

Excerpts from A Brief History of Correspondence Art by Mike Crane

Mail Art is an activity happening among thousands of artists on an international scale. Over the last two decades perhaps as many as 10,000 or 20,000 or more have participated. Among these there are hundreds who are regular participants at any given time.

At its best, Mail Art reflects an active interest and search for alternative forms of communication. The value of the activity lies in the experimental paradigms it produces. The danger of Mail Art is its appeal as a 'fashionable' activity. Many of the artists may think they are engaged in communication experiments, when in fact they are just engaged in doing Mail Art, and producing works that are more a fashion than an experiment.

Mail Art comes in the forms of interpersonal mailings, shows and publications. The results are generally ephemeral, though some works reflect attitudes that become longlasting because of their transformative abilities.

For some artists Mail Art is an end in itself, completing their aesthetic needs. For others the phenomena presents a matrix for their aesthetic experiments. In this sense Mail Art is a disposable tool for discoveries, an activity one can engage in as personal needs or development dictates. However, most artists that drop out never resume, not because of what they find but because of the disillusion that arises from unfulfilled expectations.

A definition of this activity can be arrived at by overlaying the basic paradigm of all communication. That is: *who says what to whom by what channel for what*



Gary Laskin
Los Angeles, California

purpose to what effect.

The "who" and "whom" are theoretically interchangeable (as a two-way communication). In practice however this does not always happen. Some artists purposely seek to remain anonymous or obscure, preferring the romance of intrigue to real exchange. This conception was far more interesting when it first appeared in the 60's. Today, persisting in this vein seems like more of an indulgence than a significant statement. Another consideration limiting true interchangeability is the fact that it would not be possible to maintain meaningful contact with every other artist on the network at the same time. Each participant will have a personal saturation point (of boredom or psychic overload) at which they are either unable or uninterested to go beyond. For some this may mean contact with fewer than 10 others, or fewer than 100 others, or . . .

A specific list of names and social roles is impossible within this context. Names are constantly disappearing or being added to mailing lists as people drop out or discover the network.

The reasons for doing Mail Art are probably as many and varied as the artists themselves. Some have been doing Mail Art for a decade or more, but most have been at it for a much shorter length of time (less than one or two years).

The social roles Mail artists play are necessarily diverse. Hardly anyone makes a living directly from their art (much the same as in the entire fine art world), and especially from their Mail Art! Research on the network, however, shows that a

large number are art-support-system employed (as lecturers, critics, writers, publishers, teachers, consultants, museum workers, etc.). And I would suspect that many more would accept such positions if the opportunity arose, despite the opposition to arts' systems they profess so vehemently in their mailings.

Research in the field also shows that most Mail artists have been to an art school or received some sort of formal art training. A great number are college degreed and a significant portion of those hold advanced degrees (at the Masters or Doctoral level). It should be pointed out though that this is not a prerequisite for making good art. Witness Dick Higgins or Ken Friedman, both of whom have made great contributions not only to Mail Art but in other areas as well, and, that neither have pursued training or a degree in a fine art field. Another point concerning the Mail artist is that almost all are engaged in other forms of art making (from traditional to the newest of the new), and that Mail Art is just one of their personal strategies for aesthetic and psychic survival.

The "what" of the above paradigm, is the content. Today the content of Mail Art includes images and ideas of art, life, politics, sex, loving, philosophy, science, communication, time, space, who said or did what (whatever people do or say is fair game), mysticism, games, secrets, playing, etc. "Etc." is a safeguard for what I have left out. When there are many hundreds operating on all continents, from many age groups and from many different kinds of cultural experience, something ultimately will be left out.

The content of Mail Art is similar to the content of the other fine arts in total.

While a great deal of Mail Art will address the issues of interfacing art and life, this does not always happen. There are even Mail Art equivalents for such traditional concerns as romantic or abstract painting.

The "channel" is the how. Since all the work eventually passes into the international postal system, there are inbuilt constraints. Letters, postcards and objects weighing less than 70 pounds predominate. (Maximum weight limit for a package mailed within the U.S., may vary from country to country.)

The media most widely used are described in the following list. Since Mail Art is primarily a printed media, offset lithography, letter press, multilith and other printing processes are used extensively. Relating to this can be found "words" (language) used as adjuncts to images, as images themselves, or alone. Images are also generated in sometimes ingenious ways on the multitude of copying machines available (e.g. Xerox, IBM, 3M, telecopier, etc.). An entire range of collage techniques are used, from sloppy to well done, from inspiring to insipid. Photography is used in familiar traditional ways, in conceptual documentary fashion and in other assorted states of being. Rubber stamps are used quite often as works in themselves, or as complements to other words and images. Postage-like artists stamps have been popular for a long time. They are printed by a variety of means and have even infrequently appeared on envelopes instead of official postage (much to the chagrin of authorities). Experiments with envelopes and other packaging ideas appear from time to time. Object assemblages incorporating everyday, found and/or junk items are made with varying degrees of success. Traditional and experimental writing, poetry, drawing and painting,

rounds out the bulk of what one may receive in the mail box.

The "purposes" and "effects" of Mail Art are sometimes difficult to detect. This may be the fault of the sender (ambiguous, obscure work), of the receiver (misperception), of the postal service (destruction, loss or censorship), or, of the economic and political situations regarding production and consumption (decadence, repression, turmoil, etc.).

Some of the purposes I have perceived are: to amuse, delight, anger, shock, inquire, compare, confound, inform, signify, affirm, negate, record, satirize or destroy.

Some of the effects I have perceived are: knowledge, vision, understanding, awareness, dialogue, feedback, growth, choice, change, survival. Boredom must also be recognized as an effect. This is usually the result of the whole range of stupidities and nonsense that are generated in an attempt to elicit a feeling of being "with-it", or, being engaged in crucial issues of the day. In other words, this latter effect is the result of being fashionable, though this may not be recognized or understood as such by the practitioners. To know the purposes and effects of Mail Art it is necessary to have a view of the history and transformations of art. As well, it is necessary to have knowledge of the particular aesthetic attitudes these artists have. This is not always easy, as the attitudes professed and an analysis of what is actually accomplished are frequently two different things.

A history of this phenomena is not solely a history of the things these artists send each other. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, a history of their attitudes regarding art and life. And it must be stated that within the Mail Art

network there are many diverse and even opposing attitudes toward both.

The main historical impetus (both in attitudes and practice) for today's activity comes from three areas: FLUXUS, the NEW YORK CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOL and LE NOUVEAU REALISME.

Fluxus is primarily described as "a way of doing things." From Fluxus evolved some of the most important names, ideas and attitudes which to a large degree have helped shape the face of art as it is known today. Mail Art owes more to Fluxus than any other source for its origins.

Among all the illustrious members of Fluxus, those making significant contributions to the development of Mail Art include:

Ken Friedman, who over the years has compiled mailing lists, organized and produced shows and publications, etc., that have been cornerstones for the spread of the Mail Art phenomenon. Friedman's proliferation of activities have included founding and editing the "NYCS Weekly Breeder," co-founding the "Sock of the Month Club" along with Fletcher Copp, organizing the "Omaha Flow Systems" show in 1972, and compiling and distributing the first large international mailing list (of some 1,400 names in 1971-72) from which many offshoot projects began. Friedman has done more to introduce and establish conceptual models for others to work within than any other individual. His outspoken but honest criticism keeps him in a controversial but unignorable role on the network.

Dick Higgins' pioneering efforts in the areas of quality alternative publishing, poetry, play writing, intermedia (a term he coined), etc., make him one of the most respected individuals on the network. He is Mail Art's literary cognate.

Robert Filliou gave the name "Eternal Network" to the individuals and groups who comprised the network of artists, colleagues and friends active in the Mail Art scene.

Ben Vautier's postcards, object assemblages and astute statements have been significant conceptual contributions for over a decade.

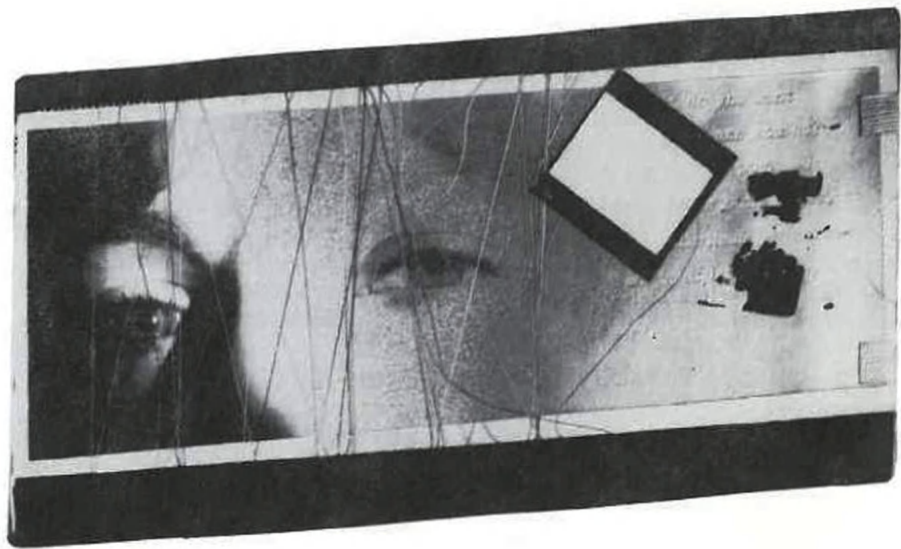
Bob Watts' stamps preceeded and have been the model for the production of artists' postage-like stamps. His remain some of the finest examples around.

Mieko Shiomi's "Spatial Poem" series evolved as 9 yearly events from '65-'75. Her book of the same title documenting the results is one of the finest publications ever put together on a Mail Art topic.

Daniel Spoerri published one of the first artists' journals, "The Journal of Nothing Else." His rubber stamps from the early 60's (along with those of Ben, Vostell, Beuys, Brecht, Friedman, etc.) are among the earliest and best known of the era.

Others participating in various ways at different times include George Brecht, Joseph Beuys, Eric Andersen, Geoff Hendricks, Milan Knizak, Alison Knowles, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Tomas Schmidt and Wolf Vostell.

The New York Correspondence School was created in 1962 by Ray Johnson. And as Thomas Albright states in the April 13, 1972 issue of "Rolling Stone" magazine, "... the 'school' consists solely of its head, artist-collagist Ray Johnson, and a corporate charter; and it teaches nothing." Albright adds, "On a process level, however, it encompasses hundreds of persons — artists, critics, movie actors — who have received mailings from Johnson and/or written to him ... and it teaches — well, whatever element of amusement, instruction,



Richard Zauft
Madison, Wisconsin

revelation, absurdity or logic that one happens to derive from Johnson's mailings, or the sheer fact of his and the school's existence. Somewhere in between are perhaps 200 more or less regular correspondents who form the core of 'faculty' and/or 'students'."

Ray Johnson is a collagist, naive draftsman, and letter writer. The attitudes he reflects in his works are entertaining, amusing, confounding, irritating and sometimes educating. Johnson's work is clever, attractive and seductive, albeit sometimes obscure. His role as a communication artist is both curious and unique.

Johnson continues to be active in Mail Art though the the New York Correspondence School is defunct. As Ray stated in a letter to John Willenbecher, "April 5, 1973 The New York Correspondence School died." Though in typical Johnson fashion, Ray cryptically adds in a statement to David Bourdon in 1975, "The New York Correspondence School has no history — only a present."

Nouveau Realisme is a term coined by French critic Pierre Restany in a manifesto/text. It reads, "Le jeudi 27 octobre 1960 les nouveaux realistes ont pris conscience de leur singularite collective. Nouveau Realisme — nouvelles approches perceptives du reel." And was signed by Arman, Francois Dufrene, Raymond Hains, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Daniel Spoerri, Jean Tinguely and Jacques de la Villegle. Also considered among this group of new realists are Cesar, St. Phalle, Christo and Piero Manzoni.

The New Realist contribution to Mail Art is twofold. First, the incorporation of everyday, found and junk objects into their sculptures, assemblages and

collages; and second, an intregration and reintroduction of the rubber stamp into art images.

The New Realist contribution to Mail Art, however, is probably the least direct or understood. The group is overshadowed by the careers and reputations of its individual members. Also, the term "Nouveau Realisme" is less known to the rest of the world than it is in Europe, and particularly France. However the New Realists' influence on their peers and the originators of Mail Art cannot be denied. Their place in time predated Pop and paralelled the Neo-Dada of U.S. artists like Rauschenberg and Johns. Many of the group were also engaged in a reciprocal relationship with Fluxus (e.g. Spoerri's membership in both groups, Ben's influence on Manzoni, etc.). Among the New Realist group those with the most direct participation in Mail Art activity were Arman and Spoerri.

Some other key influences on the Mail artist of today include Dada, Pop, Minimal, Conceptual and Structural Art. Some additional attitudes reflected in Mail Art works include: a-, anti- and non-art concerns; irreverence; anger; anarchy; interest in sexy, pornographic and even sexist ideas and images; serious social, political and/or psychological concerns (conditioned by individual interest and/or cultural milieu); serious communication concerns; committment to Fluxus-like philosophic ideals (e.g. social-political activism, community leadership, free access and sharing of information, openness to dialogue, etc.).

(A Brief History of Correspondence Art, edited by Mike Crane, is soon to be published)