

was once the guest of a neoist event in Italy. But there's another mutation, the identity of whose publisher I haven't yet been able to untangle. I'm talking about that mail art circle which published its magazines in France, West Germany and Belgium, always in French, and most often under the name of a certain Llys Dana. (So far I have only been able to track down the assistant editors, but that wasn't easy either, since they, too, use pseudonyms.) No one has yet been able to identify this woman (?), and according to some respected mail art figures I'd better reconcile myself to the fact that Llys Dana is non-existent.

For a long while, I lived under the impression that the *Madam X's Gazet* is also a non-existent publication, which is referred to in reviews only. However, at one point I received an address in Los Angeles, from where the response was accompanied by a few copies of the *Gazet*. But Madam X has so far stayed out of the public's eye. Having read her (?) letter, I had the impression that she was in fact a he.

The grand master of manipulation with pseudonyms and ever-changing magazine titles is undeniably Al Ackerman, the Texas-based physician, writer, mail artist and graphic artist, who is also known by the name Blaster. Of course, both names, as well as all the others used by him, are only pseudonyms. The register of names at the end of this volume lists his proper name as well, although it must be taken with a pinch of salt. Ackerman is perhaps the only individual today who is known and identified by false names only.

These issues and individuals will be discussed in detail in the chapters below. Here I have raised some of those problems which cropped up in the wake of my first circular. The obvious solution to the problem appeared to be to send a second round of more detailed questionnaires to the editors. However, eighty percent of them haven't yet been returned to me. Quite probably Uncle Don Milliken (beware, a pseudonym again - his proper name is George Brett) voiced the views of his fellow editors when he said in the "problem" column of the questionnaire: "People keep sending me forms to fill out".

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We may as well approach the magazines from the quirks in their contents. In this respect, the most bizarre and at the same time the best quality paper was clearly the *Duplex Planet*.

Its publisher, David Greenberger, is an employee of an occupational therapy centre in New York State. His magazine is in fact the thematically arranged minutes of the conversations he has had with the patients there. I received issue No. 92, so it's not difficult to imagine how extensive the paper's coverage could be. A sampler of its subtitles: Parking Tickets, Hobbies, Worst Job, Red Cover, Headphones, Embarrassment, Cavemen, News, Vampires, Sleep, Cowboys, Robots, Colts, Taxes/Texas, Summer, Guitars...

Rehearsal in issue No. 92, also known as the Mona Lisa issue: "Oh, she was some kind of patriot, like a courtesian lady, in Italy - I think it was Naples or Rome. She used to go around with different statesmen, Leonardo da Vinci painted a picture of her... (sings) Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa! She was a singer, wasn't she? Like my singin'?... She's a woman. I think she tightropes... That's a song by Nat King Cole one time. It's a portrait too... Is that the famous painting? Is that the one that she just sits on the chair? Some people think that her eyes move, that she's alive and her eyes move from side to side...". And so on. The *Duplex Planet* offers a kind of found literature to its readers: it presents things that belong to normal reality, but its oblique angle lends the subjects a whole new meaning. The magazine became extremely popular in the underground in no time, perhaps because there is such a shocking overlap in them of the absurd and reality.

If we look at the issue titles of the most significant mail art series, *Commonpress*, we get a step closer to reality again. Indeed, they're so shockingly similar to the subjects of the *Duplex Planet*: "What is the difference between open and closed? Eroticism and art. From poetry to poesy.

Box boxing boxers. Ideas and wheels. Slight of hand. Positiv-negativ. Speciale Italia. Post office. Diary pages. White lies. Can the artist help survive? Shoes - go anywhere you please. Handstamped selfportraits. Artists' postage stamps. Modern greek - modern turk. Nudes on stamps. Pigeons of freedom. Children. Alphabets. You can know more than we can tell. Political satire: post scriptum. Ethics and art. Ruins. Zen and art. Problems in information arts. Drawing activity. Ladies: black and white. Light. Meetings..". And so on, and so forth. The first issue of *Commonpress* series still lacked a subtitle. The subjects listed here come from the second to the thirty-first issues.

The "oblique light" is there in these titles as well, notwithstanding that they also include such academic subjects as morals and art, or poetry and poesy... These publications were in fact anthologies in which each page was contributed by a different artist. The colourful hodge-podge as a rule brings down to earth even the most high-flying and aesthetic thoughts. Thumbing through a few *Commonpress* issues, we can see for ourselves that the menu is the same, only the inscription on the plate is changed. Normally, an artist has the same in mind irrespective of whether he's talking about the pigeons of peace or ideas and wheels - strange as it may sound, this is their strong point. After all, whatever's true without being conventional is per se realistic. And this reality, if we take a closer look at it, is the same everywhere.

This makes the idiots' statements congenial, and this is why the alternatives' utterances are very much the same (they're true, although they may sometimes be banal as well).

Now is the time to recount the birth of the *Commonpress*. This publication was established by the Polish mail artist Pavel Petasz. His aim was to lay down the editorial rules for a "common" magazine that can act as a relay baton. The paper had a central coordinator, who assigned each issue to an "editor". Then the editors chose a subject, and announced the proposed format and editorial deadline. Since *Commonpress* was agreed to be issued in 200 copies only, the contributing artists were advised to submit their works in the same number of copies. Each issue was obliged to announce the addresses of the designated editors of the next issue, and also a number of other particulars. Consequently, *Commonpress* was not a one-off publication: instead, it had eight to ten issues in the hands of different editors simultaneously. The issues were then released at random, quite often by the dozen a year.

The mail artists and the alternatives have always had a latent desire for such permutations, and Petasz's *Commonpress* idea legalized and institutionalized this practice. All Petasz had to do was to develop further the "assembling", which had been common since the late sixties, and which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3. At this point, I wish to call attention only to the striking similarity between the editorial principles of *Commonpress* and Gunther Ruch's parallelogramme-shaped diagram. Of course, *Commonpress* was more like a complicated polygon, whose potential diagonals pointed to the most diverse directions. In fact, this loose society also had lots in common with the use of pseudonyms and the alternating magazine titles. As though the artist (block capitals throughout) stepped back to amalgamate with the scenery, in order to direct the public's attention from his own self to the scene.

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Pavel Petasz was coordinator of *Commonpress* until 1981 only. In that year, due to the difficulties presented by the Polish postal service, that role was taken over by the Canadian Jupiter-Larsen. By then, some fifty issues had appeared of this itinerant periodical. The new coordinator was right to exclaim that *Commonpress* was no more an alternative magazine, but an expanding international performance.

Not long after the 50th issue came out, I had a chance to see all the previous *Commonpress* publications. The occasion was an exhibition which Guy Bleus organized in the museum of a small Belgian town⁶ of the 621 (!) works that were submitted to the "aerogrammes", i.e. the 56th issue which he himself edited. The event had something markedly unlikely about it: upon entering the show,

I had the impression that I was walking in the scene of a Magritte painting instead. Besides hanging on the walls hundreds of drawings on identical air mail cards in what seemed to be an endless and absurdly pedantic row, Guy also exhibited in the middle of the showroom his own workdesk, as a symbol of "clerkdom" choked by red tape (no wonder he called his workshop "Administration Centre").

In fact, the desk itself was so very unrealistic as it stood there clean and tidy. But that was no match for the polished glass-cases with chromium-plated frames next to it, which contained the pride of Guy's collection, the complete *Commonpress* series. I was one of the few foreign guests there, so Guy spared no time to drag me away from the sterile cases stuffed with all those colourful prints just to introduce me to the city mayor and his company. It was this tuxedos and bowlers kind of stuff.

Consequently, *Commonpress* has remained in my memory as an inaccessible piece of art history, which was polished and raised to the glossy heavens by a gentleman in tuxedo and bowler hat. Later in time, I paid a few visits to Guy's home, but we've never had the time to thumb through these *Commonpress* issues. In fact, I have also collected a few copies in the meantime, and so this treasure ceased to be "inaccessible" to me.

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Another peculiarity of the *Commonpress*-type compilations is that after a while the regularly contributing artists become members of a kind of community, and in that spirit they can cooperate almost flawlessly. However, these friendly ties are bound to remain on an abstract level, since they function exclusively in the field of artistic communication. It has already happened a number of times that those artists who could get along perfectly in their correspondence were horrified by their first ever personal encounter. To my knowledge, Plinio Mesciulam (alias Mohammed) and Vittore Baroni were the first to analyse the nature of these "metacommunicative" relationships. I'll come back later to this question, and also to the experiments whose aim was to establish some kind of physical relationship between the corresponding artists within the frameworks of "congresses" or special "arts tourism" projects.⁷

Let me cite another experience of mine instead. It may well be introduced as an example for "counter-metacommunication", since the story rests on joint artistic activity (notwithstanding that the angel-wings of metaphysics are there above it as well).

It all began in Budapest, in the Artpool archives of the Galántais. The owners of the creatively growing archives are normally not aware yet of all the aspects of their collections. When I turned up there and inquired about the artists' publications, they reassured me that there must be a few dozens there. Ultimately I discovered more than a hundred alternative magazines in their archives - and we all were pleasantly surprised.

It was during my browsing there that I came upon a few hand-stitched colour prints complete with inserts and folding pages. Some of them looked like periodicals and bore the title *Afgrijs*, while the rest could best be described as freely improvised publications. Where did these fantastic prints come from? According to the Galántais, their source was not the publisher. Who then? A long and complicated story followed, whose hero was an obscure Dutch collector who was travelling up and down in Eastern Europe with a suitcase full of prints like that and who seemed determined to swap these exotic prints for local samizdats.

I was, of course, likewise determined to get hold of a few copies. However, there came another story, this time about an obscure Swedish collector, who was willing to go to any length to obtain Galántai's duplicate copies. At that point I realized that my quest was totally forlorn, and that I had to seek an alternative solution. Luckily, in the jungle of the publications' colour pages, I came upon a reference to the publisher. Its name was KNUST, and the address was Nijmegen, St. Anne