CHAPTER 2

NETWORKING: THE ORIGIN OF TERMINOLOGY

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There is always someone asleep and someone

awake

Someone dreaming asleep and someone dreaming

awake

someone eating, someone hungry

someone fighting, someone loving

someone making money, someone broke

someone travelling, someone staying put

someone helping, someone hindering

someone enjoying, someone suffering, someone

indifferent

someone starting, someone stopping

the network is eternal.

– Robert Filliou[1]

Mail art and networking are descriptive terms often used among artists who exchange art and creative ideas by post, but to individuals unaware of these postal exchanges, mail art and networking are misunderstood terms. "Mail art," for instance, is commonly mistaken as *male* art. *Networking* is viewed as a yuppie glad-handing scheme to get ahead of the other fellow through new, fast and shallow connections made over cocktails. By now there are computer "networks" joining good ol' boy "networks," which only serves to confuse the issue.[2]

"Networking" and "mail art" have very distinct roots. According to Belgian mail artist Guy Bleus, the first terms for defining mail art activities "were e.g. 'flux-post,' 'mailings' and 'correspondence (art).' The term 'Mail-Art' has presumably been used for the first time in the early seventies. But it is historical(ly) hard to say 'exactly' who, where and when."[3]

Ray Johnson, the acknowledged pioneer of the medium, used the term *moticos* in the middle fifties. John Wilcock wrote in the first issue of the *Village Voice,* "I heard about them from a friend who inexplicably found himself on a moticos mailing list one day. 'I send lists either to people I think would be interested or people I think won't be interested,' explained Ray. There are 200 people on his mailing list so far, including Elsa Maxwell and the Museum of Modern Art's James Barr."[4]

Further on in the article Johnson admits, "I've got a big pile of things at home which will make moticos. They're really collages—paste-ups of pictures and pieces of paper, and so on—but that sounds too much like what they really are, so I call them moticos. It's a good word because it's both singular and plural and you can pronounce it how you like. However, I'm going to get a new word soon."[5]

The new word Johnson soon received, which came to characterize the continuing postal activity of between "thirty to fifty artists or non-artists at this time," was brought to him by Ed Plunkett. Plunkett was experimenting with the postal system at the time, unaware that others were involved in a similar vein. In the early 1960s he was finally introduced to Johnson by a mutual friend.

> I was fascinated by what I saw of these mailings. I then began to mail things to Ray. Soon I was hearing from Ray via the post and receiving small envelopes full of goodies often with instructions to mail some item to someone else. I enjoyed this new game of contacting people without the necessity of actually meeting them and going through the usual social amenities, which I felt in those days was a bore...This business was referred to as correspondence art, but I began to call it the 'New York Correspondence School.' It was a reference to the 'New York School,' meaning the leading group of mostly abstract painters that flourished then.[+ 6]

Johnson, however, made moticos of Plunkett's new description of his activity. The writer William Wilson, son of artist May Wilson and early correspondent of Johnson, began popularizing Johnson's postal correlations under the rubric of the *New York Correspondance School* in a number of international art journals. These actions by Wilson did much to increase reader interest in Johnson and his emerging network.

> The New York Correspondance School is an art of witty resemblances; it originates with Ray Johnson, but any number can play. It takes the 'New York School' of painters, an invention of careless art historians, and schools of art by correspondence in which famous artists teach commercial art through the mails, and it combines them into a satiric portmanteau that carries still other meanings.
> *Correspondence* is spelled *correspondance*, not in the French manner, but because a Ukrainian poster from the Lower East Side of Manhattan announces a *dance* in a word that looks like *3AbaBy* (three-a-baby). This poster (*dance, 3AbaBy*) became an image after Ann Wilson gave birth to twins and M.T. became pregnant; three-a-baby seemed a sign of the times... Clearly the truth for Ray Johnson is not correspondence to actuality (verisimilitude), but is correspondence of part to part (pregnant similarities that dance).[7]

By the time (1973) Johnson "killed" the New York Correspondance School in an unpublished letter to the New York Times,[8] the term *mail art* had already been used in several published works. The earliest appearances of mail art as a term can be found in two particularly important sources: Jean-Marc Poinsot's book *Mail Art: Communication a Distance Concept,* and David Zack's article in *Art in America,* "An Authentik and Historikal Discourse on the Phenomenon of Mail Art," In 1971 Poinsot writes of mail art:

> A large number of the artists in our book view the postal service as a means of expediting messages and objects, thereby creating a network for the exchange of works of art, parallel to and distinct from the generally prevailing systems. By mailing collages, theoretical texts, and objects to various addresses without asking for remuneration, the artists concerned have upset the laws of the marketplace. It is evident that a form of exchange does take place, but not a quantitative one. A particularly interesting example is that of Ray Johnson's correspondance school, with its large network of correspondents, which perform individual mailings or take part in coordinated action based on the initiative of a member of the group.[9]

Poinsot goes on to explain the title of the book and his preference for the term "mail art" rather "postal art":

> It isn't entirely satisfactory, but it does indicate some of the main points. MAIL ART. This expression underscores the use of postal material, while not neglecting the specific characteristics of the institution. It designates mailing, by which we mean sending a simple object or document through the postal system, as well as the system of exchange and the particular form through which the message is expressed. We have preferred the term 'mail art' to 'postal art', since it seems richer in connotations.[10]

Zack's article in the January–February 1973 issue of *Art in America* and Thomas Albright's "New Art School: Correspondence" (April, 1972 *Rolling Stone* magazine), were the first articles about mail art published in a context broader than the singular activity of Ray Johnson and his correspondance school. Zack matter-of-factly used the terms *mail art* and *mail artist* in describing the evolving West Coast and Canadian artists' communication by post, especially as it centered around the Canadian art group General Idea and their publication of *FILE* Magazine.

FILE had become the rallying point for the emerging international network which was beginning to germinate from the seedling Johnson had nurtured for the past fifteen years. Johnson was elevated to saintly proportions in its

pages. His "fan clubs" and "correspondance school" meetings were expanding to a new generation of active West Coast and Canadian participants.

In 1974, Herve Fischer published *Art et Communication Marginale*, which was an anthology of rubber stamps used by artists in the ever-growing circle of postal-based artists. Thousands of rubber stamp impressions are reproduced, but only two artists use rubber stamps with the words *mail art*, Bill Gaglione (Dadaland) and the late Robert Rehfeldt. It is interesting to note that Gaglione separates the words (as in his phrase *Quickkopy Mail Art*),[11] while Rehfeldt runs the words together (as in his rubber stamp MAILART).[12]

These variations in the construction of the word *mail art*, are further complicated by Guy Bleus' preferred usage of the word *Mail-Art*, which is capitalized and hyphenated. Bleus also notes that synonyms for Mail-Art include *post art, postal art, art-mail, correspondence art*, as well as regionalized usage such as *arte postale* (Italy), *Post-Kunst* (Germany and Netherlands), *art postale* (France), and *arte correo* (Spain, South America and Mexico).[13] In the Belgian art guide, *Stijlengids*, mail art is entered under the heading of *Post kunst*, and alternate terms are given as *Correspondence art, Envois, Mail art* and *Stamp-art*.[14] In an equivalent American publication, *Contemporary Art Trends 1960–1980*, the main entry is *Mail Art*, while synonyms are given as *art mail, postcard art, letter art, correspondence art* and *junk mail*.[15]

Although it might appear to some that the many different variations of the names and spellings of the phrase used to connote postal activity is a reflection of the *confusion* inherent to the medium, rather it should be inferred that the variations are a symptom of the *decentralization* which characterizes the medium. Participants in the medium make their own contribution and write their own history. There is no central leadership or centralized publication. There are only people gathering together through the international postal service in concentric circles for fellowship and the desire to share art and information.

For this reason, although postal-based artists may disagree if they are really *mail artists* or *correspondence artists*, they all concur that they are part of an international network of artists. But the terms *network* and *networking* are themselves confusing. The term derives from a concept developed by Robert Filliou and George Brecht of an *Eternal Network* of artists. Brecht and Filliou were part of Fluxus, a movement whose actions strongly influenced mail art. Mail art inherited its poetic and Dada tendencies from Ray Johnson and its collaborative approach from Fluxus mailings. Fluxus strove for the unity of artists in many areas: joint performances, collective publications and multiples, as well as cooperative housing arrangements. These utopian and practical ideals and concerns had a significant impact in stimulating the worldwide cooperation found in contemporary mail art networking.

The Eternal Network was conceived by Filliou and Brecht, who had set up a "sort of workshop" in the south of France during the Summer of 1965 (Fig. 13). This workshop, called the Cedille qui Sourit, was intended to be "an international center of permanent creation."[16] In March 1968, a new dimension was added to this idea:

> ...over the month, we had developed the concept of the Fête Permanente, or the Eternal Network as we chose to translate it into English, which, we think, should allow us to spread this spirit more efficiently than before... In April we announced our intentions in a poster and sent it to our numerous correspondents... In practical terms, in order to make artists, first, realize they are part of a network and, therefore, may as well refrain from their tiresome spirit of competition, we intend, when we do perform, to advertise other artists' performances together with our own. But this is not enough. The artist must realize also that his is part of a wider network, la Fete Permanente going on around him all the time in all parts of the World.[17]

By 1973, Filliou had expanded this concept of an Eternal Network and communicated his concerns through the September issue of *FILE* magazine, which had emerged as the central clearinghouse for the emerging international network of postal-based artists. Filliou wrote:

> 1. Poincaré (died 1912) is said to have been the last research mathematician to know all the mathematics of his time. Minimum information on topflight mathematics would require a book of at least 2,000 pages, more than any living mathematician could comprehend.
> 2. Replace 'mathematician' with 'artist'. 'Mathematics' by 'Art' (but whom to replace Poincaré by?).
> 3. If it is true that information about and knowledge of all modern art research is more than any one artist could comprehend, then the concept of the 'avant-garde' is obsolete. With incomplete knowledge, who can say who is in front, and who ain't?
> 4. I suggest that considering each artist as part of an Eternal Network is a much more useful concept...[18]

The following year, the idea of the Eternal Network was given wide exposure when an international *Deccadance* (a takeoff on Johnson's Correspon*dance* School) was held to celebrate the one million and eleventh birthday of Art in Hollywood, California "with approval in principle from Robert Filliou and the Eternal Network."[19] The event proved to be one of the first large-scale meetings of postal artists, and was a pivotal precursor of the Tourism movement in 1980s mail art networking. Michael Morris, of Vancouver's Image Bank (an early compiler of network mailing lists), wrote in *FILE*, "The Hollywood Deccadance would be the first to bring together an international group of artists who have been working together in the subliminal." Furthermore, Morris stated, "You've probably heard rumours of our activities but have been at a loss to understand how you can find out more about them and participate in the network consciousness on the tips of so many people's tongues." He signed off as, "Michael Morris for the Eternal Network)."[20]

It is safe to say that from this time onward the term Eternal Network came to represent a poetic view of the gathering mailstream of international correspondents tied together through the postal systems of the world. Michael Crane writes in his book, *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity*:

> As a name, Eternal Network has been substituted for or used as a reference to Mail Art. While this may be somewhat out of context, it is an appropriate reference for the positive, spiritual qualities and communication potentials for correspondence art... Filliou is significant to mail art for the subtle but lasting effects of his poetic consciousness...[21]

The poem which begins with this article is just an indication of the consciousness that Filliou encapsulated. The mail art network is a revolving door with "someone starting, someone stopping." Correspondents come and go but there is always a core group willing to impart the history and process of the network.

Mail art, correspondence art, postal art, the Eternal Network—call it what you will. The process itself is hard enough to define. It can be composed of personal correspondence, or through mass photocopied mailings to mail art exhibitions. It has been said that to name a thing is to define it. So perhaps it is only fair that as fluid a situation as postal activity by artists is, it is best described by a poem. The network is eternal.

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1. Robert Filliou, "Research on the Eternal Network," *FILE*, September 1973, p. 7.
2. *Correspondence art* is better suited as a descriptive definition of the intertwining relationships that are present in postal exchanges.
3. Guy Bleus, *Commonpress 56*, Tienen, Belgium: Museum Het Toreke, 1984, p. 14.
4. John Wilcox, "The Village Square," *Village Voice*, October 26, 1955, p. 3.
5. Ibid.
6. Edward Plunkett, "From Pre- to Post-Postal Art," *Franklin Furnace Flue*, 1984, No. 3 and 4, p. 5.

7. William Wilson, "NY Correspondance School," *Art and Artists*, April 1966, p. 54.

8. Mike Crane, "The Origins of Correspondence Art," *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity*, San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1984, p. 87.

9. Jean-Marc Poinsot, *Mail Art: Communication a Distance Concept*, Paris: Cedic, 1971, p. 17.

10. Ibid. p. 18.

11. Herve Fischer, *Art et Communication Marginale*, Paris: Balland, 1974, p. 99.

12. Ibid. p. 193.

13. Guy Bleus, p. 16.

14. Stan Jaeger, *Stijlengids*, Belgium: Cantecleer, 1985, p. 89.

15. Doris Bell, *Contemporary Art Trends 1960—1980*, New Jersey: Scarecrow, 1981, p. 49.

16. Robert Filliou, "Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts," Cologne: Verlag Gebr., 1970, p. 205.

17. Ibid.

18. Robert Filliou, "Research on the Eternal Network," p. 7.

19. Carl Loeffler, ed., Performance Anthology, San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1980, p. 98.

20. Michael Morris, *FILE*, December 1973, pp. 34–35.

21. Michael Crane, p. 98.

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