mail art network will likely pursue in the present decade.

In the course of the article, I have used the terms *mail art* and *networking* interchangeably. Networking has become a commonly accepted term in mail art due to the concept of the *Eternal Network*, which was developed by Robert Filliou in the late sixties. This was used to describe "an international center of permanent creation" in which participants were composed of "someone starting someone stopping". And while contributors to the *Eternal Network* are composed of a revolving cast, the network itself remains everlasting.

This has proved to be true of mail art, whose greatest contribution has not been the creation of specific artworks, but rather the creation of an open democratic structure in which participants can exchange art and information, and in the process of doing so, learn about the ways the artistic experience is communicated.

Late in 1989, I received a letter from a Finnish rock critic who had just visited a mutual friend in Romania. He wrote to tell me that my Romanian correspondent had not heard from me in some time and wondered if it was because of censorship from the Romanian government or because I had no time to write him.

After telling me of conditions in Romania ("You also need a license if you want more than four people in one room at the same time, whether they are Romanians or not."), he went on to explain that "you can understand how much it means for _____ and other mail art people in Romania to have some contacts outside. But the secret police confiscate everything they don't understand, even if it isn't clearly against the regime. So it does not matter if it is not political; if they're not sure, they stop it. _____ is worried that you may have not received his letters for some such reason and begs you to know that he always replies to your letters to him if you would continue to write to him even if it may seem that he has not replied."

I must admit that at times when I write platitudes about mail art fostering "international artist cooperation" and establishing a new "global vocabulary" sometimes I have my doubts. The flicker of light is so small that you never know if the sparks can be seen. And then a letter like this arrives and confirmation exists that yes, one person can make a difference. At least with one other person.

Soon after the letter arrived, the walls tumbled down throughout Eastern Europe. It meant not only greater political and social freedom, but also artistic freedom for the numerous artists who labored under government repression for so long. It can safely be said that mail art played an integral part in keeping their lines of communication open throughout difficult times.

In a letter dated December 12, 1989, Gyorgy Galantai, one of the more active Hungarian mail artists, wrote about the catalog he enclosed:

"I am glad to be able to send you—after six years—this *Commonpress Hungary* issue. Though this catalogue was finished in January 1984, due to political circumstances (the exhibition was

banned, I was under police "control", all my collaborators were frightened) only some copies could be printed with xerox technique."

"Now finally in a more liberal Hungarian Republic I can publicly show again the once banned material and publish the *Commonpress 51* catalogue the way and in the quality I always wanted to."

Even the Soviet Union has been exposed to the ever widening ripples of the mail art network. The October 1989 issue of the slick Soviet art journal *Iskusstvo* carried an article on mail art written by Serge Segay with the title, "Where the Secret is Hidden".

So as we enter the nineties, we find ourselves in a much more open world. A world in which the free flow of information becomes even more a requisite of a continuing harmonious global situation.

One direct consequence of this new openness is the *Sacred Run - Europe 1990* project which will take Japanese mail artists Shozo Shimamoto, Ryosuke Cohen and Mayumi Handa through East Germany, Poland, Finland, Norway and the Soviet Union (Leningrad, Tartu, Riga, Kiev and Moscow). "The Run for Land and Life is a call to people worldwide to move away from the Path of Destruction towards a Path of a healthier and more peaceful Life initiated by Native American and Japanese Peace Movements." Providing support services for the Native American Indian runners, the three Japanese mail artists will post art and information on their car from mail artists worldwide. In preparation for the *Sacred Run* (August 6 - October 13, 1990), the mail art community has offered not only their art, but sleeping facilities to the caravan. And no doubt, the Japanese mail artists will be joined on the tour by their fellow artists. The success of this project will do much to stimulate other such global collaborations by mail artists throughout the nineties. Mail art can often serve as a springboard when postal relationships result in personal contacts and are put to use for cultural and social purposes.

Mail art is constantly evolving, but it is an evolution that occurs away from the mainstream art establishment. As we proceed into the nineties, it is still very much a "hidden secret". Even though there are repeated calls for a more socially committed art in the art press, mail art is ignored in its discussion. One of the reasons for this is that the genre demands involvement. To know mail art is to do mail art. Articles like this can only hint at its preoccupations and concerns, but in truth, they are as varied as the number of people who participate. But certain ideas tend to sweep through the network with a life of their own. The major preoccupation of the moment is *Art Strike, 1990-1993*. If followed to the letter, the beginning of the nineties is going to be a very fallow time for an explosive medium. But I don't think that many networkers will be full-time adherents to the concept. It's just too problematical to be practical at the moment. And as we will see, *Art Strike* is more a starting point than an ending.

Art Strike serves a purpose in the current situation of mail art. It is a cleansing agent which is intended to get artists thinking about why they make art and whom they serve by doing so. After talking to Stewart Home, who originated the concept, it is my opinion that the concept is intrinsically connected to the English class system and an understanding of the extreme right and left politics that hold sway over there. For this reason, most North Americans, and indeed, those outside of England, find the whole of the arguments difficult to grasp.

If the political impact of *Art Strike* is somewhat tempered by an unfamiliarity with British class structure and politics, it is easier to relate to the aesthetic concerns of the *Art Strike* Action Committees. Writing in *Smile* magazine, Home discusses mail art, the commodification of art, and the differences between art and creativity:

"The term Mail Art is however a misnomer. The written, drawn, painted and printed words, images and objects are exchanged in kind, they are not mediated by the more advanced monetary exchanges of the capitalist epoch. The vast majority of pieces exchanged have no monetary value and so cannot be considered art, a sub-division of reification which is characterised by a high monetary exchange value as well as an ideological content. Some pieces of 'postal art' might be commodified at a later date and traded for money but this is a potential unlikely to be realised in the

for-seeable future, and until it occurs the artifacts concerned cannot strictly be considered art. Most 'Mail Art' pieces are produced because their 'creators' believe that the labour put into these productions is somehow of 'moral value'. For the people involved the work ethic has taken a quasi-religious significance which is conceptualised as 'creativity' (the idea that intellectual and image producing labour are their own reward and should be pursued by the virtuous regardless of whether one is being paid for doing so). Followers of this creed often confuse the terms 'art' (those products of creativity which through a random selection process have come to be used by capitalists as a means of storing surplus value when the monetary economy is being ravaged by inflation) and creativity..."

"Of course our analysis may be incorrect but at least it can be put to the test. For the three years between 1990 and 1993 we will be abandoning all forms of creativity, activism, cultural intervention. Three years is the minimum period over which the impact of such a strategy can be assessed: We do not necessarily expect to overthrow capitalism by the end of this period as no doubt the recuperators of both the left and right will do their utmost to maintain the endless reproduction of the system we oppose..."

The dialogue created by *Art Strike* has jolted the mail art community like no other action since the *Worldwide Decentralized Mail Art Congress* concept of 1986 when some 500 artists from 25 countries participated in over 80 meetings.

After a somewhat hesitant and confused initial reaction ("Pretentious Drivel Strike (1990-1993)" reads one rubber stamp), mail artists have embraced the *Art Strike* concept in their characteristic irreverent, socially engaging and creative manner.

In a collaborative audio project, the Crackerjack Kid (Chuck Welch) sent out a *Art Strike Mantra*, 1990-1993 cassette to be recorded and returned to him for compilation. The *Mantra* reads in part:

We want to show you a strategy for attaining art strike nirvana: We want to show you how you can fight art as status, art as commodity

art as hierarchy

*Our strategy will help you lose your egotism,
self importance,
self indulgence,
self esteem.*

From Yugoslavia, long time mail art participant Andrej Tisma writes;

"Now that I have learned the reasons for the international *Art Strike* 1990-1993 I declare that I will support it, but in Yugoslavia the country where I am living and making art an *Art Strike* would have no sense because:

1. There is no art market here yet.
2. Prices of artworks are so low that you don't sell at all. You make art for pleasure, philosophical and creative reasons.
3. We have only a few art critics and curators, and they have no power or influence upon artists.
4. You don't have to pay the galleries for having your own exhibition, but galleries pay you for that. Shows are not commercial at all, as alternative artists can exhibit in official gallery spaces.
5. The serious culture hardly exists here. It is repressed by the primitive peasant culture, so our aim is to develop and support culture here.

So I am suggesting to all art strikers to come and settle in Yugoslavia during the period 1990-1993 and continue in making art and exhibitions."

While he has ceased to publish *Photostatic* magazine during *Art Strike*, Lloyd Dunn has begun distributing *Yawn: Sporadic Critique of Culture*. Dunn writes that, "The *Art Strike* offers the most aggressive and consistent critique available of the status quo of production and consumption and its power structure." And something called *Forced Art Participation (FAP)* 1990-2001 has surfaced in *Yawn* in an attempt to "integrate the mental set 'art' into the daily routine of all individuals."

My personal way of dealing with *Art Strike*, 1990-1993 is to examine the reasons for my own cultural participation. To see if art is an egotistical projection of the self upon others, or whether after fifteen years of participation in the international mail art network I am able to avoid the term art altogether and instead forge some new hybrid of art and life towards the implementation of a world view that allows me some measure of personal comfort.

It is because of *Art Strike* that this intensive questioning has occurred. And no doubt, there will be even more questions asked

and newer strategies developed to reach even more far reaching conclusions during the period 1990-1993.

Home's statement that, "Some pieces of 'postal art' might be commodified at a later date and traded for money, but this is potentially unlikely to be realised in the for-seeable future...", is already being challenged and is likely to become one of the main issues confronting the medium in the nineties.

From December 7 through 30, 1989, the Davidson Gallery in Seattle, Washington, held an "International Invitational Artistamp Exhibition", curated by James Warren Felter of Vancouver, Canada. Felter hosted the "Artists' Stamps and Stamp Images" exhibition at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, Canada, in 1976, which was the first time that artist created stamps were collected for viewing by the public. An excellent catalog was also produced at the same time making it among the first printed items that the literature of the field produced. So when Felter issued a call to artists early in 1989 to submit editions of signed and numbered stamp sheets for exhibition and sale, he was given the respect he deserved as a pioneer of the medium. But his request raises several important questions for mail artists, both of which will be more fully examined in the coming decade.

The questions raised are the *sale* of mail art, or mail art related, objects, and whether the *invitational* show and publication will make inroads into the traditionally open nature of the classic mail art exhibition ("no fees, all work shown, documentation to all participants"). Let me first say that I was one of the mail artists who accepted Felter's request to participate in the Davidson Gallery exhibition. This was due to his historical importance to the field and a belief that mail art, when properly curated, could enter the gallery system and compete, both visually and conceptually (but not necessarily financially) with any other art being produced today. In addition, even though artist postage stamps could be successfully marketed through a gallery structure, it does not mean that they could not still be given as a gift through normal mail art exchange. Each method of distribution could exist within its own proper framework.

But then I received a call from a collector of "cinderellas". This is a branch of philately that deals with postage stamps, seals and labels, which have no official value for mailing purposes. Just recently a book has been published called *Lick Em, Stick Em: The Art of the Poster Stamp*, which deals with one aspect of this particular field of stamp collecting.

The call I received was due to the collector/dealers' interest in the artist postage stamp due to his exposure to the field through the Davidson Gallery exhibit. As a dealer, he wanted more information and sources about the field so he could promote the collecting of the artist stamps to his customers. I suggested he contact the mail artists active in the field directly and from their submissions put together a catalog. This would give him an overview of the field and involve him in the process of mail art. The mail artists, on their part, would appreciate the interest he showed, and a nicely produced catalog could also contribute to the development of this still evolving genre within mail art.

Instead the dealer issued a letter to mail artists, which I received second-hand, asking "to let us know what you currently have available so we can discuss the details of either purchasing your works or handling them on a consignment basis." Furthermore the dealer stated that, "I hope we can establish a relationship that is not only mutually beneficial, but beneficial to the advancement of Artists' Stamp collecting worldwide." But this is never going to happen when one side of the "mutually beneficial" team doesn't care enough to find out what the field is really about. Any other form of involvement is bound to be superficial. And just like Ronny Cohen during the Franklin Furnace/Artist Talk on Art imbroglio in the eighties, the quick-hit curator or collector is bound to get burned by mail artists who are rightfully angered by people who would misrepresent the field for their own personal interest or gain to the detriment of a free and open network.

One dealer who is going about it correctly is Barbara Moore, proprietor of Bound and Unbound in New York City. Barbara's husband Peter was the "photographer of record" for Fluxus. His photographs saved many of the otherwise lost moments of Fluxus performance. Together the Moores have been tireless champions of Fluxus, and Barbara has written about the movement in such magazines as *Artforum*. Her curation of the exhibition, "The Page as Alternate Space" at Franklin Furnace was a penetrating look at

artist designed publications. Just recently Moore curated an exhibition called, "The Book is in the Mail", which featured such artists as Eleanor Antin, George Brecht, Buster Cleveland, Pawel Petasz (Commonpress), Robert Fillious, Henry Flynt, Gilbert and George, Guerrilla Art Action Group, Ray Johnson, On Kawara, George Maciunas, Mieko Shiomi, Daniel Spoerri, Wolf Vostell and Robert Watts. In her introduction to the exhibition catalog, Moore writes:

"This exhibition is not a survey of mail art. It's intentionally limited to ways in which artists have used the mails as a process for the production and dissemination of book-like or sequential works. It's about 'mailed' rather than 'mail' art, about communication, subverting established procedures, and the increasing internationalization of the avant-garde which, before the fax machine, employed the post office as the most efficient means of eradicating geographical and institutional boundaries."

People are still cautious about the institutionalization of mail art, but mail art is sure to attract its share of attention in the present decade in the context of the fine arts. And the results will be both good and bad. It's always interesting to see how a previously subversive and ignored activity, such as Fluxus and the Situationist International, are institutionalized by the art establishment. I think in the coming decade this will begin to happen to mail art. But I've been thinking this since 1978, so really, who knows.

The other question raised by the Davidson Gallery exhibit of artist postage stamps is whether the invitational approach to mail art is at odds with its democratic nature. The open structure of the medium has caused mail art to grow to the proportions it has. Everyone who wanted to has been able to participate. There are few roadblocks to newcomers. Most projects and publications follow the same guidelines as exhibitions: an open call goes out for submissions and all who answer are included. From time to time, an organizer decrying the uneven quality of contributions will attempt to limit his project to invited artists only. And while the organizer

is certainly within his rights to organize his project in the manner he or she sees fit, this invitational approach diminishes the spirit of openness in mail art. In truth, people who employ this approach reveal more about themselves than the art. They are usually reaching the point of burnout. The openness and uneven results can sometimes get to people who want to exact control over the network. It's like trying to control the ocean: it goes where it wants, and no amount of control is going to make it smoother or flow in a specific direction.

But let me return to Barbara Moore's statement about the FAX machine now being the "most efficient means of eradicating geographical and institutional boundaries." Is FAX a compliment to mail art, or a threat? Does its increased speed expand the effectiveness of the technology over the postal systems' slower arrival time? We will probably begin to sense the answer to these questions in the nineties.

In the January 18, 1990, issue of *Artweek*, there appeared a review of the exhibit, "Information", curated by Robert Nickas, which contained some seventy pieces FAXed to Terrain Gallery in San Francisco by such mainstream artists as Peter Halley, Nancy Spero, Vito Acconci and Hans Haacke. Like a mail art show, entries were simply push-pinned to the wall. The author of the review, Anthony Aziz, writes that, "If the FAX is essentially the visual manifestation of a telephone call, its single most important advantage for art is its ability to provide a new vehicle for distributing information. A medium artists can exploit like other fringe non-gallery media—mail art, video, cable TV, street art, performance." The review also refers to a Summer 1989 exhibit at Capp Street Project in San Francisco with artists from Border Arts Workshop, who installed an "international FAX network". This component of the exhibit "was intended to bridge communities across both geographical and economic borders, making advanced communication technology available to those who might not otherwise have access to it."

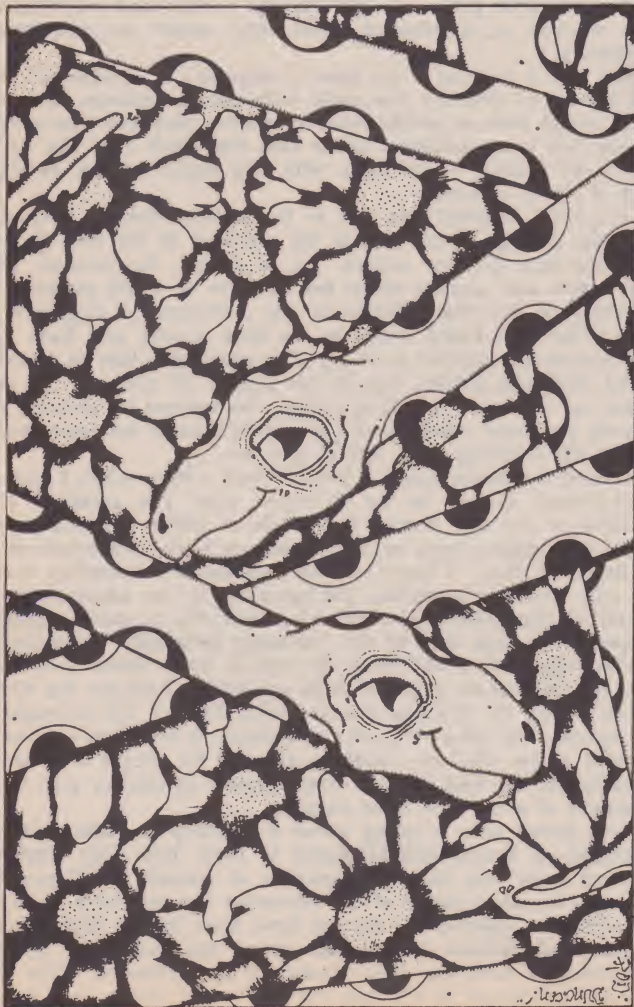
There is obviously a place for FAX in the mail art network. At the very least, as a way to meet last minute show deadlines. At the very best, to utilize a medium which has a faster pace than the postal system. Mail art will use FAX technology, as it does any communication technology, in a manner the artist deems fit for the particular situation.

Computers are another technological innovation seeing increasing use in the mail art network and have been a topic of discussion for several years. Guy Bleus (Belgium), Charles Francois (Belgium) and Ruud Janssen (Holland) have written about the impact of computers on the mail art network. Pawel Petasz, a pioneering mail artist from Poland, has held a computer mail art show entitled, "Square 88". Fred Truck from Des Moines has compiled a computerized listing of conceptual performance events, which has attracted a lot of mail art participation. A yearly Report of the Performance Bank is published in connection with the project.

It seems as if there are several directions mail artists are taking the new technology. Computer works are being sent through the postal system, networks are being established by modems, information is being stored for fast retrieval and updating, and discs are being created as actual art objects.

One of the finest examples of computer generated graphics I've seen are the artist postage stamps created by Gene Laughter of Richmond, Virginia, who was active in the network a few years ago. By the use of a scanner, Laughter took mail art related imagery culled from the network, as well as his own designs, and created some of the finest artist postage stamp graphics seen in the genre. Charles Francois uses a video camera to take portraits of mail artists who visit him in Liege, Belgium, and adds them to his mailings. I wish I knew more about the subject than I do. But I will, as I've just obtained a Macintosh. It seems like in the United States this is the model of choice, while in Europe most mail artists use Commodore and Atari systems. This is not a big problem for the transmission of information, as standardization prevails in this aspect of the technology.

In 1983, Ruud Janssen started publishing his *TAM Bulletin*, a mail art publication which circulated information about mail art shows, publications and projects. After it reached a circulation of 400 copies, Janssen decided to stop publishing it in printed form. In 1988, the *TAM Bulletin* was "computerized so that each new bulletin could be 'uploaded' into two central computers. After the bulletin is uploaded it can be read by anyone having access to a



computer with a modem." (Ruud can be reached at HCC-Fido Tilburg - 1 Tel. Nr. 0-13-563150 or Infoboard-Venray Tel Nr. 0-4780-88119)

I'm currently working on the finishing touches to a research project I've been working on for several years. **Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography** is entered onto computer discs and is being put into camera ready form via Pagemaker. Computers are obviously the archival tools which we must begin to deal with. And the foundation of most mail artists are their archives. Charles Francois lists all the mailing he sends and receives, mail art shows he enters, and makes notations whenever his correspondents include his RAT symbol in their correspondence (for a future project). With this information he plans to issue a "RAT Belgium Annual Report" each year.

Guy Bleus, one of the key theoreticians in the network, has just joined the computer age. It will be interesting to see what uses he makes of the technology as he possesses one of the finest archives in the world. An earlier project of his, which listed all the **Commonpress** editions, is an exemplary mail art documentation project. Bleus writes that, "The transformation of 'mailed-art' into 'electronic' mail-art (or 'computer' mail art, or 'P.C.' mail-art, or 'modem' mail-art, or 'online' mail art, etc.) will provisionally not menace, but extend the existing postal mail-art network with recent technological facilities."

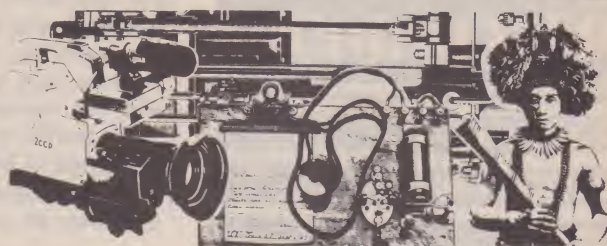
Others are working with computers as electronic paint brushes and as artworks in and of themselves. Eric Finlay, who lives in London, England, and is in his 70s, has taken to computers like a duck to water. He has forsaken his considerable talents as a painter (he taught Carlo Pittore at the Slade School) to work extensively with the Amiga computer. Rod Summers, who is well known in the network for his audio work in connection with the VEC Archives, is doing something I find very interesting. He creates "environments" on the computer, which can be manipulated by the user. Interactive artistic computer environments I guess you would call them. At any rate, they are artworks created on the computer, sent out as artistic software to other artists.

In conclusion, the nineties will be a time of new ideas, of continuing debate on issues vital to the network and of increased experimentation with emerging communication technologies. The eighties were a time of self-reflection in mail art: Crane's **Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity** was published, which provided the first extensive overview of the medium; the Decentralized Worldwide Mail Art Congresses were held; and the Franklin Furnace Controversy continued the schism between mail art and mainstream art. This self-reflection will continue as long as the medium lays unexamined by others.

The mail art network is fortunate in being composed of a dedicated group of participants who give unselfishly of themselves and in so doing expand the network. Publishers of mail art magazines like Daniel Plunkett of **ND** (Austin), Francois Duvivier of **Metro Riquet** (Paris), Dobrica Kamperelic of **Open World** (Beograd), Vittore Baroni of **Arte Postale** (Italy), Gilbretto Prado of **Wellcomet Bulletin** (Sao Paulo), Anna Banana of **Banana Rag** (Vancouver), Daniel Daligand of **Le Timbre** (Paris), Joki Mail Art of **Smile** (Minden, West Germany), Shigeru Nakayama of **Shigeru Magazine** (Kyoto), Shozo Shimamoto of **AU** (Nishinomiya, Japan), Lloyd Dunn of **Yawn** (Iowa City), Judith Hoffberg of **Umbrella**, and Eamonn Robbins of **Mail Art Portraits** (Dublin), among many others, spread the word to others and document the everchanging flux of the network.

In the **Artweek** article that dealt with the FAX exhibition, the author stated that, "These artists, along with others in the show, belong to, and emerge from, a non-object, idea-based idiom that peaked in the late 60s and early 70s". This seems to be the prevalent view of mainstream critics: that mail arts' time has come and gone. That Ray Johnson was interesting, but those that came after him were doomed to repeat the past. This just isn't true to those who have followed the evolution of the network. This will become more apparent in the nineties, for mail art is a vital process of participation which serves as an umbrella for new talent in a variety of disciplines, be it graphics, audio, publishing, performance, conceptual, computer or written arts. Rather than fracturing into separate unities, these disciplines are nurtured by the vitality and internationalism of the mail art network. Mail art will expand in the nineties, because the world is becoming more open and artists are eager to communicate with one another. Network artists will continue to explore the world around them and interpret its changing condition.

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