

Flowing in Omaha

Ken Friedman

The more immediate inception of the *Omaha Flow Systems* project finds its roots in my *One Year One Man Show* presented by the Oakland Museum in 1972. George Neubert, Curator of Art of the Oakland Museum, invited me to present a solo exhibition which would somehow give the meat and substance of my work. I therefore designed a show which would provide a flow of information growing, changing, maturing and regressing along with the flow of my life. Naturally, for a show of this nature, it seemed logical to take a year, sending in the show at intervals by mail. As it came about, some friends who are part of that life heard about it, and asked to send things in. And, in the course of allowing my life to happen, I let the invitation go abroad until hundreds of people were joining me in my show. When invited to show at The Vancouver Art Gallery, I decided to consciously utilize the participation of my friends, rather than just allowing it, and the result was *Ken Friedman and Friends in Process*, a presentation of the intersections, parallels, and interstices of our mutual labors in the arts. *Work in Progress*, the final pre-Omaha systemic from which the Flow System derived, involved the forwarding of all my mail over a six-month span to The Henry Art Gallery of the University of Washington in Seattle, while the museum engendered massive public participation by a saturation campaign of invitations throughout the region.

In 1972, I went to visit Archive Jean Brown, a fabulously well-organized archive of contemporary art of Fluxus, the mail artists, and others arranged by Jean Brown, a generous and astute collector. On the way, Roy Butler of Denver's Friends of Contemporary Art suggested I go to visit Harry Taylor at the Joslyn. So: one fine Autumn day, I drove into Omaha to meet Harry Taylor. We sat in his office and chatted for a few hours, nothing in mind, when suddenly he asked me, 'If you could do anything

you wanted to do here, what would you do?' And I told him all the dreams which eventually became the Omaha Flow Systems.

Which were: to invite thousands of people from around the world to send their work through the mail to Omaha, and to invite the citizens of Omaha to come to the Museum to take what they wanted home, leaving something behind in exchange, and contacting the artists whose work they took. To use this series of activities as methods for trying to involve all levels of the public in the life of the arts, to involve all segments of society from businesses and civic authorities to educational institutions and religious organizations. 'MY' artwork was the creation of the idea and the systems, and after some time of drawing up proposals, ideas and plans, and getting them accepted by the Board of the Museum, 'my' art - the systems itself - was done, and The Omaha Flow Systems itself began.

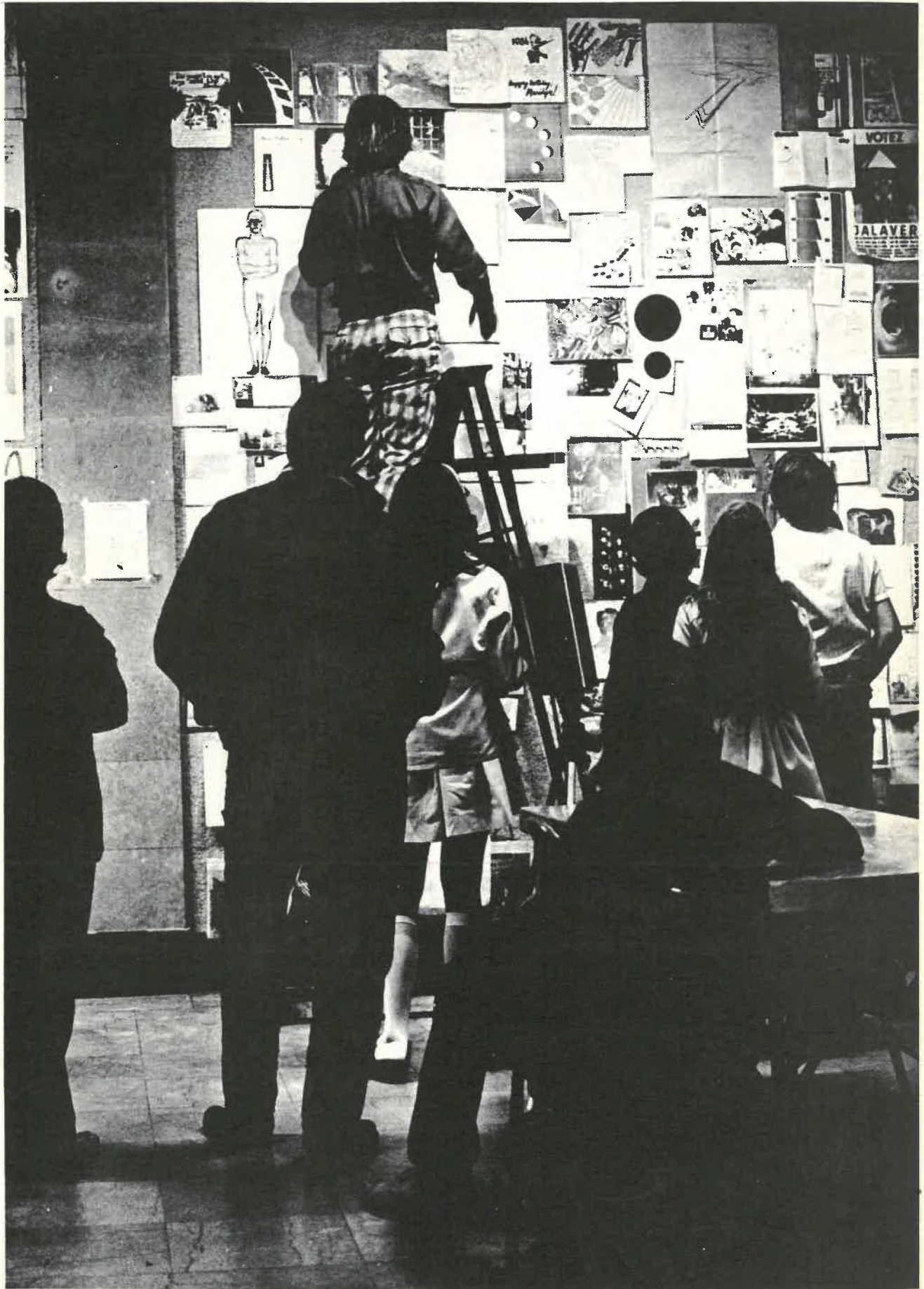
What was the Omaha Flow Systems? The Joslyn Art Museum in cooperation with many other institutions, businesses, and individuals, including Creighton University, The University of Nebraska at Omaha, The Gallery in the Market, Concordia Teachers College, The Greater Omaha Area Lutheran Ministry, The United Methodist Metropolitan Ministries of Omaha, The First Unitarian Church of Omaha, International Artists Cooperation, The Brandeis Department Store, the Xerox Corporation, Roncka Printing Company, Field Paper Corporation, Klopp Printing Company and Commercial Lithographing Company, presented a project for thousands of people in Omaha and around the world. All these groups of people worked together with the System's own Flow Team to present as many challenging activities as could be arranged in the museum, on the street, out of the museum, in stores, bringing performance projects and video programs into the usual quiet spaces of the

museum, bringing the shows right out into the classrooms of schools and universities, and more.

Who was the Omaha Flow Systems? It was: Harry Taylor, Project Director; Tim Herstein, Associate Project Director; Bruce Rennie, Associate Artist; Diane Berendt, Special Collaborating Artist; Tweety, Registrar; Calvin Hennig, Director of Floating Information; Max Almy, Director of Video; Eric Sommers, Video Consultant; twelve collaborating artists, Nam June Paik, Shigeo Kubota, Robert Filliou, Klaus Groh, Janos Urban, Diane Berendt, Stu Horn, Hanns-Werner Kalkmann, Davi Det Hompson, Tom Ockerse, Per Kirkeby and Pierre Keller. As well, the many different members of the Flow Team, in Omaha and around the world, who made the project, in its many aspects, possible. And the excellent photographic team of Butkus, Langdon, Larkin and Phillips who were responsible for the fabulous and thorough documentation of the show from first to last, including the pictures you see here.

The kick-off to the show took place when the museum sent out about 2,000 invitations and posters around the world. A sad irony took place here, in that while the European posters arrived well on time in many cases, in other cases they did not arrive until the week the show opened. And, as of the day the show opened, only 10% of the poster/invitations in the U.S. had arrived, so the very postal service which made the show possible impaired it incalculably in terms of what it could have been. The results, however, were not bad, in that by the end of the show, over 4,000 individual artworks had arrived. Some, of course, came in bundles including many different artists, some

Visitors at the Omaha Flow Systems show



came – for example, one French artist, Giner, who sent a packet every day for the duration of the show – many works by one artist. As a result, when each packet was logged in, we came up with a log of several hundred names, but were not able to log in every work. At the end of the show, the rush to get new material out as old material went away made it impossible to maintain the logging system during the last few days, when the greatest amount of the material was exchanged.

During the show, a large number of activities took place. These included lecture/demonstrations for Creighton University, a seminar for a class at University of Nebraska, an Omaha Flow Systems Potluc & Benefit at The First Unitarian Church of Omaha, and a Celebration of the Arts in co-operation with the Lutheran and United Methodist ministries in the Omaha area.

The show was not without its problems. The museum received two grants, one from The Nebraska State Council on the Arts and the other from SRL A Free Religious Fellowship of Boston, and itself budgeted \$500, and spent somewhat more than that. Due to miscalculations, monies supposedly to have been raised were not, and I myself underwrote the show in the sum of \$2,000 out of my own pocket for communications and printing expenses, and financial assistance to the collaborating artists.

We feel that one of the reasons for the unusual successes and failures of the show was that it was an amalgamation of firsts for The Joslyn and for Nebraska, including the first exhibition to involve the use of video, the first non-standard (i.e., hang or mount only) exhibition in the area, and the first show to try to utilize a major system, rather than simple museum-channel operations for programming.

The area and the citizens responded well – we had a large number of television interviews and broadcasts, including a lengthy interview on one channel and two half-hour special programs on a nearby FM radio station. The local press responded well, with two major favorable articles in the two large metropolitan newspapers, one unfavorable review and one rebuttal allowed by the unfavorable critic. Many school-children came, along with other citizens ranging from

museum members and interested members of the public to the Mayor of Omaha, Eugene Leahy, who – with Dr. San Guinary – entered two giant postcards painted in the Museum as their contribution to the show. (Dr. San Guinary is the fascinating MC of Omaha's late-night monster-movies).

We have not yet determined the number of visitors to the show, but it ranges well into the several thousands. As well, through the press, the publications and announcements, we feel that this project reached out – if only as an idea, a possibility – to millions of people, some who came from thousands of miles away, others who wrote, to see or take part in the show. In fact, John Bosshard, Michael Gehrke, and Jan Gallagher drove over 1,000 miles from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to do an hour-long sculpture construction piece, then removing half the sculpture to take back with them. They arrived in the late afternoon, did their work, we all ate dinner together, and

then they left the next morning to get home in time for work. (The piece was really outstanding, and they even transported several tons of boulders and trees to make sure everything went well, rather than relying on finding the right rocks in Omaha.)

Was the show an art epic? Yes and no. We feel it was an epic project, a glorious idea which opened up a lot of new areas of thought and exploration in the arts. As we discussed earlier, this idea did not spring full-blown from the brain of the artist, but had precedents and resonances over the years in the work of many. It was, for the region and for the museum, and for many who had not heard about earlier projects or efforts in these traditions, a new idea, a new experience, a series of firsts which shed light on many old and new thoughts, ways people can

Cardmusic sequence at Joslyn Art Museum



work, what art means, who is an artist, the function and potential of the museum, etc. As well, even to the informed in communications and mail art, it was a new thing: the largest, best-financed (even though running short of funds) and best-organized such project ever to be attempted. And, in this sense, for museums and artists interested in accomplishing such projects in the future, it is a source of information and ideas, both for what to do and what not to do – and such mundane things as the importance of mailing time-tables, which the artist suggested, but which, through miscommunication, the museum did not follow, with the sad postal results mentioned above.

The quality of the work varied – some of the individual works were great, others not so great . . . and much depended on the eye and heart of the individual viewer. Pieces I would have snatched up often stood on the walls while short-order items went like the proverbial hotcakes. Of great interest were the hundreds of works of children's art from around the world, another of the interlinked aspects of the OFS, arranged through artists in various countries.

Beyond, works from artists everywhere . . . Robert Indiana, Jorg Schwarzenberger, Renate Kretschmer, Bengt Af Klingtberg, Kalevi Lappalainen, Gabor Attaldi, Jiri Valoch, William Sorensen, May Wilson, Franci Zagoricnik, Alice Hutchins, Jerry Elrod, Daniel Biga, Urs and Ros Graf, Bernard Heisdieck, and . . . and . . .

Like the entire class full of kids who took away Josef Bauer's work, planning to send him their works as a class project . . . or the German class who took away Timm Ulrich's work for a translation project . . . or the many people who received the works of the aforementioned Giner . . .

The basis of our project was this: a regeneration of public interest in the arts, a lively experiment involving many and affording significant personal pleasure to each in her or his own way. Across the nation and around the world, governments, foundations, museums and artists are spending millions toward this goal, often without success. That Omaha Flow Systems was able to achieve the essential goal, even in a tentative, first-step fashion, on a short budget and

with a lot of work, stands as a tribute to the many participants, the Flow Team, the Joslyn Art Museum and the citizens and organizations of Omaha who made it possible and effective. This stands as the final judgement of the craft, brightness, hard work and energy involved in creating and nurturing the *process* that was Omaha Flow Systems, and is its validation as a work of art.

Everything it was . . . from a mail art show to a solo show of one artist's concept to a celebration of the arts (the work of Rev. Vic Schoonover and Rev. Jerry Elrod, of the two ministries) to a giant group show to the ideas and information you are deriving from this article.

One critic suggested that it was a case of the emperor who had no clothes, a pretentious avant-garde exercise in aesthetic futility. I say, it's true the emperor has no clothes – but the Ohama Flow Systems was not an imperial procession. It was a family picnic of good, hard-working folks, artists, bankers, politicians, plumbers, all having a go at that most complex of human activities – creative participation in the arts. It was an experimental process which will bear fruit in the lives of those touched by that process. A postage stamp will not cover an emperor, naked or not – but it will cover the globe, shortening the distance between people and nations, sweetening the hours of our days. This was what we set out to do, and it was good.

CHRONOLOGY: 1960 – KF performing events and sending items through the mails to friends, not as a conscious art activity. 1965–6 – KF produces the Radio Garnisht Kigele series on Radio WRSB, Shimer College, Mt. Carroll, Illinois. Contacts Something Else Press. When in New York to visit the Press, Dick Higgins suggests a visit to Fluxus. KF joins Fluxus and becomes Director of Fluxus West. For more details on this Fluxus activity, read 'Fluxus and Concept Art', *Art & Artists*, October 1972 Fluxus Issue. 1967 – through these connections, KF enrolls in the New York Correspondence School, headed by Ray Johnson. 1968 – Fluxus West publishes *Amazing Facts Magazine*, a randomly assembled contributor-based magazine paralleling the better-organized magazines such as Atchley's *Ace Space Company* productions and Kostelanetz' *Assembling* of later years. This early project included work by Christo, Ray Johnson, Dick Higgins, Greg Sweigert, Mario Diacono

and others. 1970 – Ray Johnson and the New York Correspondence School exhibit at New York's Whitney Museum. 1971 – The Biennial of Paris holds a large mail art section, organized by Jean-Marc Poinot. Image Bank of Canada launches the giant *Post Card Show* under the auspices of The National Gallery of Canada. 1972 – KF exhibitions take place as described in article.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Information on correspondence and mail art will be found extensively in such books as: *Mail Art*, ed. Jean-Marc Poinot, Editions C.E.D.I.C., Paris, 1971; *The Paper Snake*, Ray Johnson, Something Else Press, New York; *Ample Food for Stupid Thought*, Robert Filliou, Something Else Press, New York; *Breakthrough Fictions*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, Something Else Press, Barton, Vermont; *Fluxus and Happenings*, Harald Szeeman, Hanns Sohm & Dietrich Albrecht, Kunstverein Kölnischer, Cologne; *A Dialogue with Ken Friedman*, by Thomas Albright, The Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; *International Sources*, ed. Ken Friedman & Stanley Lunetta, Composer/Performer Editions, Sacramento, California; and in the following articles, including several by Thomas Albright, one of the most astute and well-informed critic-historians of communications art, 'A Guerrilla Attack on Traditional Art Ideas', *San Francisco Chronicle*, p. 49, Feb. 9, 1972; 'Informed Sources', *The Art Gallery Magazine*, Ivoryton, Conn., April 1972; 'Correspondence Art', *Rolling Stone*, Issues # 106 and # 107, San Francisco; 'Mail Art' by David Zack, *Art in America*, March 1973; and 'Postal System is Shaping Art Shows', by James Bresette, *Omaha World-Herald*, Mon., April 16, 1972, p. 4.

A special source of information is *The International Contact List of the Arts*. Sections have been published since 1966 by Fluxus West. The first major edition was released in 1972 by Fluxus West in cooperation with Image Bank, TransCanadian Fluxus Ltd., and others in Canada. The new revised edition will appear in Fall of 1973 by Fluxus West and Tom Ockerse Editions, of Providence, Rhode Island, including over 1,500 additions, changes, corrections, and updates of information. The list contains over 3,000 names and addresses of individuals around the world who are involved in the arts, and has been used successfully by FILE MAGAZINE of Toronto for their list – originally taken directly from the list, later amended by General Idea – and in projects such as Davi Det Hompson's *Cyclopedia* or recent promotionals by *FlashArt* of Milan. A large number of pirates or reprints of the list are in circulation, some bearing the imprint of Fluxus West, and others not. Several of these reprints have received favorable review in major art magazines, sadly lacking the credit to Fluxus West for originating and consistently developing and sharing the list since 1966.