

The Shadow Project: A Collaboration between the Mail Art Network and Peace Activists in Contemplation of an Uncertain Age.

By John Held, Jr.

The Mail Art network is an international assemblage of cooperating artists and concerned individuals who share art and ideas through the post in an alternative to the commercial art system. Rather than participate in juried shows, Mail Artists have curated their own exhibitions allowing for open and free participation. Rather than concentrate on the production of objects for sale, Mail Artists have tried to forge new ties between art and life.

Although there are precursors of Mail Art contemporary with the beginning of the Modern Art movement (such as Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, Dadaism, and the Italian Futurists), and recent affinities with more recent avant-garde manifestations (as Gutai, Nouveau Realism, and Fluxus), Mail Art can be said to have been pioneered by Ray Johnson, a New York artist who began weaving a web of postal intimates in the fifties. Through word of mouth, and his admonitions to "add and send" his correspondence on to either a known or unknown party third party, Johnson created a poetic performance through the mails, which became known in 1962 as the New York Correspondance (sic) School of Art.

In 1972, a two-part article, written by art critic Thomas Albright, appeared in *Rolling Stone* magazine describing Johnson's Mail Art activities. For the first time, wide-spread attention was focused on this underground art movement in other than an artworld publication. An influx of new participants entered the medium eager to share in the camaraderie of communication. Mail Art began to attract not only individuals interested in artistic alternatives, but in social and political ones as well.

This newly forged alliance of socially, politically, environmentally, and artistically engaged postal-based artists and individuals began organizing a number of thematic art exhibits reflecting their concerns. The following exhibitions (followed by the organizer or place of origin, and the year in which it was shown) exemplify the interest Mail Artists placed in activist issues:

The Artist at the Service of the Community (Clemente Padin, 1976); *Earth Healing Mail Art Event* (Chuck Stake, 1977); *The Young Generation and the Political and Social Reality* (Peter Below, 1978); *Satira Politica: Post Scriptum* (Vittore Baroni, 1979); *Anti-Nuke Mail Art Show* (Seattle, 1980); *Anti WW III Show* (San Francisco Poster Brigade, 1980), *Marginal Art and Society* (Nicola Frangione, 1980); *Capitalism is Sad* (Patrick T., 1981); *Homosexuality* (Christorper Mach Art, 1981); *Solidaritat for Solidarnose* (Jürgen Gchweinebraden, 1981); *The World Message Now* (Art Stage, 1981); *Artists Make Art Against War* (Jürgen Schweinebraden, 1982); *Arts for Surviving* (West Germany, 1982); *Enlightenment and Perversity in Urban Life* (Steve Balkin, 1982); *First International Peace-Art Action by Mail* (Hans Kalkmann, 1982); *International Action for Peace* (Georg Ozery, 1982); *International Festival in Solidarity with the People of Central America and the Caribe* (Mexico, 1982); *Make Love Not War* (Joachim Strange, 1982); *Mr. X Presents Anti-War* (Sweden, 1982); *On Freedom On Peace* (Kala Institute, 1982); *Paper Ambassadors* (Creative Thing, 1982); *The Place of Arts in Society* (Arno Arts, 1982); *Reclaim the World, Redesign the Future* (Internationalist Arts Festival, 1982); *Shall We Save Venice?* (Italy, 1982); *Accion Postal America Latina* (Chile, 1983); *Human Rights* (Peru, 1983); *Mail Art for Peace* (East Germany, 1983); *Pollution in Italy - Save the Bormida River* (Bruno Charlone, 1983); *Prison Mail Art Show* (California Institute for Men, 1983); *United for Peace* (Ruggero Maggi, 1983); *Women Today* (East Germany, 1983); *About War, Peace and Something Else* (Rodolfo Granaffi, 1984); *Art Against Apartheid* (New York, 1984); *Big Brother's Year* (Greece, 1984); *Censorship East/Censorship West* (John Jacobs, 1984); *Flags Down for World Peace* (Crackerjack Kid, 1984); *För Places and Rights of the People* (Italy, 1984); *Has Any of Your Mail Been Censored?* (Mark Wamaling, 1984); *Mail Art on Racism* (Cellini, 1984); *Mailart for Peace* (Peter Küstermann, 1984); *On Being Black in America* (California, 1984); *Peace in the World or the World in Pieces* (Michael Leigh, 1984); *Reagan 1984: War Criminal or ?* (Howard Munson, 1984); *Against US Intervention in the Caribbean* (Artists Call, 1985); *Flags for World Peace* (Crackerjack Kid and Shozo Shimamoto, 1985); *Nicaragua: Patria O Muerte* (Uruguayan Mail Artists Association, 1985).

These social, political and environmental concerns were not only manifested in exhibitions, but in a number of actions as well. Mail Art issues each participant a certain cloak of anonymity in its practice. One is safely confined to one's home, for the most part, while solitarily plying one's trade. But through letterwriting campaigns, and direct actions in both social and artistic settings, Mail Artists have raised their voices to focus attention on global concerns.

The power of a mass letterwriting campaign in today's society should not be undervalued. Corporations still pay heed when a sizable amount of letters address a subject. They know that so few people actually write letters anymore that when one person writes, it indicates thousands feel the same way. In the case of Clemente Padin and Jorge Caraballo, a Mail Art letterwriting campaign had the effect of securing their release from political confinement in Uruguay.

In August, 1977 Mail Artists Clemente Padin and Jorge Caraballo were arrested and imprisoned for their political protests against the Uruguayan military and the American influence within the country. In February, 1978 Geoffrey Cook, an American artist active in the Mail Art network, undertook to organize a letterwriting campaign and coordinated the efforts of European and American artists. His purposes were two-fold: "1. Popular: to get interested individuals to write letters to their governments and the Uruguayan government to influence the decision makers, and to circulate information and documents on the case. 2. Direct: to win the support of influential individuals, organizations, and governments to intercede on the behalf of the artists."

As a result of the insuing attention placed on Padin and Caraballo by the Mail Art community, both the French and American governments made diplomatic inquiries on behalf of the artists, and in 1979 both Padin and Caraballo were paroled from prison. Geoffrey Cook wrote that the project, "has shown us that structures exist within the art world through which we can effect change and influence larger forces."

Sometimes more direct measures than letterwriting campaigns are called for. At times one has to engage in direct action to measure him or herself against personal ideals.

The social concerns expressed by the international Mail Art network, a willingness to bring them before the public, and an emerging tendency to collaborate in real time, set the stage for one of the most widespread continuing Mail Art collaborations - the Shadow Project.

In the Peace Museum in Hiroshima are the steps of a bank's doorway with a human image indelible etched into it. This is the image which was used to represent a scenario of our future destruction should we not cooperate with one another. Alan Gussow, project co-director of the International Shadow Project, wrote, "By scattering images across the face of the earth, we hope to nourish the collective imagination. It is possible, indeed it is our

expectation, that people seeing for themselves what will be left after nuclear war will not only act to preserve their own lives, but to continue all life on earth."

In early 1985, the following announcement, written by two members of Performers and Artists for Nuclear Disarmament (PAND), began to circulate in the Mail Art Network:

Dear Friends,

August 6, 1985 will mark the 40th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima. We remember this day not only because of its historic significance, but to keep vivid in our minds the probable consequences of nuclear proliferation. As a way of commemorating the first nuclear holocaust, we are organizing a worldwide event, the INTERNATIONAL SHADOW PROJECT, that will help people visualize the consequences of nuclear catastrophe and affirm its human dimensions.

When the first atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima in 1945, human beings who were within 33 meters of ground zero were instantly vaporized by the searing heat of the blast, leaving behind only their "shadow." The remnants of these innocent victims provide the image and theme for the Shadow Project, a solemn memorial with a singular purpose: to help people understand and imagine the disappearance of all life through nuclear annihilation.

Before dawn on Hiroshima Day, August 6, 1985, we will paint silhouettes of human beings engaged in various activities. These non-permanent shadows will be found on public streets and sidewalks in various communities around the world. The silent testimony of these anonymous human silhouettes will dramatize what would remain after nuclear war.

The first Shadow Project took place in New York City in 1982 and was followed by a similar event in Portland, Oregon in 1983. As cultural workers, we created a way for concerned people to commemorate Hiroshima Day. We achieved two goals. First, the project provided an opportunity for participants to share a sense of community and empowerment. Second, it provoked and stimulated extensive public debate about the nuclear issue. The media coverage was extraordinary.

As a result of our collective experience, we have developed a program to help other communities implement their own Shadow Projects so that a simultaneous display of human images will appear throughout the world on Hiroshima Day, August 6, 1985...

In peace and action,
Donna Grund Slepach and Alan Gussow

This plea for international action was reprinted in several Mail Art publications, among them the influential *Clinch* magazine edited by Günther Ruch, and it struck a receptive chord with an art network that had been radicalized by political and social causes in the past. It also was timed perfectly, because at the same time the earliest notices for the Shadow Project were circulating in the mailstream, plans were underway to

organize the largest sustained gathering of Mail Artists since the New York Correspondence School of Art Meetings organized by Ray Johnson in the sixties and seventies.

The Decentralized World-Wide Mail Art Congresses were conceptualized by Swiss artists H. R. Fricker and Günther Ruch, who were attempting both to stimulate discussion of Mail Art concerns and to encourage Mail Artists to meet each other. During 1986, over 80 Congresses were held in 25 countries with over 800 participants. Accounts of individual Congresses were published and received wide distribution. The trend in Mail Art clearly was to extend the postal encounter to direct collaboration in real time.

Ruggero Maggi, a long-time networker from Milan, Italy, was already promoting the Shadow Project in connection with the Mail Art Congresses. He was one of the thirty or so Mail Artists who attended the Minden (West Germany) Mail Art Congress organized by Joki Mail Art (Jo Klaffki) from September 19-29, 1986. The Congress included exhibitions, performance, workshops and art actions. At the conclusion of the Congress, on the morning of September 29, 1986, Mail Artists Peter Küstermann, Joki, Gerard Barbot, Willi Metting, Marcel Stüssi, Manfred Schild, Dirk Gorny and Maggi gathered in front of the Bürgerzentrum, where an exhibition of Maggi's visual poetry curated by Peter Küstermann was being held.

The Mail Artists proceeded to carry out the "Hiroshima Schatten Projekt" by laying down paper silhouettes of humans in various positions. Around these silhouettes were painted outlines in white paint. But soon after the commencement of the action, the police arrived on the scene to question the participants. Documents and passports were given to the authorities, but in the end all were released. An account of the action with photographs was published in the Minden newspaper. Maggi issued his own account of the proceedings, which was entitled, *An Injury to One Is an Injury to All*.

In the wake of the Mail Art Congresses a number of collaborative actions ensued. Jürgen Olbrich, a networker from Kassel, West Germany, formed a group called the Nomads, which included Mail and Performance Artists from Canada, England, West Germany and Switzerland. The Nomads performed a number of times in Europe, culminating in their participation in the prestigious Documenta 8 in 1987.

For his part, Ruggero Maggi was collaborating with Shozo Shimamoto, Director of the AU (Art Unidentified) Artspace in Nishinomiya, Japan, to bring the Shadow Project "home" to Hiroshima on August 6, 1988. Mail

Artists Daniel Daligand from France, Gerard Barbot and myself from the United States, also made commitments to come. In late July of 1988, the artists meet in Nishinomiya (a suburb of Osaka) to begin an intensive three week itinerary of performances, exhibitions and workshops. The stay in Hiroshima alone included a Mail Art exhibition at the Hiroshima train station, a party with local Hiroshima artists, a Hiroshima World Mail Art Symposium at the PTT (Post, Telegraph and Telephone) headquarters, and a Shadow Project street action just outside the Peace Park on August 6th. Further Shadow Performances were held in Nishinomiya, Kyoto, Iida and Sennan.

Traveling as a group for three weeks, the Japanese, American, French, and Italian artists forged strong ties which endure to this day. It made for a unique blend of art and life, which carried over to other of their future activities.

Perhaps the most significant of these was the Net Run project, which Shozo Shimamoto carried out with fellow Japanese Mail Artists Ryosuke Cohen and Mayumi Handa, in collaboration with an array of European Mail Artists in 1990. Accompanying Native American Dennis Banks in his Sacred Run from London to Leningrad, Shozo and company elicited the support and hospitality of networkers throughout Western and Eastern Europe in presenting a strong symbol of international cooperation for world peace.

At the same time Net Run was in progress, I was in the Soviet Union collaborating with my correspondent Ilmar Kruusamae in presenting a series of public performances based on the Shadow Project in the streets of Tartu, Estonia. Dressed in a rubber wetsuit, encased by mask, gloves and boots, I would lay on the ground while Ilmar and others would draw around me in chalk.

The Shadow Project has also been the focus of a number of exhibits. Ruggero Maggi was approached by Harry Polkinhorn to collaborate on a project at the Imperial Valley campus of San Diego State University, and many of the works exhibited in Japan during the 1988 event were shown along with newly created works. In an essay accompanying the show, Polkinhorn wrote, "Interestingly, much of the work in the Shadow Project features both visual and verbal systems, as it to underscore a drive to overcome the loss of communication which takes place between cultures, languages, and media. In spite of these preconditions, these works speak bluntly: the message is one of the necessity for tolerance of difference if we are to survive."

Karl Young, curating a 1990 Shadow Project exhibition at Woodland Pattern Gallery in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, found that contributors did not always directly address the specific question of nuclear weaponry, but expanded the dialogue to include child and spouse abuse, censorship, AIDS and colonialism. "Two large pieces by Clemente Padin of Montevideo traced shadows of Disappeared Persons in his country... These formed a second motif, constantly asking the viewer not to see nuclear arms in too narrow a context."

In reviewing a Shadow Performance I gave in Phoenix, Arizona in 1989, critic Karlen Ruby wrote, "Will these performances and other activities leave a lasting impression? Didn't the some hundred thousand who were killed in Hiroshima in 1945 leave an indelible mark? For those of us born after Hiroshima, the implication is clear - there should be no repetition. Held's Shadow Project may seem a simple statement, yet it evokes deep feelings about such basic issues as human survival, nuclear disarmament and peace, providing much for viewers to contemplate in this uncertain age."

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