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Networking and Craft in Three Generations of Mail Art

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NETWORKING AND CRAFT IN THREE GENERATIONS OF MAIL ART

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Art History

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

by

Laura Dunkin-Hubby

August 2014

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves this Thesis Titled

NETWORKING AND CRAFT IN THREE GENERATIONS OF MAIL ART

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ART HISTORY

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2014

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ABSTRACT

NETWORKING AND CRAFT IN THREE GENERATIONS OF MAIL ART

by Laura Dunkin-Hubby

This thesis examines two threads in the history of mail art: a networking approach dedicated to open participation and a crafted approach dedicated to the art object. It then follows these two threads across three generations. Mail art is an international phenomenon that evolved over the past sixty odd years due to the efforts of a dedicated and growing group of individuals. American artist Ray Johnson and the international artistic group operating under the banner of Fluxus are discussed as establishing mail art as a separate form through their creation of the mail art network. The generation that followed Johnson and Fluxus expanded on the free and open ethos of the mail art network, making it a cornerstone of mail art practice and embracing new technology. Finally, this study examines work by contemporary mail artists who have not yet been historicized and who return to a craft approach in the production of mail art. Using Glenn Adamson's theory of craft, this thesis concludes that craft is an equally pertinent aspect of mail art practice and that, although it is underemphasized in mail art's first two generations, it is a dominant factor in the production of mail art today.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
CHAPTER 1: Introduction to Mail Art	1
CHAPTER 2: Early Innovators – Ray Johnson and Fluxus (c.1950-1970)	13
CHAPTER 3: Networking and New Technology – John Held Jr. and Chuck Welch (c.1970-1990)	49
CHAPTER 4: Contemporary Mail Art and Personal Networks (c.1990-2014)	65
CHAPTER 5: Conclusion	101
BIBLIOGRAPHY	105

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Ray Johnson, <i>Untitled Mail Art</i> , No Date.	18
2. Ray Johnson, <i>Untitled Mail Art</i> , No Date.	21
3. Ray Johnson, <i>Cover Image New York Correspondance School Exhibition Catalog</i> , Whitney Museum of America Art, 1970.	26
4. <i>New York Correspondance School Exhibition Contributors</i> , Whitney Museum of America Art, 1970.	27
5. George Maciunas, <i>Fluxus Manifesto</i> , 1963.	30
6. George Maciunas, <i>Price List for Fluxshop & Mail-Order Warehouse</i> , Printed in <i>Fluxus Vacuum Trapezoid</i> (Fluxus Newspaper No. 5, 1965).	33
7. Fluxus, <i>Flux Post Kit 7</i> , 1967.	37
8. Ben Vautier, <i>The Postman's Choice</i> , 1965.	37
9. George Brecht, <i>Mailbox Event</i> , circa. 1963.	41
10. Unknown artist, <i>Omaha Flow Systems Poster</i> , 1973.	44
11. Dr. Ronny Cohen, <i>Call For Mail Art</i> , 1984.	53
12. Ryosuke Cohen, <i>Brain Cell Number 827</i> , June 14, 2012.	59
13. Ryosuke Cohen, <i>Brain Cell Number 827</i> , June 14, 2012.	60
14. Cara Mullinary, <i>Untitled</i> , July, 2013.	80
15. Cara Mullinary, <i>Untitled</i> , January, 2014.	82
16. David Solomon, <i>Feed This Direction</i> , 2013.	84
17. David Solomon, <i>Accordion letter</i> , 2013.	86
18. David Solomon, <i>Confetti Letter</i> , 2013.	89
19. The Center for Book Arts, <i>Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century exhibition catalog</i> , April 11 – June 28, 2008.	93

20. Champe Smith, *Mapping Correspondence:* 96
Mail Art in the 21st Century exhibition catalog, April 11 – June 28, 2008

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Since the urinary bowl of Duchamp, everything can be art. Since Beuys, everybody can be an artist. It all depends on the way one looks at it, on the way one thinks.” –John Held Jr.

This thesis will explore the history and issues involved in mail art, a practice of sending artistic and/or creative communication through the postal system. The importance of mail art practice from an art historical standpoint lies in its unique properties of one-to-one communication between mail artists and their intended audience(s) and its existence outside of the art world context. Mail art also provides unique methods of collaboration, such as adding to a mail artist’s work and passing it on to another, that would be difficult and/or impossible with artists located around the globe. Additionally, as mail art is typically a gift exchange (i.e., free), it upsets the economic forces that underlie the art market.

There is no one exact definition of what mail art is, although there are no shortage of opinions. Of many terms used to describe the exchange of objects through the postal service, “mail art” stands out as the most ubiquitous among authors and practitioners. However, there are almost as many definitions of mail art as there are terms that describe it such as “correspondence art,” “postal art,” and “networking.”¹ One of the hardest problems in discussing mail art is defining what it is, as every mail artist conceives of his or her practice differently. Each author’s definition of mail art is tied

¹ For more definitions of mail art see Madelyn Starbuck, “Clashing and Converging: Effects of the Internet on the Correspondence Art Network,” University of Texas at Austin, accessed March 25, 2014, <https://www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2003/starbuckmk032/starbuckmk032.pdf>: 6-13.

directly to his or her own experience with mail art practice, which is not necessarily an artistic one. As a result, mail art history and art history do not always align. It is a concept that is so freely defined that many authors disagree with each other, and several aspects of mail art practice are still under debate. However, there is one thing that all mail art authors and artists agree on: mail art is communication. This basic underlying notion connects the breadth of authors and mail artists who engage in this loosely unified genre, albeit just barely. In order to understand this practice better, it is perhaps more useful to define what it is not.

First of all, mail art is not a movement.² There is some disagreement among authors who refer to “the mail art movement,” but mail art does not follow the traditional categorization of types, schools, and styles of a traditional art historical movement.³ Second of all, the term “medium” in the traditional art historical sense also does not apply to mail art as there is no specific material or structure that underlies this practice. Mail art activity is, according to Michael Crane, “a pluralistic and diverse arena that has grown in numbers, attitudes, and kinds and cannot be pinned down by easy classification”.⁴ Third, mail art does not necessarily have to utilize the postal service in order to be called “mail art.” For the purposes of this thesis, I will only be examining mail art that is transmitted via the postal system, thus the term “mail art” is most appropriate. Finally, as mail art is not a medium or movement, I will be discussing mail art as an artistic genre,

² Michael Crane, “A Definition of Correspondence Art”, in *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity*, ed. Michael Crane and Mary Stofflet (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1984) 6.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

considering each individual mail artist or formalized group as subscribing to his or her own ideology and aesthetic ideas.

There are a number of important figures within the genre of mail art. American artist Ray Johnson and an international community of artists operating under the name “Fluxus” lead by George Maciunas both in the 1950s and 60s are typically credited as some of the most important innovators in the field.⁵ Mail art historians, many of whom are also mail artists themselves such as John Held Jr., quoted above, also played an important role in the development of this young genre. Held, like many of the other historians and theorists who are discussed in this thesis, has had a hand in shaping the history of mail art practice, using many of the sociopolitical ideas of Fluxus as a basis for his respective theories.

One of the primary concepts that has come out of Fluxus and Johnson’s respective practices is the “mail art network”. The mail art network is a group of individuals interconnected via the postal service that grew out of Johnson and Fluxus’ personal networks and is an idea that is at the heart of much of mail art history. It is also a concept that mail historians claim defines mail art history as its own field of study. Despite isolated examples by previous artists and art movements such as Dada, Merz, Futurism,

⁵ “Nouveaux Realisme” or “New Realism” was a European group promoted by French art critic Pierre Restany that was active in the 1950s and 60s is outside the scope of this thesis. The group consisted of Arman, Yves Klein, Jean Tinguely, Daniel Spoerri, Martial Raysse, Jacques de la Villeglé, Raymond Hains, and François Dufrêne and were some of the first to use artist stamps and rubber stamps. For more information see Julia Robinson, ed. *New Realisms: 1957–1962; Object Strategies between Readymade and Spectacle*, (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia & MIT Press, 2010); Jill Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-avant-garde: Topographies of Chance and Return*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010).

and others, mail art historians such as Clive Philpot argue that until Johnson, mail art was incidental and thus does not warrant separate treatment as a distinct art form.⁶

Johnson and Fluxus have both been strong innovators within the field of mail art practice and history. Specifically, they have contributed to mail art practice in two areas that have been strong threads throughout the history of mail art: an engagement or rejection of craft and a conceptual framework for mail art practice. Both threads are necessary in order to fully comprehend mail art practice from an art historical perspective. In terms of materials and making, Johnson's collage style represented a handmade approach while Fluxus' mass-produced anti-crafted aesthetic provided a counterpoint. In terms of a conceptual framework, Fluxus' manifesto provided a strong basis for the mail art network while Johnson's mail art exhibition at the Whitney provided an example of what would become the basic format for mail art exhibitions, the public face of mail art practice. As succeeding generations of mail artists and historians have written about mail art, specifically in the second era outlined in chapter three, they have tended to concentrate on the conceptual framework that underlies mail art practice. However, with the exception of Johnson, the engagement with craft remains an underrepresented aspect of mail art history.

My thesis examines these two threads, a conceptual framework and an engagement with craft in mail art practice and how these threads inform mail art as an art form throughout its history. This is the perfect time to reexamine mail artists' engagement with materials and making throughout mail art history as I will be adding

⁶ Clive Phillpot, "The Mailed Art of Ray Johnson", in *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995), 25; Ken Friedman, "The Early Days of Mail Art: An Historical Overview," in *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995), 4.

original research into a yet undiscovered contemporary mail art circuit of which I am a member that has returned to a handcrafted way of working reminiscent of Johnson's style. I will use Glenn Adamson's book *Thinking Through Craft* as a basis for discussing how practical and theoretical issues of craft can be applied to contemporary mail art practice. This research will be covered in the final era discussed in chapter four and the information will be added to the history this thesis charts.

In terms of time period, mail artist and Fluxus artist Ken Friedman divide mail art history into four separate stages starting as a natural outgrowth the artists' personal correspondence with each other and gradually expanding to a public audience.⁷ Friedman's first two stages include Ray Johnson as the central figure in the first phase, starting in the early 1950s and Fluxus in the second phase starting in late 1960s.⁸ Friedman divides Johnson and Fluxus into two stages because Fluxus' main contribution was to make mail art public.⁹ However, it would take a few more years before the public side of mail art (i.e., mail art exhibitions and publications on mail art practice) would develop. As a result, I have grouped Johnson and Fluxus together in chapter two when a majority of their respective mail art activities were limited to private and/or small groups.

Friedman does not give an exact time period for the third and fourth stages of mail art, but he puts the third stage starting in roughly the early 1970s and the fourth starting in the 1980s, and he notes that these stages were defined more by influential publications and emerging mail art leaders rather than mail art itself.¹⁰ Friedman left the mail art network for approximately ten years, from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s, and

⁷ Friedman, 3.

⁸ Ibid., 3-4; Ibid., 7.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 13-15.

upon his return declared mail art to be a “complete art form practiced by tens of thousands around the world, by history [and] discourse”.¹¹ The leaders who emerged from those two stages, such as John Held Jr. and Chuck Welch who are discussed in chapter three, also wrote a number of the influential publications spanning the two stages that would shape the history of mail art. Thus I have grouped these two stages together in order to demonstrate how the public face of mail art and mail art history developed side by side during this time period.

I have organized my chapters by “eras” of mail art, arranged chronologically with each era represented by the most influential figures of the time period. The mail art examples discussed in each chapter are pulled from the prominent figures of the era and/or their respective personal networks. While the following sections sketch three eras of mail art in broad brushstrokes, these will be elaborated upon in detail in the chapters that comprise this thesis. The final “era” consists of original research into a yet undiscovered contemporary mail art circuit of which I am a member. This information will be added to the history this thesis charts.

My Personal Network: The Third Era of Mail Art

In order to give a contemporary perspective on current mail art practice, I will be examining the work of mail artists from my personal network in chapter four.

Specifically, I will be focusing on two mail artists in particular, Cara Mullinary and David Solomon, whose work aesthetically, technically, and conceptually encapsulates some of the interests and concerns of my mail art network. One of the more surprising

¹¹ Friedman, 15.

aspects of Mullinary and Solomon's work, which is echoed among mail artists within my personal network, is that they both embrace a handmade aesthetic and continue to exchange mail via the postal system despite rising postage costs. This is an aspect that characterized much of Johnson's work, yet the subject of craft has remarkably not been discussed with respect to mail art history. In fact, materiality of the mail art object is often rarely discussed as most of the literature from the previous era has focused on the conceptual basis for mail art practice. However, Adamson's book *Thinking Through Craft*, published in 2007, makes some key points about the relationship between art and craft that can be applied to mail art practice as well. Adamson approaches craft as an idea, one that can be applied within the broader context of the visual arts.¹²

There are a number of concepts that mail art historians have started to explore in recent years. Matt Ferranto's thesis "(Mis)Reading Mail Art," published in 2003, is a plea to rethink mail art in terms of its formal tactile and informal qualities and to investigate the special qualities of collaboration that make mail art a unique art form.¹³ Michael Lumb's dissertation "Mail Art from 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art as Social Sculpture," from 1997, provides a counterpoint to Ferranto's work claiming that the mail art network and egalitarian ethos of open free participation that it supports *is* the artwork itself.

However, much of the other literature, such as Madelyn Starbuck's dissertation "Clashing and Converging: Effects of the Internet on the Correspondence Art Network," published in 2001, have concentrated on how new technology and a contemporary context have effected mail art practice. Evidence of the effect of the Internet is the fact

¹² Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft*, (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 1.

¹³ Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part One: A Medium or a Movement?", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_1.html.

that all of the academic literature mentioned above is now available online.¹⁴ Essays by Owen Smith and John Held Jr. explore how these issues have changed over the past several decades in *At A Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, published in 2005. Smith focuses on certain key aspects under the umbrella of the Fluxus rubric namely performativity, process, play, networked culture, and communal artistic practice.¹⁵ Held discusses early innovators of mail art practice, such as Johnson and Fluxus, in terms of the avant-garde and also how mail art emerged as a cross-cultural form.

John Held and Chuck Welch: The Second Era of Mail Art

Fluxus and Johnson's conceptual practices became a point of fascination for the next generation of mail artists who came after them. Chuck Welch and John Held Jr., two mail artists, historians, and archivists working in the next era of mail art (roughly 1970 to 1990) chronicled in chapter three represent the second generation of mail artists and their respective networks. They were part of a larger effort in this period to document and expand upon the conceptual basis for mail art practice primarily via mail art exhibitions and publications. The mail art network came to embody the cultural values of mail art practice for this generation as a democratic open practice that is free

¹⁴ Michael Lumb, "Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art As Social Sculpture", accessed May 2, 2014, http://www.nonopp.com/ac/arte_correo/Tesis/Tesis.htm; Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Introduction?", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed May 2, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_intro.html; Madelyn Starbuck, "Clashing and Converging: Effects of the Internet on the Correspondence Art Network", University of Texas at Austin, accessed March 25, 2014, <https://www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2003/starbuckmk032/starbuckmk032.pdf>.

¹⁵ Owen Smith, "Fluxus Praxis: An Exploration of Connections, Creativity, and Community", in *At A Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, eds. Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 117.

(except for postage) for any and everyone to participate in regardless of background, technique, or skill level.

Although the mail art practice originated within the art world, many mail artists and mail art historians writing in this era did not necessarily consider it to be an art form.¹⁶ The breadth of opinions is chronicled in the literature from this era, which was one of the most prolific scholarly periods in mail art history. It is during this era that mail art history and art history start to separate and bleed into a number of other subjects such as politics, sociology, philosophy, et cetera.

Held and Welch both contributed to two of the most comprehensive books on mail art history published ten years apart: *Correspondence Art*, published in 1985, and *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, published in 1995. *Correspondence Art* and *Eternal Network* are both anthologies, and although they contain many examples, focus little attention on the visual nature of mail art objects. In these books, mail art is discussed in a non-linear manner, focusing on the diverse range of experiences of mail artists both past and present and not necessarily in an art historical context. Other important works are John Held Jr.'s *Annotated Bibliography*, published in 1991, which contains three short essays on how mail art changed over several decades and Chuck Welch's *Networking Currents*, published in 1986, which also contains several essays by the author on various subjects such as money, museums, and mail art exhibitions that are relevant to mail art history. While Held generally categorizes mail art as a marginal art

¹⁶ Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part One: A Medium or a Movement?", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_1.html; Chuck Welch, "Introduction: The Ethereal Open Aesthetic", in *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995), xx. Many well-known mail artists, historians and theorists do not consider mail art to be an art form. For this reason, mail art is often described as a "process" as opposed to an object.

form that grew out of the avant-garde practices of Johnson and Fluxus, Welch is keen to emphasize the “spiritual and mystical utopian tradition” of the mail art network as a genuine aesthetic basis for mail art practice.¹⁷ Their books, as well as other prominent examples from this period, focus mainly on the utopian social aspects of mail art practice, many of which are an extension of Fluxus ideology, rather than the aesthetic nature of the objects themselves.

Ray Johnson and Fluxus: The First Era of Mail Art

Ray Johnson and Fluxus (lead by George Maciunas) are largely considered some of the most important leaders in mail art history. Their contributions to mail art were both conceptual and aesthetic in nature and provided some of the first examples that future generations of mail artists would follow. Although Fluxus is credited for bringing mail art to the public, Johnson also contributed to the public face of mail art by establishing the mail art exhibition format. Unlike Johnson’s enigmatic stance towards his own practice, Maciunas published a manifesto for Fluxus (Figure 5) that clearly delineated the aims of the group, which although had an artistic bent, were socially minded in nature.¹⁸ Fluxus’ largely social objectives lead to a more conceptual approach to mail art practice. Fluxus artists utilized the postal service not only to distribute their work, but also to collaborate and exchange ideas.¹⁹

Johnson’s mail art conveyed his sense of humor, contradictory opinions about the art world, and a distinctive handmade-collaged style. Johnson dubbed his mailings

¹⁷ Welch, “Introduction”, in Welch, xix.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Armstrong, “Fluxus and the Museum”, in *In the Spirit of Fluxus*, ed. Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss (Minneapolis: The Walker Art Center, 1993), 17.

¹⁹ Friedman, 6.

“moticos,” a term he invented to describe the collage pieces consisting of paper, cardboard, pictures, and other media that he sent to people he thought would be interested or people he thought wouldn’t be interested.²⁰ In contrast, Maciunas, who controlled almost all aspects of Fluxus production, opted for a clean commercial look to emphasize Fluxus anti-commodity stance towards art objects.²¹ They represent not only different aesthetics, but also different attitudes towards making mail art. Working with a particular recipient in mind, Johnson engaged almost exclusively in one to one communication, while Fluxus mail art works mimicked an anonymous commercial mail order format.²²

While many Fluxus artists and Johnson were established within the art world during the 1950s and 60s, their contributions to the history of mail art would not become widely known until the second era of mail art discussed in chapter three. However, in 1970, Jean-Marc Poinot published one of the first books on mail art entitled: *Mail Art: A Distance Concept*. Poinot was one of the first authors to consider mail art practice a separate form of art and argued that this type of long distance communication through the postal service gave new meaning to both the object exchanged and the message communicated.²³ His book was soon followed by a number of influential articles in 1972 by Thomas Albright in *Rolling Stone* magazine and one in 1973 by David Zack in *Art in America*. Additionally, Dick Higgins landmark article “Intermedia,” first published in 1966 via Fluxus’ *Something Else Newsletter*, created a new language for discussing mail art practice and what Fluxus artists were trying to achieve. These publications in

²⁰ John Held Jr., “Networking: The Origin of Terminology”, in *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995), 17.

²¹ Smith, “Fluxus Praxis”, in Chandler and Neumark, 126.

²² Phillipot, 27.

²³ Jean-Marc Poinot, *Mail Art: A Distance Concept*, (Paris: Editions CEDIC, 1971), 17.

conjunction with Johnson's influential mail art exhibition in 1970 brought mail art practice to a larger audience and helped establish the international mail art network.²⁴

²⁴ Held, "Networking: The Origin of Terminology", in Welch, 19.

Chapter 2: Early Innovators – Ray Johnson and Fluxus (c.1950-1970)

Mail art history is generally traced back to the work of prominent artists Ray Johnson and a group of artists operating under the name “Fluxus” lead by George Maciunas in the early 1960s. While Maciunas and Johnson were known to each other, both individuals represent different approaches, both conceptually and artistically, to mail art practice. Johnson’s mail art tended to consist of handmade drawings and collages while most Fluxus work was made to look commercially produced. Although Johnson frequently used photocopied and other non-handmade objects in his work, his process of drawing, collaging, and writing on top of various materials was an extension of his own style and gave mail art some of one of the first handmade aesthetics. Conversely, the commercial look of Fluxus would lead to aesthetic expansions into new subcategories of mail artistic production such as rubber stamps and artists stamps that future mail artists would expand upon.

The difference between Johnson and Fluxus is not only one of materials, but also of ideas. They were both instrumental in the creation of the first mail art network, but approached creating and expanding the network in very different ways. Fluxus is often credited with the creation of the mail art network by distributing their various publications and artistic experiments to the public.²⁵ Fluxus artist, mail artist, and historian Ken Friedman notes that the mail art network was first documented and grew largely in part due to Fluxus mailing lists, which were first published in 1966.²⁶ While Fluxus artists stuck to their manifesto (see Figure 5), Johnson’s contradictory statements

²⁵ Friedman, 7.

²⁶ Michael Lumb, “Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art As Social Sculpture, Chapter 2: Fluxus and Postal Ephemera”, accessed May 6, 2014, http://www.nonopp.com/ac/arte_correo/Tesis/2_fluxus.htm.

and enigmatic stance towards his work and life made it difficult to pin down his ideas. However, both were intent on creating networks outside of the bureaucratic institutions that displayed artwork at the time.

Ray Johnson

Although Ray Johnson and Fluxus are both great innovators in the history of mail art, Johnson is often singled out as one of the founders of the international mail art network.²⁷ Many artists and art groups had previously experimented with mail art practice, such as the Futurists in the early 20th century, but Johnson was one of the first to extend his practice beyond his inner circle to friends of friends, art world intellectuals, and strangers. Johnson's early correspondence in the 1940s with his friend Arthur Secunda is often considered some of his first mail art, yet it would take many years for him to assemble what would be the first open mail art network.²⁸ While Johnson is not the only mail artist who deserves credit for opening up this practice to a larger social context, Johnson's mail art activities over the course of his life were so prolific that he is often referred to as the father of mail art.

Beginning in the 1940s, Johnson's education at Black Mountain College in North Carolina informed his early work in both painting and collage. During his tenor, he was under the tutelage of renowned Bauhaus artists Joseph Albers who taught his students to expand their thinking by considering color and form as expressive properties in and of

²⁷ Phillipot, 25.

²⁸ Donna De Salvo, "Correspondences", in *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, ed. Donna De Salvo (Ohio: Flammarion and Wexner Center for the Arts, 1999) 16.

themselves.²⁹ Albers emphasized learning through the experience of doing, not through the mastery of theory or knowledge.³⁰ His teaching method was based on an idea that the definition of art is flexible and an art object's meaning changes as time goes on, thus it is the experience of that object at any given time that is art, not the object itself.³¹ This idea served Johnson well as he continued to experiment with different techniques, materials, and strategies to convey his message through art.

Although Johnson is primarily known for his visual art, throughout his career he experimented with performance art and music. His friendship with the modern composer John Cage while they were neighbors in New York in the late 1940s had an effect on how Johnson approached art and art making, although it is more difficult to pinpoint.³² Both were students of Zen philosophy, which informed their ideas about chance and indeterminacy in their respective artistic processes.³³ While Albers's teaching informed Johnson's ideas about craftsmanship, Cage opened up ways of working that allowed Johnson to approach his work as a performative act and see the world itself as a collage in time and space.³⁴ While Johnson was always purposely contradictory and vague about his intentions, those closest to him remarked that there was no separation between Johnson's art and his life; they were one in the same. Thus, everything that Johnson made and did, from his performance pieces to his mail art to the strange conditions surrounding his untimely death, can be viewed as an extension of Johnson's artistic practice. Mail art served Johnson well throughout his life as it not only allowed him to

²⁹ De Salvo, 17.

³⁰ Adamson, 84-5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

³² De Salvo, 17.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

connect with other people, but also brought his ideas about art into other people's everyday lives in a fittingly unusual way.

The New York Correspondence School

Those lucky or unlucky enough to encounter Johnson's work in their mailbox during the 1950s and early 60s were often taken off guard by Johnson's enigmatic pieces often constructed from paper ephemera, pieces of cardboard, paint, and ink. Some of his recipients became part of what became known as "The New York Correspondence School" (sometimes spelled "Correspondance"), a name coined by Johnson's friend and Fluxus artist, Ed Plunkett.³⁵ The group wasn't a really a school or a club at all, it was simply a number of individuals who Johnson chose to send his work to.³⁶ The name is a takeoff of the New York School, which referred to a group of Abstract Expressionist artists who lived and worked in New York in the 1940s and 50s and schools of art by correspondence in which famous artists teach commercial art through the mail.³⁷ The alternate spelling, "Correspondance," has been interpreted several different ways from implying a performative aspect of mail art practice to Johnson's unique way of thinking.³⁸ William Wilson, a long time friend and correspondent of Johnson's, explains the etymology of the name [emphasis in original]:

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 the word that looks like 3AbaBy (three-a-baby).

³⁵ John Held, "Networking: The Origin of Terminology", in Welch, 17.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ William S. Wilson, "NY Correspondance School", Warholstars.org, accessed January 23, 2014, <http://www.warholstars.org/warhol/warhol1/andy/warhol/articles/wilson/ray/johnson.html>

³⁸ John Held, "The Mail Art Exhibition", in *At A Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, eds. Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 90.

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).³⁹

Wilson also points out that the word “correspondence” can have a dual meaning of both content (similarity) and as method (epistolary intercourse), much in the same way that the NYCS was both fact and fiction.⁴⁰

Although the NYCS was one of many of Johnson’s fictional clubs, it contained a number of real members who actively participated in his mailings. These clubs, such as the Shelly Duval fan club and Buddha University, are one of many common motifs that appear over and over again in Johnson’s mail art. Occasionally, after the NYCS had been in operation for several years, Johnson began to “announce” meetings such as in Figure 1. Like much of Johnson’s work, pop stars, art world figures, and friends both alive and dead are represented with a cartoon head, this time of an elephant. In typical Johnsonian format, the cartoon head levels the playing field, representing in exactly the same way all sorts of individuals from respected artists and historical figures to friends and acquaintances. However, it is impossible to know if this was a meeting in real life or fantasy as there is no logistical information or what the arrangement of individuals mean.⁴¹

³⁹ William S. Wilson, “NY Correspondance School”, Warholstars.org, accessed January 23, 2014, <http://www.warholstars.org/warhol/warhol1/andy/warhol/articles/wilson/ray/johnson.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Sharla Salva, “Ray Johnson’s New York Correspondence School: The Fine Art of Communication,” in *Ray Johnson: Correspondences*, ed. Donna De Salvo (Ohio: Flammarion and Wexner Center for the Arts, 1999) 122.



Figure 1. Ray Johnson, *Untitled Mail Art*, No Date. *Source:* Ray Johnson Estate, Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co.

This piece is indicative of Johnson’s unique style in that it is playful, ambivalent, and sometimes presents contradictory information. His pieces used a variety of materials, but they were mostly handmade on pieces of cardboard or paper that he sometimes photocopied and sent out to multiple recipients.⁴² Additionally, while Johnson’s pieces were often handmade or written by hand, such as in Figure 1, he often photocopied mailings and sent them out to multiple individuals. Johnson had little regard for original objects as either an original or a copy would convey the same message.⁴³ However,

⁴² Phillpot, 27.

⁴³ Ibid.

Johnson's work always had a personalized element in that all of his mailings were crafted for a particular person or group of people:

Even when all or most of the elements in the mail piece are recyclings or reprintings, that particular collection of items may well be assembled in a unique combination, and include, perhaps, images or words provoked by that person, even though current Johnsonian preoccupations will probably figure in the mailing as well.⁴⁴

Add and Pass

Johnson was one of the first artists to utilize the "add and pass" method in order to expand his network. This method consisted of asking the recipient to add something to his mail art and send it on to someone else, sometimes multiple people.⁴⁵ Some of these recipients were real people and some were fictitious organization and clubs, much like the NYCS, that Johnson created to poke fun at the seriousness of the art world and his own stance as a respected artist. In a preface to an interview with Johnson, Henry Martin explained how the add and pass worked:

The classical exhortation in a Ray Johnson mailing is "please send to..." Person A will receive an object or an image and be asked to pass it on to person B, and the image will probably be appropriate to these two different people in two entirely different ways, or in terms of two entirely different chains of association. It thus becomes a kind of totem that can connect them, and whatever latent relationship may possibly exist between person A and person B becomes a little less latent and a little more real.

It's the beginning of an uncommon sense of community, and this sense of community grows as person A and B send something back through Ray to each other, or through each other back to Ray. And then the game itself will swell through Ray's addition of still other images and person C and D and E...."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Phillpot, 27.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁶ Henry Martin, "An Interview with Ray Johnson: Should an Eyelash Last Forever?" *Lotta Poetica*, (February 1984) 7.

In Figure 2, these two themes come together in a mail art piece that is indicative of Johnson's add and pass mail art and his witty references to the art world. A photocopied picture of Johnson's face with an added mustache serves as the background image to a number of names and addresses separated by a curved dotted line. Each recipient (besides Johnson himself) is represented by Johnson's notorious bunny drawing with his or her name written below it. The bunny image is often featured in Johnson's work and first appeared next to his name in a letter to his friend William Wilson.⁴⁷ Johnson also used the bunny head to represent other "characters" or in this case recipients. This simple drawing of a bunny became a repetitive symbol that appears numerous times in Johnson's work and functions in a variety of ways. It can mean anything from a self-portrait, but it was also an indication of how he was feeling on any particular day.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Ray Johnson Estate, "Glossary", accessed January 23, 2014, <http://www.rayjohnsonestate.com/glossary/> .

⁴⁸ Ibid.

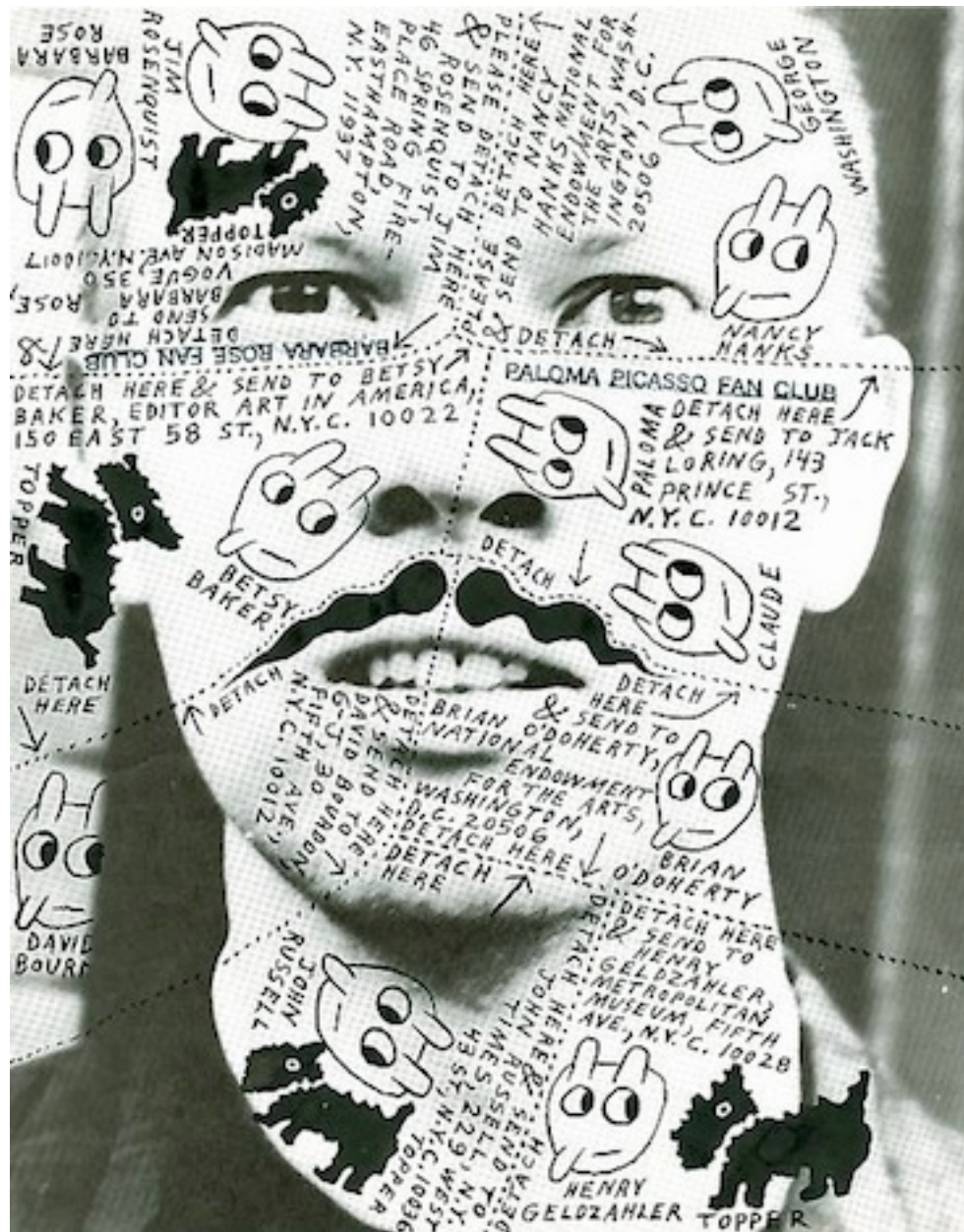


Figure 2. Ray Johnson, *Untitled Mail Art*, No Date. Source: Ray Johnson Estate, Courtesy Richard L. Feigen & Co.

Johnson often repeated motifs, words, and images, typically of himself, in many of his pieces, layering private jokes and personal meaning onto advertisements and bits of found ephemera. The way that Johnson works with words and images was often

reminiscent of Dada poetry because he created semi-fictional assemblies that defied any sense of time and space.⁴⁹ Some of Johnson's most used motifs are well known while others are not. Johnson also altered some of his usual motifs, changing words, letters, or images around to create new meanings. He was also fond of using his own image, which he often incorporated into his work either using photos of himself or snippets of reviews or bios that people had written about him. Although not all recurring motifs have a known singular meaning (many were altered to fit the piece), they are all windows into how Johnson saw and interacted with the world. All of these recurring motifs, along with new anachronisms that Johnson came up with for individual pieces, presented Johnson's unique vision of the semi-fictional world that he lived in.

Like many add and pass pieces, Figure 2 relies heavily on the initial recipient to complete the work. Whoever receives this work must cut it up and send with correct postage the separate pieces to the nine specified individuals. The top left hand corner piece is actually addressed to two different individuals, although the dotted lines indicate that it is one solid piece. Thus, the recipient must decide how to handle separating these two pieces, if at all, and send them out. Placing much of the autonomy of the work in the hands of the recipient was a common characteristic of Johnson's mail art because it encouraged involvement on the part of the recipient. This would essentially make the recipient the mail artist as he or she would do much of the work. Designating a "middle man" was a clever way for Johnson to not only expand his network, but also convert his recipients into active mail art participants.

⁴⁹ John Held, "Networking", in Welch, 20.

Figures 1 and 2 exemplify Johnson's attempt to bring the mundane and everyday life activities and art closer together. The playful drawings of bunnies, elephants, and dogs, as well as the variety of fictional clubs that Johnson created, all attempted to turn the spectator into an active participant. Johnson's handmade aesthetic purposely lacked the traditional formalistic concerns of his predecessors, namely the Abstract Expressionist, and instead relied on the intended recipient for both the work's ideological and material concerns.⁵⁰

The NYCS Mail Art Exhibition

Johnson enigmatic and often contradictory stance towards the institutions of the art world and marketplace led him to develop other ways of circulating and exhibiting his work.⁵¹ He was known to carry around his work with him like a traveling salesman displaying it in untraditional spaces such as placing pieces on doorsteps, or using his work to cover the body of a friend.⁵² When he exhibited his work in more traditional settings, he favored "highly pristine and carefully chosen installations" that drew attention to art world systems themselves.⁵³

One such example was an exhibition of his own group, the NYCS, at the Whitney museum in New York in 1970, entitled *Ray Johnson: New York Correspondance School* organized by himself and curator Marcia Tucker.⁵⁴ Johnson capitalized on both his art world connections and the inherent irony of placing work squarely in one of the most

⁵⁰ Marilyn Ravicz, *Aesthetic Anthropology: Theory and Analysis of Pop and Conceptual Art in America*, (Los Angeles: University of California, 1974), 274.

⁵¹ De Salvo, 20.

⁵² De Salvo, 19.

⁵³ De Salvo, 20.

⁵⁴ Salva, in De Salvo, *Ray Johnson*, 122.

prestigious art museums in the United States that was created specifically to circumnavigate such art world institutions. The NYCS mail art exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970 was a landmark event in the history of mail art practice. Mail art exhibitions became the public face of a previously private practice opening up to new mail artists and linking old ones together.⁵⁵ After the Whitney exhibition, John Held observed that mail art practice “took on a life of its own, often bowing to Johnson for tone and inspiration but growing too large for his immediate attention”.⁵⁶ The popularity of the mail art exhibitions after the Whitney exhibit was undeniable with a documented 1,335 exhibitions occurring between 1970 and 1985.⁵⁷

The Whitney exhibit was remarkable not only because it was one of the first major mail art exhibitions, but also because it set a historical precedent that many future mail art exhibitions would follow. Johnson ensured that all work submitted to the exhibit was shown, and the participating mail artists received documentation for their contribution in the exhibition catalog (see Figure 4).⁵⁸ This process of exhibiting all work submitted and giving credit to the participating artists via the catalog for the exhibit would become an important guideline for future mail art exhibitions and a major part of mail art ideology.⁵⁹

In addition to giving credit to all 106 participants, the NYCS exhibition was meant to convey mail art practice as a parody of the commercial art market, facilitating

⁵⁵ Held Jr., *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography*, (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1991), xxiv.

⁵⁶ Held Jr., “The Mail Art Exhibition”, in Chandler and Neumark, 97.

⁵⁷ Held Jr., *Mail Art*, xxiv.

⁵⁸ Held Jr., “The Mail Art Exhibition”, in Chandler and Neumark, 95.

⁵⁹ Guidelines or “considerations” for mail art exhibitions were outlined in a manifesto of Mail Art written by Mario Lara and Lon Spiegelman in 1980. For more information see Held Jr., “The Mail Art Exhibition”, in Chandler and Neumark, 101-102.

the free flow of information, images and junk.⁶⁰ Figure 3 is the cover image of the catalog as well as the postcard that Johnson sent out to the NYCS requesting work for the exhibition. On the right hand side a rubber stamp that reads “Evaporations by Ray Johnson,” which John Held has speculated suggests that “the exhibition was to be a momentary glimpse into a transitory realm, flowing like a river and as difficult to capture.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ Held Jr., “The Mail Art Exhibition”, in Chandler and Neumark, 100; William S. Wilson, “Drop A Line”, *New York Correspondance School Exhibition Catalog*, September 2 – October 6, 1970, Whitney Museum of American Art.

⁶¹ Held Jr., “The Mail Art Exhibition”, in Chandler and Neumark, 96.

removed 1-10-99
~~ARTISTS FILE~~

ray johnson

SEND LETTERS, POST CARDS,
DRAWINGS AND OBJECTS TO
MARCIA TUCKER, NEW YORK
CORRESPONDANCE SCHOOL
EXHIBITION, WHITNEY
MUSEUM, MADISON AVE.
AND 75 ST., N.Y.C. 10021

EVAPORATIONS BY RAY JOHNSON

new york correspondance school
exhibition

Figure 3. Ray Johnson, *Cover Image New York Correspondance School Exhibition Catalog*, Source: Whitney Museum of America Art, 1970.

New York Correspondance School Contributors

Vinco Alenti	Peter Frank	New Yorker Talk of the
George Ashley	Charles & Nina Frazier	Town
Dana W. Atchley	Ken Friedman	Northwest Mounted
Ay-O	Gersh	Vaise
Frederic Barthelme	Suzi Gablik	Yoko Ono
Ed Baynard	Edwin Bollk Galkoff	Philip Peppia
Carol Berga	Larry Hager	Lil Picard
G. Berkowitz	Lynda Hart	E. M. Plunkett
Judith V. Bernstein	Marcia Herscovitz	Joseph Raffael
Bruce Birmelin	Dick Higgins	Partner
David Bourdon	Yatz Hjortsberg	Robbin
Eugenia Butler	Dovi Del Hompson	Linda Rosenkrantz
Richard C	Hudson Art Farm	James Rosenquist
Lisa Camnitzar	Peter Huger	Richard Ross
Ted Carey	Ara Ignatius	Amelia R. Rothchild
Monte Carazza	Helen Jacobson	Mickey Ruskin
George Champlin	Lila Kalzen	E. Schmidt
Jean-Claude Christo	J. A. Kietar	Arthur Secunda
Alex Clayton	Alison Knowles	John Slop
A Clear Well Lighted	Sacha Koln	Norman Solomon
Place	Sana Komanjian	Harry Sevjak
Michael Cooper	Jill Komblee	Toby Spizelman
Fletcher Copp	William Landwehr	Texas Special
Herman Costa	Gary Lee-Nova	Philip Van Brunt
Vincent D'Aquila	Les Levine	John Van Ripar
Agnes Dones	Michael Mahoney	Edwin Varney
Nancy Dickinson	Tim Menzies	Nancy Warrick
L. L. Dolby	Jean-Patrice Marancel	Phil Weidman
Ray Densrsky	Eric Metcalfe	George Wastlinghouse
John Evans	Gary Miller	Sam Wiener, Jr.
Charles Fahlen	Ian Milliss	John Wilcock
C. Fairburn	Malcolm Morley	John Willenbecher
Milton Fest	Michael Morris	May Wilson
Nial Falls	Lowell Nesbitt	William S. Wilson
Albert M. Fine	Norham California	Karl Wirsun
Allen Fish	Industrial &	Charlotte Zloczower
Henry Flynt	Business News	
Charles Fodor		

September 2-October 6, 1970

Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10021
Telephone (212) 249-4100

Photograph: William S. Wilson



Figure 4. *New York Correspondance School Exhibition Contributors*. Source: Whitney Museum of America Art, 1970.

Reviews of the exhibition reflected the skeptical reaction of the mainstream press.⁶² There were also a number of internal references known only to the group, which critic Gerrit Henry remarked on in his review in *Art International* [emphasis in original]:

The mounting of a show full of this in-humour proved that Johnson and his curator expected everyone who attended to somehow 'get it'; I feel fairly certain that not everyone did, if the mutterings of one museum-goer about the 'permanent collection being put in storage for *this*' were any indication.⁶³

Although most reviewers remarked on a general confusion, Kasha Linville writing for *Artforum* noted the intentional contradiction between the museum setting and this new type of art practice:

The only sad note about Johnson's Whitney diversion is it seems a shame to catch a living thing in flight, to pin it down and make a museum display out of it.⁶⁴

Despite the bemused reaction of art world critics, the exhibition was a critical turning point in the development of mail art history.⁶⁵ The display of mail art in a prominent and publicly sanctioned institution of art elevated it as one of the avant-garde practices of the time.⁶⁶ After the Whitney exhibit, mail art assumed both a private and public face that allowed this practice to expand far beyond the inner circles of the art world.⁶⁷

Fluxus

At the same time, another group of artists and mutual friends of Johnson were also experimenting with mail art practice, but in a different way. George Maciunas

⁶² Held Jr., "The Mail Art Exhibition", in Chandler and Neumark, 96.

⁶³ Gerrit Henry, "New York Letter," *Art International* 14, no. 9 (November 20, 1970): 71.

⁶⁴ Kasha Linville, "New York", *Artforum* 9, no. 3 (November 1970): 86.

⁶⁵ Held Jr., in Chandler and Neumark, 97.

⁶⁶ Sava, 121.

⁶⁷ Held Jr., in Chandler and Neumark, 97.

officially started the art group called “Fluxus” in 1963 when he published their manifesto (Figure 5). Originally based in New York, Maciunas took a job in Germany in the early sixties while starting Fluxus.⁶⁸ The move to Germany strengthened the internationalism that would define the group with artists located all over the world.⁶⁹ It also made the postal service a necessity in order to connect all of the artists to each other. In addition to utilizing the postal service, Maciunas set up several Fluxshops, the first in New York and later in Amsterdam, California, and southern France, in order to sell the various publications and objects being produced.⁷⁰ He extended this enterprise to include Fluxus Mail-Order Warehouses, which served the same purpose as the shops to use the postal system in order to circumvent “what was felt to be the elitist nature of the museum and gallery systems.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Michael Lumb, “Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art As Social Sculpture, Chapter 2: Fluxus and Postal Ephemera”, accessed May 6, 2014, http://www.nonopp.com/ac/arte_correo/Tesis/2_fluxus.htm.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Smith, “Fluxus: A Brief History”, in Armstrong and Rothfuss, 33.

⁷¹ Ibid., 34.

Manifesto:

2. To affect, or bring to a certain state, by subjecting to, or treating with, a flux. "Fluxed into another world." South.
3. Med. To cause a discharge from, as in purging.

flux (flŭks), n. [OF., fr. L. *fluxus*, fr. *fluere*, *fluxum*, to flow. See FLUENT; cf. FLUSH, n. (of cards).] 1. Med. a A flowing or fluid discharge from the bowels or other part: esp. an excessive and morbid discharge: as, the bloody flux, or dysentery. b The matter thus discharged.

Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectual", professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, —
PURGE THE WORLD OF "EUROPANISM"!

2. Act of flowing: a continuous moving on or passing by, as of a flowing stream; a continuing succession of changes.
3. A stream; copious flow; flood; outflow.
4. The setting in of the tide toward the shore. Cf. REFLUX.
5. State of being liquid through heat; fusion. Rare.

PROMOTE A REVOLUTIONARY FLOOD AND TIDE IN ART,
Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples, not only critics, dilettantes and professionals.

7. Chem. & Metal. a Any substance or mixture used to promote fusion, esp. the fusion of metals or minerals. Common metallurgical fluxes are silica and silicates (acidic), lime and limestone (basic), and fluorite (neutral). b Any substance applied to surfaces to be joined by soldering or welding, just prior to or during the operation, to clean and free them from oxide, thus promoting their union, as rosin.

FUSE the cadres of cultural, social & political revolutionaries into united front & action.

Figure 5. George Maciunas, *Fluxus Manifesto*, 1963. Source: MoMA NY Collection.

Maciunas, who had a background in typography, controlled the overall graphic look of Fluxus work, which consisted of bold typography and slick commercially produced pieces.⁷² Like most Fluxus work, Fluxus mail art was included in some of the various kits that were produced and sold through the Fluxus mail order catalog (Figure 6). In order to produce these kits, Maciunas would “call” on his network of Fluxus artists to send him their ideas for new works via letter.⁷³ Maciunas’ involvement was key for the production of all Fluxus work. In order for a work to be considered a Fluxus work as opposed to a work by a Fluxus artist or a work made in the spirit of Fluxus, it must have been listed or described in a Fluxus publication or mentioned in Maciunas’ correspondence as a planned Fluxus work.⁷⁴ Maciunas controlled production of Fluxus work sometimes altering and interpreting other artists’ ideas, designing labels and packaging for their designs.⁷⁵ Sometimes artists would create their own pieces that were then distributed through the Fluxus network of artist-run Fluxshops and mail order houses in several countries, but the majority of production went through Maciunas personally.⁷⁶ One of the reasons why Maciunas controlled production so tightly was to enforce the Fluxus principle of group authorship. In a letter to Tomas Schmit, Maciunas outlined the basis for group vs. individual copyrights [emphasis in original]:

Eventually we would destroy the *authorship* of pieces & make them totally anonymous – thus eliminating artists “ego” – Author would be “FLUXUS”. We can’t depend on each “artist” to destroy his ego. The copyright arrangement will eventually force him to it if he is reluctant.⁷⁷

⁷² Jon Hendricks, foreword to *Fluxus Codex*, (Detroit, MI: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988) 25.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 27.

Maciunas' vision of a "united front" foregrounded participation, inclusivity, experimentation, and creativity as key elements of the Fluxus agenda.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Michael Lumb, "Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art As Social Sculpture, Chapter 2: Fluxus and Postal Ephemera", accessed May 6, 2014, http://www.nonopp.com/ac/arte_correo/Tesis/2_fluxus.htm.

FLUX SHOP & MAIL ORDER WAREHOUSE

FOUR YEARS LATER




FOUR YEARS LATER

FLUX SHOP & MAIL ORDER WAREHOUSE

FLUX KIT



FLUX KIT... containing everything you need to make your own flux...

FLUX KIT... containing everything you need to make your own flux...

JOE JONES



MUSIC MACHINES



MUSIC BOXES



FLUXORGAN



FLUXORGAN... a new type of organ...



ROBERT WATTS



ROBERT WATTS... safes and security...

FLUXCHESS



FLUXCHESS... a new type of chess set...

GAMES



GAMES... various board games...

AYO



AYO... a new type of box...

NEW!



NEW!... latest arrivals...

NEW!



NEW!... latest arrivals...

ERIC ANDERSEN



ERIC ANDERSEN... safes and security...

YEARBOXES



YEARBOXES... commemorative boxes...

CHIEKO SHIGI



CHIEKO SHIGI... boxes and containers...

BEN VAUTIER



BEN VAUTIER... bottles and containers...

GEORGE BRECHT



GEORGE BRECHT... safes and security...

ROBERT WATTS



ROBERT WATTS... safes and security...

ALISON KNOWLES



ALISON KNOWLES... tins and containers...

ARTHUR KOPKE



ARTHUR KOPKE... safes and security...

WILLEM DE RIDDER



WILLEM DE RIDDER... safes and security...

GEORGE MACIUNAS, PRICE LIST FOR FLUXSHOP & MAIL ORDER WAREHOUSE, PRINTED IN FLUXUS VACUUM TRAPEZOID (FLUXUS NEWSPAPER NO. 5, 1965). SOURCE: COLLECTION WALKER ART CENTER.

Fluxus work had an unusual system of production that relied heavily on the postal service. The postal service provided not only a practical way to circulate work and ideas amongst its members, but also served an ideological purpose as well. In the Fluxus manifesto (Figure 5), Maciunas took a strong stance against the hat he saw as a highly commodified art market that was flourishing at the time.⁷⁹ Like Johnson, the Fluxus manifesto is in part a reaction to the huge increase of the price of American art following the success of the Abstract Expressionists in the 1940s and 50s.⁸⁰ The ideological concerns of Fluxus are directly stated in their manifesto specifically referencing “abstract art” as something that needs to be purged as the idea that art can only be fully grasped by “critics, dilettantes, and professionals.” Maciunas and his fellow artists wanted to break free from the current art market and were looking for alternative methods to make, sell, and distribute art that was both inexpensive and outside of the museum and/or gallery system. Additionally, they wanted to make art that could be easily understood by anyone, not simply by those well versed in traditional art criticism. This was an attempt to cut out the “middle man,” namely the art critic, whose job was to explain the work of art.⁸¹

Both the Fluxus mail order method and Johnson’s add and pass method attempted to set up new systems of distribution that existed outside of art world institutions. While Johnson took a more direct approach making handmade objects and mailing them to individuals, Fluxus relied on a more commercial setup, which reflected the group’s ideological interests. Maciunas, who was a typographer by trade, favored the

⁷⁹ Smith, “Fluxus: A Brief History”, in Armstrong and Rothfuss, 34.

⁸⁰ Ravicz, 274.

⁸¹ Ibid., 273.

organization, layout, and bold graphic look of traditional mail order catalogs such as in Figure 6. All the information about the pieces, including their prices, is neatly organized by columns, which are broken down by subject such as “games.”

In contrast, Johnson’s Figure 2 with its handwritten names, cartoon heads, curving lines and comical mustache, is the antithesis to the official commercial look of Fluxus. Even when Johnson worked in a more “official” manner, such as in Figure 1, the cartoon heads are slightly different shapes and sizes, the lines don’t exactly match up, and important logistical information about who these people are, what their relationship is to each other, and the purpose of Johnson bringing them together in this image is absent. Stylistically, the choices of Johnson and Fluxus reflect their different methods of rebelling against the dominant style of the previous decades, namely Abstract Expressionism, and their different ways of interacting with their intended recipients. Fluxus treated its recipient much like a company treats its consumers: anonymously, simply purchasing “products” from a mail order catalog. Johnson’s approach was much more individual as even when he photocopied his pieces, each work was customized and handmade for a specific recipient or recipients.⁸²

Although almost all Fluxus work was for sale, the pieces were priced very low.⁸³ Selling work through the mail was more of a symbolic gesture than a practical source of income. However, their efforts to circumnavigate the art world and sell directly to consumers was part of the Fluxus agenda to transform the fine art market into a site of dialog, invention, and exchange. The commercial look of all Fluxus work is deliberately

⁸² Philpot, 27.

⁸³ Armstrong, 18.

tongue and cheek as it is meant to look like a product, but each piece is subversive and supports the Fluxus agenda. This is an important difference with respect to Johnson's mail art of the same time period because while both Johnson and Fluxus took the art world as their subjects, the Fluxus critique was much more sharply focused and defiant, specifically targeting the gate-keepers of the fine art world. Even so, both Fluxus artists and Johnson attempted to include ordinary people in the process of participating and making art through their postal experiments, albeit in very different ways. The Fluxus solution was to create and sell inexpensive kits directly to their audience completely outside of the art world context.

Fluxus mail art pieces were almost always a DIY art experience prepackaged and sold for others to complete. The lack of handmade objects was intentional as Fluxus artists were trying to create anticommodities reversing traditional artistic values that conferred value on crafted aesthetic objects.⁸⁴ They used mass produced materials to create objects, which were intended to be manufactured in large numbers as a kind of disposable art form.⁸⁵ In addition, Fluxus DIY mail art, such as the *Flux Post Kit 7* (Figure 7), broke down the hierarchy between artist and viewer, as anyone who purchased the kit could become an artist simply by following the kit's instructions. By using the kit, anyone could start to form their own mail art network much in the same way Johnson created his: by sending works of art via the mail to an unsuspecting audience.

⁸⁴ Smith, "Fluxus Praxis", in Chandler and Neumark, 126.

⁸⁵ Ibid.



Figure 7. Fluxus, *Flux Post Kit 7*, 1967, *Source*: Fluxus Foundation.

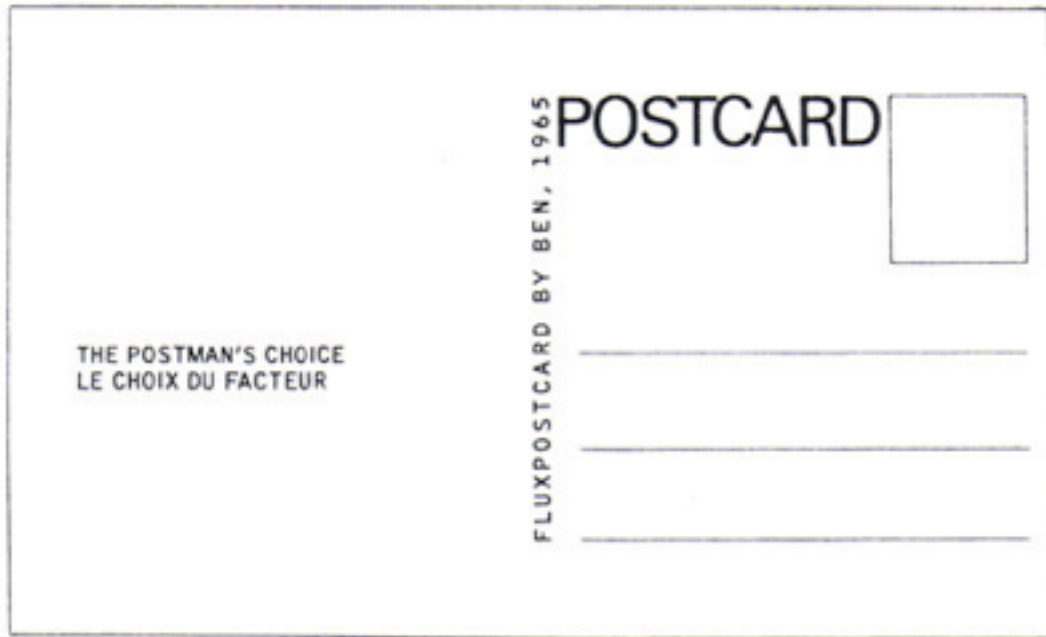


Figure 8. Ben Vautier, *The Postman's Choice*, 1965, *Source*: Fluxus Foundation.

Fluxus artists such as Ben Vautier used his mail art to break down the barrier between bureaucratic system and the human workers who it employed in pieces such as Figure 8 *The Postman's Choice*. The postcard artwork looks very ordinary upon first inspection, but if one was to look closely he or she would notice that both sides are exactly the same with room for a message, address, and stamp. The sender is encouraged to write down two different addresses, messages, and affix postage to both sides and let the postman decide whom to deliver it to. *Postman's Choice* is typical of Fluxus work in that it places emphasis on the actions and decisions each individual involved must in order for the piece to come to fruition. Like Johnson's add and pass method, *Postman's Choice* attempts to involve the recipient, or in this case the sender, in order to complete the piece. While *Postman's Choice* offers more straightforward instructions, the concept and intention are the same. The simplicity of *Postman's Choice* can be deceiving because the decision required, (i.e., delivering a piece of mail), is small but revolutionary. Mail can only be delivered to one address at a time, so by choosing one the postman must defy the rules.

Intermedia

The required performative aspects of this piece are part of a Fluxus attitude that emphasizes shared interactions.⁸⁶ Many Fluxus artworks are not simply mail art or performance, but often times a mixture of both. In 1966, Dick Higgins came up with the term "Intermedia" to describe these types of works that refer to pieces that are between

⁸⁶ Smith, "Fluxus Praxis", in Chandler and Neumark, 126.

mediums.⁸⁷ Years later, Higgins' daughter, Hannah Higgins, offered a compelling explanation of her father's term:

Rather than merely multiplying existing media categories, like multimedia (as in opera, which discreetly combines theater with music and dance) or mixed media (as in illustrated stories, presenting complimentary images and words), intermedia actively probes the spaces between the different media.⁸⁸

The purpose of the Higgins' term is to explain an important aim of Fluxus work, which is to consider all aspects of a work, not just its formal origins.⁸⁹ Additionally, Higgins' term offers another way for people to look at art that allows for a dialog rather than merely a static object.⁹⁰ With the notion of Intermedia, Higgins formalized an approach that emphasized dialogue over medium purity, a notion that was epitomized by Clement Greenberg's statement: "It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself."⁹¹

A second aspect of Intermedia is the intersection between what Higgins called "art media" and "life media." Higgins offers an example of how his definition works when examining a readymade or found object:

The readymade or found objects, in a sense an intermedium since it was not intended to conform to the pure medium, usually suggest this, and therefore suggests a location in the field between the general area of art media, and those of life media.⁹²

⁸⁷ Dick Higgins, "Intermedia", *Leonardo* 34, no. 1 (2001): 49. "The term, an appropriate one for understanding Fluxus, has since spread into common art parlance and changed meaning, becoming associated with hi-tech art." Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 91.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Dick Higgins, 53.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁹¹ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, ed. Francis Frascina (London: Routledge, 2000), 66.

⁹² Dick Higgins, 49.

A “life media” may be anything from shoes to hamburgers, essentially anything that doesn’t fall into the category of “art.” Higgins’ notion of Intermedia is an example of how Fluxus sought to locate the area between the life of the artwork and that of the artist. This concept is also present in Johnson’s work as his mail art always operates between art media (image and text) as well as between art and life media (image-text and mail). This definition is particularly useful when discussing both Johnson and Fluxus mail art because these works were made in the spirit of Intermedia; that is, they were not governed by rules, each work determined its own medium and form according to its needs.⁹³ The term allowed both Johnson and Fluxus artists the ability to look at materials and the art making process in a different way, allowing for a new liberated mentality.⁹⁴

Another Fluxus work that is an example of Intermedia is Figure 9: *Mailbox Event* by George Brecht. The piece consists of instructions printed on a small gold colored piece of paper that instructs the participant to reach into their mailbox with their eyes closed, pull out a piece of mail, and destroy it. Afterwards, the participant is instructed to open their eyes to see what they have destroyed. Although *Mailbox Event* is about the destruction of mail as opposed to its creation, it highlights the performance aspect of opening a piece of mail or mail art. This is a common theme amongst Fluxus mail art with each piece focusing on a specific aspect of the process of creating a piece of mail and making it the subject of the piece. Vautier’s *Postman’s Choice* highlights the delivery aspect while Brecht’s highlights the opening of a piece of mail. In *Mailbox Event*, it is the opening, or in this case the destruction of a letter that is the work of art, as

⁹³ Dick Higgins 50.

⁹⁴ Smith, “Fluxus Praxis”, in Chandler and Neumark, 127.

opposed to the piece of mail itself. In *Postman's Choice*, the postman's decision is the work of art. These two pieces demonstrate Intermedia quite well in that they both exist between art media as well as between art media and life media. Neither piece comfortably fits into the category of "mail," "art," or both, and the interpretation is left up to the recipient. Thus, both pieces respective meanings are not static and are subject to change, or flux every time they are performed.

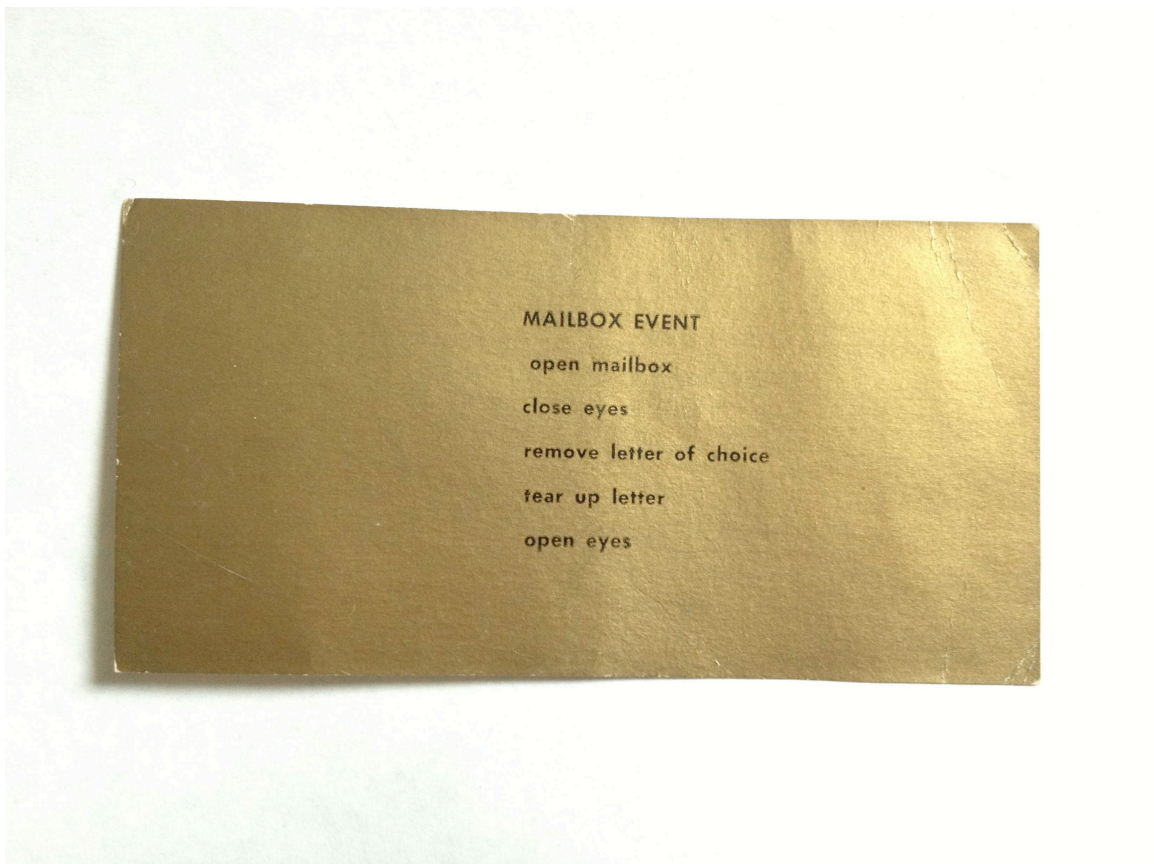


Figure 9. George Brecht, *Mailbox Event*, circa. 1963. *Source*: Collection of the author.

Omaha Flow Systems Mail Art Exhibition

Both Vautier and Brecht's pieces were included in several Fluxus exhibitions; however, the most important Fluxus mail art exhibition and one of the most important exhibitions in the history of mail art, was organized by Fluxus artist Ken Friedman in 1972 at the Joslyn Museum of Art in Omaha, Nebraska. To this day *Omaha Flow Systems* remains one of the largest and most influential mail art exhibitions with over 20,000 objects passing through the exhibition during its tenure.⁹⁵ Friedman was one of the youngest artists in the group and eventually became the head of one of the four Fluxus warehouses in San Diego known as "Fluxus West."⁹⁶ In the beginning stages of planning the exhibit, Friedman sent several thousand invitations to fellow artists and mail art friends, requesting work for the exhibition (see Figure 10).⁹⁷ Unlike the NYCS exhibition at the Whitney museum two years prior, *Omaha Flow* was one of the first mail art exhibitions in which anyone was free to contribute.⁹⁸ However, as part of the exhibition, Friedman instructed the staff to encourage visitors to "trade," (i.e., take a piece of mail art from the exhibition and replace it with something else.)⁹⁹ The "something else" did not have to be mail art; for example, one woman replaced a piece she took with a loaf of bread.¹⁰⁰ The process was documented, and the visitor was asked to write to the artist and express his or her opinion about the work he or she had

⁹⁵ Ken Friedman, "Flowing in Omaha", accessed January 27, 2014, http://sdrclib.uiowa.edu/atca/subjugated/five_14.htm.

⁹⁶ Michael Lumb, "Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art As Social Sculpture, Chapter 2: Fluxus and Postal Ephemera", accessed June 19, 2014, http://www.nonopp.com/ac/arte_correo/Tesis/2_fluxus.htm.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Held, "The Mail Art Exhibition", in Chandler and Neumark, 99.

⁹⁹ Ken Friedman, "Flowing in Omaha", accessed January 27, 2014 http://sdrclib.uiowa.edu/atca/subjugated/five_14.htm.

¹⁰⁰ Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part Two, Moticos and Mail Art: A History", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed June 19, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_2.html.

chosen.¹⁰¹ The purpose of the trade aspect of the exhibit was to encourage “active participation by the public” and relinquish the role of the passive observer.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Ken Friedman, “Flowing in Omaha”, accessed January 27, 2014
http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/atca/subjugated/five_14.htm.

¹⁰² Ibid.



Figure 10. Unknown artist, *Omaha Flow Systems Poster*, 1973. Source: Image courtesy of Joslyn Art Museum Omaha, Nebraska.

The materials received for the exhibit included more than just mail art. Friedman solicited an amalgam of drawings, poems, audio and video tapes, ideas for projects, photographs, documents, songs, films, and philosophical statements from the artists.¹⁰³ The scope of the project was also larger than a typical art or mail art exhibition as it attempted to represent “both a massive interchange of ideas and a scope of multi-level communication that has seldom ever been encountered in man’s history.”¹⁰⁴ Although the objects on display were constantly changing, an exhibition checklist, which is now available online, was created after the fact to document the archived works.¹⁰⁵

Johnson’s Whitney exhibition and Friedman’s *Omaha Flow* mail art exhibition were not only groundbreaking for their time, but also set the example that most mail art exhibitions would follow. While Friedman’s “trade” idea remains unique to his exhibition, most mail art exhibitions would always be free to enter, all work received would be shown, and all mail artists who participate would be given credit in some way, usually in the form of an exhibition catalog. Mail art exhibitions were essential to the growth of mail art practice throughout the 1970s and 80s as they were the public face of mail art. The number of documented mail art exhibitions worldwide exploded in the 1970s from five in 1971 to 75 in 1979 and 187 in 1983 introducing a flood of new mail artists into the mail art network.¹⁰⁶ In addition to spreading the word about mail art to a broader audience, the exhibition catalog, which listed all of the participants, also typically listed their mailing addresses as well, thus serving as a mechanism for expanding the mail

¹⁰³ Ken Friedman, “Flowing in Omaha”, accessed January 27, 2014
http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/atca/subjugated/five_14.htm.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ken Friedman, “Art (Net) Worker Extraordinaire Exhibition Checklist”, accessed January 28, 2014,
<http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/atca/subjugated/friedexh.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Held Jr., *Mail Art*, xvii.

art network.¹⁰⁷ In an age before Internet and email, mail art exhibitions provided a crucial service in helping both experienced mail artists and newcomers to expand their personal networks through either viewing or participating in a exhibition.

Creation of the Mail Art Network

The idea of a single mail art network was a concept that gained traction and importance after the NYCS mail art exhibition at the Whitney museum in 1970. As mail art practice expanded beyond Ray Johnson and the Fluxus artists' personal contacts, people who had little to no connection with the art world started to take up the idea of mail art and run with it. As the practice grew in popularity, mail artists and historians alike placed great emphasis on the relationships that were formed through the exchange of mail art objects rather than the objects themselves. The idea of a single open international mail art network quickly became important because it encompassed the personal connections that were formed through this practice. As a result, mail art objects became the physical expression of a series of intricate overlapping personal connections between mail artists and people in an invisible web that stretched around the globe.

By the 1970s, the mail art network had become so large that it was difficult to comprehend in its entirety. The prominent artist Robert Filliou came up with the term "Eternal Network" to describe the enormous number of people worldwide communicating and connecting with each other via exchanged mail art objects. He described the use for his concept:

¹⁰⁷ Held Jr., "The Mail Art Exhibition", in Chandler and Neumark, 97-98.

If it is true that information about the knowledge of all modern art research is more than any one artist can comprehend, then the concept of the avant-garde is obsolete. With incomplete knowledge, who can say who is in front, and who ain't. I suggest that considering each artists as part of an Eternal Network is a much more useful concept.¹⁰⁸

Filliou predicted that this network would remain “eternal” as it was now large enough to withstand turnover and constantly renew itself with new mail artists. This idea would become particularly important for the next wave of mail artists who took up the practice in the late 1970s, 80s and 90s. Fillious’ prediction remains accurate as mail art practice continues to thrive even in today’s technological landscape.

In a sense, the concept of the Eternal Network was the final evolutionary stage of Johnson’s initial concept of creating a network of friends, artists, and strangers who shared ideas and communicated with each other outside of any kind of traditional art world system or structure. The main difference between Johnson, Fluxus, and the mail artists of the ensuing decades was that both Johnson and Fluxus had to create their own networks from scratch while later mail artists simply had to tap into the network. In an interview, John Held Jr. explained how other emerging art genres evolved out of mail art practice: “The Mail Art tree not only has new branches; it has fellow trees.”¹⁰⁹ From fax art, to email art, to network art, all of these new emerging art genres owe a debt to the enigmatic missives of Ray Johnson and the DIY kits of Fluxus. Their respective styles became iconic in the mail art community either through direct interaction or through a trickle down effect as mail artists quoted and imitated their respective styles and then passed their designs along to other mail artists who did the same. Although Johnson and

¹⁰⁸ Robert Filliou, quoted in John Held, *Mail Art*, xxiv.

¹⁰⁹ John Held Jr., quoted in Madelyn Starbuck, *Clashing and Converging: Effects of the Internet on the Correspondence Art Network*, Trends in Interview Data, accessed March 25, 2014, <https://www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2003/starbuckmk032/starbuckmk032.pdf>: 60.

Fluxus remained ensconced in the art world, as mail art practice spread beyond the art world they became known, either directly or indirectly, for creating the mail art network and some of the first objects that were exchanged within the network.

Chapter 3: Networking and New Technology – John Held Jr. and Chuck Welch (c. 1970-1990)

New Mail Artists Enter the Network

After Johnson's exhibition at the Whitney and Friedman's *Omaha Flow* exhibition in the early 1970s, mail art exhibitions proliferated around the world, bringing the practice to a new audience. A new wave of mail artists entered the network, bringing their disparate background, interests, skill sets, and agendas into the community. Despite the fact that Ray Johnson and Fluxus, lead by George Maciunas, remained actively involved in mail art throughout the 1970s and 80s, many of these new mail artists who took up the practice after seeing a mail art exhibition were wholly unconnected with art or the art world and had little to no idea of mail art's historical precedent.

At the same time, there were also many new mail artists who were either personal correspondents of Johnson, Fluxus artists and/or followers of their respective work who made an effort to ensure that ideas and spirit of these early innovators would not be forgotten. John Held Jr. and Chuck Welch, both authors, mail artists, and archivists in their own right, represent this next generation of mail artists who became very active in the network and sought to preserve its roots. Their involvement in mail art was and has been multi-faceted from curating mail art exhibitions, to writing about mail art, to collecting and maintaining some of the largest mail art archives in the world. Both were also deeply involved in writing and/or editing major publications on mail art and participating in pivotal events that helped shape the mail network during the 1970s, 80 and 90s.

Mail Art Practice Outside of the Art World

The 1980s and 90s were key decades in mail art history as most of the major publications on mail art practice were published in that time period. While many new mail artists became aware of this growing practice through mail art exhibitions, these public displays of mail art tell only half of the story. Personal correspondence between mail artists was not only difficult to track, but also had few apertures for public display. Anthology-style books provided an important window into this private type of mail art that before the Internet would have been nearly impossible to find out about without being directly involved in the mail art network. Starting with *Correspondence Art* in the mid 1980s, a handful of influential books such as Chuck Welch's *Networking Currents* (19886) and *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology* (1995) and John Held Jr.'s *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography* (1991) attempted to capture the variety of personal experience, ideology, intent, and spirit of mail art and where it stood at the time.

The 1980s and 90s were also pivotal decades with respect to experimentation in mail art practice as a result of the large and diverse group of new mail artists entering the network. Not only had the practice grown in popularity thanks to the proliferation of mail art exhibitions, emerging mail art scholars gave a voice to the broad and varied group of people who now made up the mail art network. However, as mail art expanded outside of the art world, new mail artists had the difficult task of not only establishing a context for their work, but also finding common ground with other mail artists. Additionally, the open nature of mail art attracted people with all different backgrounds, each one with a different point of view of what mail art is and how it should be used,

many of whom were not interested in creating art. In the absence of a strong common visual aesthetic, new mail artists focused on finding other purposes for mail art practice beyond art to rally behind. Those who were familiar with the egalitarian ethos of the mail art network and Fluxus' manifesto saw themselves as building on these ideas, advocating that mail art can and should be used to bring people closer together and break down social and political barriers. This was particularly true in Eastern Europe and South America as mail artists entering the network from those countries found it a useful vehicle for political dissent as well as a window into the outside world.¹¹⁰ In Western countries, mail artists sought to expand upon the anti-establishment ethos of Fluxus work by writing their own manifestos,¹¹¹ starting movements, and creating projects that reflected their ideology.¹¹² Despite varied perspectives and individual agendas, the most common idea that most mail artists agreed on was the egalitarian, open nature of the mail art network. As a result, most of the writing about mail art from this period has a more sociological point of view presenting mail art as a tool for social, political, or philosophical change.

The Mail Art Exhibition – A Forum for Experimentation

The mail art exhibition remained one of the most popular and public formats for mail art display in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Most exhibitions followed the example

¹¹⁰ For more information on how mail art was affected by politics in Eastern Europe and South America during this time period, see Chuck Welch, *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995).

¹¹¹ Guidelines or “considerations” for mail art exhibitions were outlined in a manifesto of Mail Art written by Mario Lara and Lon Spiegelman in 1980. For more information see John Held Jr., “The Mail Art Exhibition”, in Chandler and Neumark, 101-102.

¹¹² There are many important mail art figures, magazines, movements, and projects that are beyond the scope of this study. See bibliography for additional resources.

Johnson set in 1970 at the Whitney museum and maintained an open format with all work shown and credit given to all participants in some form or another. Despite previous examples, there has never been an established principle of methods for displaying mail art.¹¹³ The format and context for a mail art exhibit has always been a format of some contention because as mail art historians argue it inevitably triggers certain expectations and attitudes as to how to assess and evaluate the work on display, which is why some mail artists don't believe that mail art should be exhibited at all.¹¹⁴ However, during this time period, mail art exhibitions remained one of the most effective methods for expanding the mail art network, and mail art exhibition organizers were keen to experiment with new ways of presenting mail art. One such example took place in a gallery in which the organizer of a mail art exhibition stipulated that all mail art received for the exhibition was to be opened on the day that the exhibition opened by viewers, a clever pun on the idea of an art exhibition "opening."¹¹⁵ Part of the reasoning behind this was to turn the exhibition into an event, thus making the viewer a more active participant in the process of mail art and potentially even a new mail artist.¹¹⁶ This attempt to bring together the experience of personally opening mail and publicly visiting a mail art exhibition is just one documented experiment that not only sought to bring the two types of mail art together, but also put the viewer in a more active situation.

However, not all new ideas for mail art exhibitions were received with enthusiasm. In 1984, curator Dr. Ronny Cohen solicited work for a mail art exhibition

¹¹³ Michael Lumb, "Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art As Social Sculpture, Chapter 3: The Democratisation of Mailart – MAP", accessed May 8, 2014, http://www.nonopp.com/ac/arte_correo/Tesis/3_map.htm.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

entitled *Mail Art Then and Now: Mail Art International Show* at Franklin Furnace, a gallery in New York City (Figure 11). New mail art that was submitted was combined with works from Johnson and other prominent mail art figures in the exhibition. When the exhibition opened, some mail artists noticed that not all of the work that had been submitted was on display. Additionally, works by Johnson and well-known artists were presented separately in glass cases as “historical mail art” while new works were simply placed together on a shelf in the gallery space.¹¹⁷ To add insult to injury, participating mail artists never received documentation of their work either in the exhibition’s catalog or in any other form.¹¹⁸

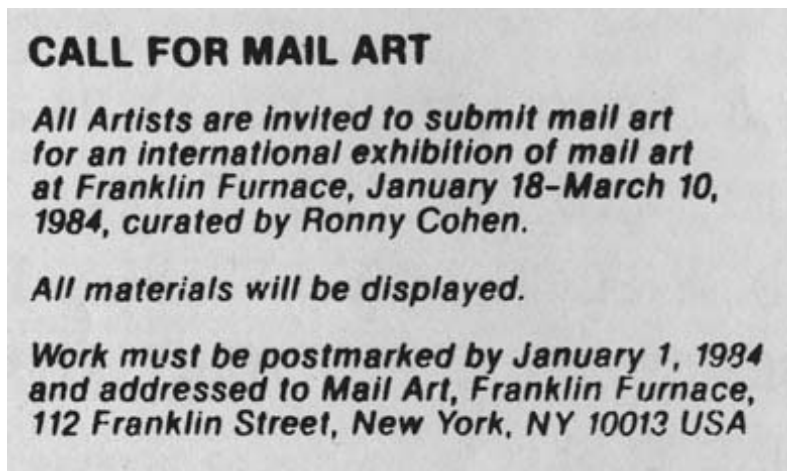


Figure 11. Dr. Ronny Cohen, *Call For Mail Art*, 1984. *Source:* Reprinted from "Editorial: Our Ball" by Mark Bloch, *Panmag International Magazine*, Issue 6, ISSN 0738 4777, PO Box 1500, New York, NY 10009, USA, see also <http://www.panmodern.com>.

¹¹⁷ Chuck Welch, “Corresponding Worlds: Debate and Dialog”, in Chuck Welch, *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995): 190.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

What followed is commonly referred to as the “Mail Art Melee,” involving a dramatic and emotional reaction on the part of the New York mail art community.¹¹⁹ In reaction to the exhibition, mail artist Carl Pittore wrote an open letter to the curator in *Newark Press*, a mail art zine, insisting that the curator display all work that was submitted for the exhibition. [Emphasis in original.]

Your invitation stated that **all** material would be exhibited. As you know, this is a sacrosanct mail art concept – the primary aspect of mail art exhibitions – and that is **everything** contributed to a mail art exhibition is to be exhibited. No rejections is synonymous with mail art, especially as the work is given and not returned, and you have arbitrarily decided to reject and edit. That you have decided to disregard this concept marks you as no friend to mail art, or to mail artists, and denies perhaps the most unique and appealing feature of this universal movement.¹²⁰

The situation came to a head when a discussion panel featuring the exhibition’s curator took place at the venue and irate mail artists turned up, demanding that the curator display all mail art that was received for the exhibition or step down from her position as curator for the exhibition.¹²¹ John Held Jr. and Chuck Welch both attended the event and *The Village Voice* wrote a compelling account of what happened that night:

The evening got quite lively, with many in the wall-to-wall audience shouting accusations at each other and vociferously arguing across the gallery space. A Mail Artist dressed as a satyr, jumped up at one point and made some obscene gestures with his hand over his crotch in response to derisive barbs directed at him. “Communication is the idea of Mail Art,” bellowed one of the panelists, E.F. Higgins III, outshouting the audience as he held a beer can in his hand. This was a hot night on the downtown art circuit.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Gary Azon, “Mail Art Melee”, *The Village Voice* 29, no. 11 (March 13, 1984): 38.

¹²⁰ Carlo Pittore, “An Open Letter to Dr. Ronny Cohen”, *Umbrella* (March 1984) 38.

¹²¹ Chuck Welch, *Networking Currents: Contemporary Mail Art Subjects and Issues*. (Boston: Sandbar Willow Press, 1985): 4.

¹²² Gary Azon, “Mail Art Melee”, 38.

The Franklin Furnace debacle is an explosive example of the ideological clash that was occurring between mail artists and outsiders during the 1980s. By this time, Johnson's egalitarian, open network had become gospel to the now established mail art community and some mail artists took it upon themselves to enforce it. Their reaction was tempered by the fact that mail art was not accepted by the art world, and thus mail artists were distrustful of outsiders who attempted to "curate" mail art exhibitions.¹²³

New Technology and Networking

Mail art exhibitions were not the only tool that mail artists had at their disposal to expand the network. New technology that facilitated communication, such as fax and email, lead many mail artists to expand their practice into other systems. Many mail artists embraced this new technology and considered their work in these other media an extension of their mail art practice.¹²⁴ These mail artists coined the term "networking" as a term to personify the use of technological and social transformation of mail art.¹²⁵ However, networking was not just a new term that adjusted the definition of mail art practice to include these new technologies; it also reflected a new mentality. Swiss mail artist and author H.R. Fricker explained the ethos behind this new term [emphasis in original]:

As foreseen by the DADAist, Futurists, Situationists, Fluxus and others, a new kind of artist has developed – **the networker**. In total autonomy and independent from the art and culture institutions, the networker is manifested through the international networks of mail art, tourism, copy-

¹²³ Held Jr., "The Mail Art Exhibition", in Chandler and Neumark, 98.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹²⁵ Charles Francois, "Networking, Technology, Identity", in *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995) 117.

art, computer bulletin boards, fax art, cassette labels, bands, and the underground press etc.¹²⁶

Fricker's definition broadened the definition of mail art even further to include other media as well, specifically new technologies. While the term "mail art" continued to be a popular definition, even for work created using these new systems, mail art practice no longer implied the postal system as a supporting structure. In this respect, it is a term that is directly reflective of the time period in which it was coined.

Other new technology such as photocopy machines and, eventually, the Internet facilitated the spread of mail art by offering quick and cheaper ways to make work, display it, and form new contacts. Photocopy machines were a tool favored by Johnson and made it easy for mail artists, both old and new, to create multiples of their work. Additionally, photocopy machines allowed mail artists to create their own inexpensive publications and send them out in mass mailings to their entire network. These publications were called "zines," which were essentially homemade magazines that could be cheaply and easily produced.¹²⁷ Like mail art exhibitions, zines began to become popular among mail artists who were looking for ways to communicate with a large and growing group of contacts.

However, not all mail artists viewed the effect of new technology on mail art practice as a positive. More established mail artists felt that new, inexperienced mail artists who entered the network in the 1970s, 80s and 90s used photocopy machines to

¹²⁶ H.R. Fricker, "Mail Art: A Process of Detachment", in Welch (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995) 144.

¹²⁷ Zine history and culture are outside of the scope of this thesis. For more information about zines, zine history and zine culture, see Steven Duncombe, *Notes from underground : zines and the politics of alternative culture*, (Bloomington, IN: Microcosm Publishing, 2008); Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo Fi Culture*, (London: Marion Boyars, 2005).

produce “quick-copy crap.”¹²⁸ *FILE*, a popular Canadian mail art magazine, published several editorials condemning the practice of sending out mass mailings of “junk-mail” in three major issues dating from 1972 to 1973.¹²⁹ They related this decrease in the quality of mail art to the lack of handmade mail art and the increase in the quantity of mail art being sent and received.¹³⁰ The flood of photocopied mail art into the network disillusioned some mail artists causing them to cease all mail art activity and leave the network entirely.¹³¹

The advent of the Internet not only facilitated expansion of the network, but also profoundly affected how mail artists worked, communicated, sent, and displayed their work. Starting in the 1980s, the Internet began to slowly replace the postal system as the cheapest, quickest, and easiest way to exchange information. The response to this new technology was mixed within the mail art community. Some embraced the Internet as a tool to support their mail art, some refused to use the Internet, and some abandoned their mail art activities via the postal service all together and took their practice online. Those who chose to take their practice online renamed their work “network art,” and while this type of work won’t be discussed in this thesis, there is an entire history of network art practice.

One example of a mail artist who used the Internet as a tool to enhance his work is the Japanese mail artist Ryosuke Cohen. Cohen’s practice involves communicating with mail artists both via the Internet and postal system. The *Brain Cell* project is based

¹²⁸ Welch, “Corresponding Worlds”, in Welch, 189.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid. Some mail artists viewed the editorials in *FILE* magazine as a betrayal. Mail artist Anna Banana created a zine called *VILE* in 1973 as a reaction against the *FILE* issues in 1972 and 1973 that dealt with mass mailings.

¹³¹ Friedman, 13.

off of Cohen's own idea of how the postal system distributes information amongst mail artists. He likens the system of mail art traveling through the postal system to information traveling through the human brain with an intricate and complicated structure facilitating the circulation of information. Each *Brain Cell* captures a certain number of mail artists' individualized markings in the form of rubber stamps and what is commonly referred to as "artist postage stamps." Artists' postage stamps are a common format for mail art practice and usually look like faux postage stamps that are either printed or imprinted via a rubber stamp. Artist postage stamps are commonly used as a mail artist's calling card, representing his or her work in a small snapshot. Often times these stamps contain images of the artist or their address, either on the web or their physical mailing address. Artist's postage stamps (sometimes referred to as simply "artist's stamps") have their own history within the history of mail art, which won't be discussed in this thesis.

Cohen collects these stamps via email, mail, and fax and arranges them into collages. Each collage is numbered, and every participating mail artist receives a copy of the collage along with a list of all the other participants and their mailing addresses. Figures 12 and 13 are an example of one of Cohen's more recent *Brain Cell* projects from 2012. The collage itself is a mixture of stamps that have been individually glued down and a digital assembly of stamps that have been printed on top. On Cohen's website, he explains his ideas behind his *Brain Cell* project:

I can make mail artists' ideas more interesting by actively availing myself of seals and stamps and other materials sent from others and through my own printed matter. What is more, I can give other mail artists the feeling that they can utilise other's art and collaborate their ideas.¹³²

¹³² Ryosuke Cohen, Ryosuke Cohen: Official Site, accessed November 18, 2013, <http://www.ryosukecohen.com/>.



Figure 12. Ryosuke Cohen, *Brain Cell Number 827*, June 14, 2012. *Source*: Collection of the author.

BRAIN CELL ~ 827

GUIDO BONDIOLI	708 E. PEPPER PLACE MESA AZ. 85203 USA
DKA PRODUCTION	5365 ORRVILLE AVE. WOODLAND HILLS CA. 91367-5754 USA
FLEUR HELSINGOR	3858 HOWE ST. OAKLAND CA. 94611-5313 USA
FJM	BOX 2632 BELLINGHAM WA. 98227-2632 USA
JON FOSTER	707 WATSON AVE. WINSTON SALEM NC. 27103 USA
CAROL STETSER	BOX 20081 SEDONA AZ. 86341-0081 USA
STEVE SMITH	BOX 5172 GULFPORT FL. 33737 USA
TERESINHA FERAIRA	2204 TALMADGE RD. TOLEDO OH. 43606-2529 USA
KDJ	1224 LK. MARGARET DR. ORLAND FL. 32806 USA
CHRIS DAY	267 BLACK BOTTOM RD. JEREMIAH KY. 41826 USA
FICUS STRAGULENSIS	538 HANSON HOLLOW RD. CHARLESTON WV. 25311-8025 USA
MICHAEL GOETZ	1340 BRANDYWINE DR. ROCKFORD IL. 61108 USA
RICHARD C.	409 S. EMERALD LANE CARBONDALE IL. 62901-2140 USA
DR. ART JONES	1412 N.W. 46TH ST. OKLAHOMA CITY OK. 73118-4802 USA
OTTO DAVID SHERMAN	621 WEST 51ST ST. NY NY. 10019 USA
MALOK	BOX 41 WAUKAU WI. 54980 USA
STARRY-EYED STAMPER	PO. BOX 10264 JACKSON TN. 38308 USA
ARTURO G. FALLICO	A.F. IV %PO. BOX 2487 SARATOGA CA. 95070 USA
JOHN TOSTADO	505 N. NAOMI ST. BURBANK CA. 91505 USA
ERICA DURANTE	PO. BOX 473 WILDWICK NJ. 07463 USA
MARYMARK PRESS	45-08 OLD MILLSTONE DR. EAST WINDSOR NJ. 08520 USA
JOKIE X WILSON	620 EDDY ST. N. 24 S.F., CA. 94109-7912 USA
JUDITH SKOLNICK	301 G. ST. SW N. 502 WASHINGTON DC. 20024 USA
NORTH CAROLINE	3400 N. WESLEYAN BLVD ROCKYMOUNT NC. 27804 USA
WESLEYAN COLLEGE	
WALTER PENNACCHI	VIA R. SANZIO N. 35 04100 LATINA ITALY
VITTORE BARONI	VIA C. BATTISTI 339/341 55049 VIAREGGIO ITALY
RUGGERO MAGGI	C. SO SEMPIONE 67 20149 MILANO ITALY
MORENO MENARIN	VIA BORTOLAN 24 36100 VICENZA ITALY
TIZIANA BARACCHI	VIA CAVALLOTTI 83-B 30171 VENEZIA-MESTRE ITALY
SOLAMITO LUIGINO	VIA CAVOUR 44 18039 VENTIMIGLIA (IM) ITALY
GIOVANNI STRADA	C.P. 271 48100 RAVENNA ITALY
"E"	
SERGE FIEALER	38 GRANDE RUE 02300 GUIVRY UTOPIA FRANCE
JEAN HUGUES	13 RUE DE LA MOISSON 53320 BEAULIEU SUR OUDON FRANCE
MICHEL DELLA VEDOVA	46 RUE DE GESVRES 60000 BEAUVAIS FRANCE
REMY FENARD	29 RUE LE SUEUR 87000 LIMOGES FRANCE
JACQUES VILLEGLE	7 RUE GOLONEL IMFELD 87100 LIMOGES FRANCE
VALENTINE MARK HERMAN	15 RUE AU MAIRE 75003 PARIS FRANCE
	1 RUE DE LA VIELLE FONTAINE 11130 SIGEAN FRANCE
PC (TICTAC)	
RAINER WIECZOREK	POSTFACH 1140 82301 STARNBERG GERMANY
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RUDIGER AXEL WESTPHAL	JAHNSTRASSE 20 31157 SARSTEDT GERMANY
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	% E.P.I. ZENTRUM/ASA-EUROPEAN, BOLTENSTERNSTRABE 16/V6 50735 KOLN GERMANY
RUUD JANSSEN	PO. BOX 1055 4801 BB BREDA HOLLAND
ROD SUMMERS	CANTECLEERSTRAAT 40 6217 BX MAASTRICHT HOLLAND
LOIS GIL MAGARINOS	CASAS NOVAS 2/HERBOGO 15912-ROIS A CORUNA GZ SPAIN
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KAZUNORI MURAKAMI	216 NONAKACHO NISHIWAKISHI HYOGO 677-0005 JAPAN
KEIICHI NAKAMURA	1-18-7-402 KAMIOCHIAI SHINJIKUKU TOKYO 161 JAPAN
RYOSUKE COHEN	3-76-1-A-613 YAGHMOKITACHO MORTGICHT CITY OSAKA 570

Figure 13. Ryosuke Cohen, *Brain Cell Number 827*, June 14, 2012. Source: Collection of the author.

What is interesting about Cohen's project is that it is a unique combination of both collaboration and display via the postal system. Unlike Johnson's analog version of the add and pass which involved sending mail art pieces to individuals and asking them to add to them and send them on to someone else, mail artists are actually able to collaborate through Cohen simply by sending him their stamp. Cohen acts as a gathering point for all of these mail artists' work, presenting a small representation of their work via their stamp. The *Brain Cell* project not only act as a mechanism by which mail artists can gain new contacts, but also gives them a way to visually represent their work to other mail artists. The *Brain Cell* project is remarkable because each Cell is a microcosm of the mail art community and a mail art piece in its own right. Additionally, the technology involved in creating each *Brain Cell* collage (e.g., emailing, scanning, printing, et cetera) has given Cohen the ability to create hundreds of versions of his project by including artist stamps from people all over the world.

Congresses and Tourism

As new technology made networking between mail artists all over the world cheap and easy, those who were acquainted with Johnson and Fluxus' work saw an opportunity to discuss the myriad of new ideas that the now robust mail art network represented. In 1986 H.R. Fricker, in conjunction with Gunther Ruch, hosted the first of several mail art congresses that brought mail artists together from all over the world to discuss and debate important issues to the mail art community.¹³³ The purpose was to serve as a meeting point for all kinds of mail artists/networkers, discuss the role of the

¹³³ Fricker, 145.

mail artist/networker, and spread their ideas through public discussion and media coverage.¹³⁴ Fricker's event was such a success that he hosted another congress in 1992.¹³⁵ John Held Jr. and Chuck Welch were some of the participants at the first mail art congress held by Fricker in 1986 in Geneva, Switzerland and later attended the 1992 congress as well. Their experiences over the years are chronicled in their respective publications, which describe the purpose of the congresses as a way to hash out the new role of the mail artist/networker and discuss the future of the practice. John Held Jr. describes the congresses:

Since 1986, to be truly involved in mail art is to confront the greater world in extended discussions. Mail artists thought they were in agreement, only to find in a face-to-face confrontation that there was a wide gulf between them. It seemed that only by meeting and discussion could many of those disputes be resolved.¹³⁶

Fricker encouraged others to organize their own congress session by sending out information to his fellow mail artists/networkers.¹³⁷ The 1996 congress consisted of approximately 80 meetings with 500 participants from more than 25 countries.¹³⁸ In order to participate, a potential session organizer would need to prepare a "networker statement" and send it to Fricker by the stated deadline.¹³⁹

In the spirit of the mail art network, these congresses were open to anyone to attend, but some felt that these events were unfair because they were typically hosted in Western countries. As a result, many mail artists took it upon themselves to meet face-to-face and coined the term "tourism" to describe such events. Many mail artists

¹³⁴ Fricker, 144.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Held, *Annotated Bibliography*, xxix.

¹³⁷ Fricker, 144.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

believed that congresses and tourism deepened the relationship formed via mail art or networking and thus were a natural extension of mail art practice. Fricker describes the role of the mail artist/networker in terms of Intermedia, namely how he/she operates in a space between the established art world and everyday life [emphasis in original]:

The networker does not move in the traditional art spaces of galleries and museums. The networking *field* signifies spaces between people. Mail art and “Tourism” for example, create spaces between partners. Every networker constitutes a measuring-point for the *space system* of another. The networker does not merely construct these spaces by means of computer connections, but defines them, exploits them and establishes relationships within these space-systems.¹⁴⁰

These events not only gave mail artists the opportunity to become better acquainted with one another, but also allowed them to discuss their ideas and personal experiences, much like they would via their exchanged mail art.

The pioneering work of the early innovators such as Johnson and Fluxus paved the way for the next wave of mail artists to make their mark. However, unlike the previous generation who were working within the art world, the next generation of mail artists had to define the context for their mail art. This preoccupation shaped the trajectory of this period and despite a variety of styles, techniques, and materials that characterized the work during this period, any discussion of materials or making is completely absent in the majority of literature. Some mail artists approached mail art as an art form and some did not. Additionally, skill level and techniques varied widely as people from all different backgrounds took up the practice. As a result, new mail artists had less in common with each other than the previous generation, so they focused on their shared ideas and beliefs instead of the material qualities of their work. Johnson’s

¹⁴⁰ Fricker, 145.

idea of an open mail art network where any and everyone can make and send mail art quickly became the main tenet of the mail art community as the network blossomed.

Furthermore, expanding the network became a chief concern of the new generation, so the methods by which people became aware of mail art practice and mail artists expanded their own networks became increasingly important. New technology such as the photocopier machine and the Internet facilitated this expansion of the network, allowing for large-scale mailings and a faster and cheaper way for mail artists to come into contact with one another. Mail art congresses and tourism were another method by which mail artists could meet each other face to face specifically to discuss ideas and issues related to mail art. The term “networker” is a perfect encapsulation of the spirit of this generation who attempted to redefine the role of the mail artist outside of the art world context. However, while this generation embraced the egalitarian decentralized global mail art network that Johnson and Fluxus developed, the next generation has yet to show an interest in this shared conceptual basis. There is a decided break between this generation and the next who have chosen an entirely opposite approach, instead, focusing on a shared engagement with craft as a basis for their mail art practice.

Chapter 4: Contemporary Mail Art and Personal Networks (c. 1990-2014)

As mail art practice enters the digital age, the methods and systems by which mail artists communicate, exchange objects, and gain new contacts have changed. As the Internet, email and social media become more ubiquitous in America and Europe and postage rates continue to rise, the result has been a shift in the way mail artists work and interact with each other. This change is reflected not only in how mail artists communicate, but also in how they treat the mail art object. A return to a more handcrafted style, reminiscent of Johnson's collaged works, is a prominent feature among the mail artists examined in this chapter. This return to handcraft is perhaps a reaction against the proliferation of digital communication, as mail art via the post has become a rare and almost nostalgic activity. As a result, this new work demands a more in depth look at the materiality of the mail art object, a subject that has been largely untouched in mail art history.

The Proliferation of Networking

The emphasis on networking that defined the 1980s and 90s is still very much an important part of mail art practice today. However, networking is no longer synonymous with mail art practice as the term has entered everyday vocabulary. Additionally, the anti-establishment spirit that Johnson and Fluxus employed in their work has been encroached upon as networking practice has digitized. The very act of forming connections via the Internet has become increasingly commodified and profitable as companies like LinkedIn and Facebook have capitalized on the process via their respective websites.

The proliferation of digital networking can be framed in either a positive or negative light. One of the more positive aspects is that these websites offer ways not only of expanding the network, but also new opportunities for display and interaction. In addition to Facebook and LinkedIn, blogs and media content sharing sites, such as Pinterest and Tumblr, allow mail artists and free and easy methods to display their work in popular formats. Even though displaying mail art on the Internet has been possible for some time now, the ability to create an online gallery or blog was once the territory of the Internet savvy few. Now that the Internet has become more pervasive, more people are able to create sophisticated websites for the purposes of display and interaction. One of the negative aspects is that networking, which was once a revolutionary act that existed outside of the bounds of established institutions, has become a fairly ordinary mainstream activity. As a result, the term has been stripped of its original meaning and has become another way for companies to target their advertising, marketing and recruiting efforts.

As networking and via the Internet has become more popular and cost effective, it has become easier for anyone to compose and send a message. This has, in turn, changed the way that mail artists work, network, and communicate with one another.¹⁴¹ In the late 1990s/early 2000s when Madelyn Starbuck was interviewing mail artists about the effect that the Internet was having on their practice, there was already an issue of balance between networking and creating mail art:

...An artist's time may be spent more on networking and research activities using the Internet and less on actually making art, but the artist

¹⁴¹ Madelyn Starbuck, Clashing and Converging: Effects of the Internet on the Correspondence Art Network, Trends in Interview Data, accessed March 25, 2014, <https://www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2003/starbuckmk032/starbuckmk032.pdf>: 118. Starbuck's research covers a transition period in the late 1990s when many mail artists were starting to incorporate email and the Internet into their mail art practice.

must find her own balance between the values of traditional mailing and digital ways to make and send art.¹⁴²

As Starbuck found in her research, the advent of the Internet has meant that mail artists have faced new opportunities and challenges in continuing their practice. As more and more people around the world gain Internet access, mail artists have a larger and larger pool of potential new contacts to choose from. However, finding new contacts online has meant increased time spent culling through mail art websites, sending and receiving email, and maintaining an online presence through blogs and message boards.¹⁴³ For better or worse, much of at least the initial interactions between mail artists now occurs online either via a website or email.

Materiality and the Mail Art Object

While much attention has been paid in previous periods of mail art history to conceptual issues of mail art practice, material considerations have been less abundant.¹⁴⁴ However, the engagement with craft, specifically handcraft, in the works that will be examined in this chapter differentiates these mail artists from previous generations of mail artists.¹⁴⁵ As a result, further discussion of craft and how mail art historians have approached the issue of materiality in the mail art objects is needed.

¹⁴² Madelyn Starbuck, Clashing and Converging: Effects of the Internet on the Correspondence Art Network, Trends in Interview Data, accessed March 25, 2014, <https://www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2003/starbuckmk032/starbuckmk032.pdf>: 100.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Matt Ferranto, “(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part One: A Medium or a Movement?”, *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_1.html.

¹⁴⁵ For more information and examples of Cara Mullinary and David Solomon, see their respective websites. Cara Mullinary, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://caramullinary.com/>; David Solomon, *Because I Really Felt It: The Art of Snail Mail*, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://ireallyfelt.blogspot.com/>.

In the past, theorists such as Michael Lumb triumphed the message communicated between sender and receiver over material considerations of the mail art object.¹⁴⁶ In his dissertation, Lumb focused solely on how the relationship develops between sender and receiver, even going so far as to argue that the mail art object does not matter:

Mailart produced by the networker has only this purpose: the mailart product is the relationship, not an envelope and/or its contents. While, for the artist, the production of the work may in itself satisfy all his/her needs and there may not be a need to share the work with other, by definition, the mailartist needs to communicate: it might be argued that this should also be the aim of the artist but there is no compunction on him/her to do so.¹⁴⁷

Lumb's definition of mail art has little to nothing to do with the materiality of the mail art object. He goes on to describe mail art as more akin to a Fluxus performance, claiming mail art is not a static object but a forty-plus year old "event."¹⁴⁸ However, when Lumb does address materiality, it is only when discussing the drawbacks of networking via the Internet:

Much of the aesthetic is missed and, most obviously, it misses any three dimensional qualities and all those of weight, texture and subtleties of appearance....For the mailartist, the incidents of the ravages of the postal systems, transport, handling and the elements all contribute to the proof of the journey that has taken place and the origin of the dispatch. It is this journey, the distance relationship (Poinot's 'distance concept') which is the attraction for the mailartist.¹⁴⁹

For Lumb, his sense of materiality of the mail art object only goes so far as to discuss the object's contact with the postal service via the marks it acquires that indicate the physical journey it has taken. This idea is in part referred to as the "distance concept" which was

¹⁴⁶ Michael Lumb, "Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art As Social Sculpture, Chapter 5: An Evaluation of Mailart in the Second Half of the 1990s", accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.nonopp.com/ac/arte_correo/Tesis/5_now.htm.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

put forth by one of the earliest mail art scholars in 1970, Jean-Marc Poinso, in his book *Mail Art: A Distance Concept*. While Poinso's theories are considerably broad, he agrees with Lumb that the importance of mail art lies not only in its engagement with the postal system, but also in the material used in its realization.¹⁵⁰ "Postal communication is a form of long-distance communication, and thereby the aesthetic object is modified both in its form and in its presentation."¹⁵¹ However, like Lumb, Poinso's discussion of materiality with respect to the mail art object is quite vague, only going so far as to claim that: "The nature of messages transiting through the postal system is not irrelevant to the form of the objects transmitted."¹⁵²

A few decades later, Matt Ferranto's four-part essay *(Mis)Reading Mail Art*, which was published only three years after Lumb's dissertation, readdressed the issue and attempted to explain why this aspect has been overlooked:

In attempting to establish the medium as a popular manifestation of an historic artistic avant-garde, mail artists have ignored an essential element of their art. Mail art involved a dialectic between the artifact and the communicative process. It encompasses the formal and tactile as much as the activity of giving and receiving. Indeed, the object itself remains crucial to realizing the whole activity.¹⁵³

However, Ferranto's discussion of materiality with respect to the mail art object is very similar to both Lumb's and Poinso's, only addressing how the object relates to the postal system:

In traveling from point to point, moreover, the mailed object is branded to facilitate its conveyance. Meanwhile, cancellation marks and postal codes fix the object in time. Mail art employs these aspects of the international

¹⁵⁰ Poinso, 17

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 14.

¹⁵³ Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part One: A Medium or a Movement?", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_1.html.

postal service as both formal and communicative devices. Passage through the postal system gives these items their artistic significance.¹⁵⁴

Money and Mail Art

Despite Poinot, Lumb, and Ferranto's differing views on mail art, their discussions of materiality with respect to the mail art object all lack one very significant aspect; namely visual analysis. One possibility for this is that any kind visual analysis runs the risk of including mail art within the realm of static art objects as opposed to active processes.¹⁵⁵ Even though the mail art network began within the context of the art world, as it has expanded beyond it more amateur mail artists have taken up the practice. In an effort to include all perspectives, both art and non-art, previous mail art historians have focused on the macro picture of the entire mail art network discussing individual works as only one small part of the larger picture that is constantly changing.¹⁵⁶ Lumb likened examining individual mail art works to examining a single pixel, which only acquires meaning and therefor value when examined together as a whole image (or network).¹⁵⁷

There is also a historical impetus behind this perspective. As Owen Smith notes, Fluxus ideology took Marxism a step further, insisting that artists not only control the

¹⁵⁴ Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part One: A Medium or a Movement?", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_1.html.

¹⁵⁵ Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part One: A Medium or a Movement?", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_1.html; Chuck Welch, "Introduction: The Ethereal Open Aesthetic", in *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995), xx. Many well-known mail artists, historians and theorists do not consider mail art to be an art form. For this reason, mail art is often described as a "process" as opposed to an object.

¹⁵⁶ Michael Lumb, "Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art As Social Sculpture, Chapter 5: An Evaluation of Mailart in the Second Half of the 1990s", accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.nonopp.com/ac/arte_correo/Tesis/5_now.htm.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

means of production, but also the distribution systems.¹⁵⁸ With Maciunas' leadership, Fluxus practices aimed at "undermining the status of art as commodity" had material implications by making objects in quantity from cheap, easily obtainable material and selling them at below market rates.¹⁵⁹ In doing so, Smith observed that "the works and the distribution forms become intertwined in Fluxus as they both are subsumed into a new exchange value for the works."¹⁶⁰ This approach was intended to deflate the significance of the artist by demonstrating that any and everyone can be an artist.¹⁶¹ Maciunas' goals with respect to Fluxus have largely been discussed as having a more social rather than aesthetic aim, which is why Fluxus is often described not as an art movement or style, but as a "network of ideas around which a varied group of artists have collaborated."¹⁶²

Fluxus artists and Ray Johnson were among the first mail artists to reject the "object-centered, exclusive, and commercially driven nature of art," which has remained a hot topic within the mail art community ever since.¹⁶³ Many mail artists and mail art historians, including Lumb, Poinot, and Ferranto, have written about the importance of mail art practice remaining a form of gift exchange.¹⁶⁴ In the mid 1980s, mail artist Lon Spiegelman famously declared that "money and mail art don't mix," which has since

¹⁵⁸ Smith, "Fluxus Praxis", in Chandler and Neumark, 131.

¹⁵⁹ Armstrong, 18.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, "Fluxus Praxis", in Chandler and Neumark, 132.

¹⁶¹ Armstrong, 17.

¹⁶² Armstrong, 17; Smith, in Chandler and Neumark, 119.

¹⁶³ Smith, in Chandler and Neumark, 133.

¹⁶⁴ Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part One: A Medium or a Movement?", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_1.html; Poinot, 17; Michael Lumb, "Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art As Social Sculpture, Chapter 5: An Evaluation of Mailart in the Second Half of the 1990s", accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.nonopp.com/ac/arte_correo/Tesis/5_now.htm.

become a foundational precept for mail art practice.¹⁶⁵ In Chuck Welch's book *Networking Currents*, an entire chapter is devoted to this topic claiming that mail art practice is one of the only artistic practices that values "social and spiritual bonding through gift exchange."¹⁶⁶ Welch's reference to spirituality implies a moral value to this type of practice, which "can supersede all other interest, even aesthetic considerations."¹⁶⁷

Craft and Mail Art Practice

Poinsot, Lumb, and Ferranto's discussions of materiality with respect to the mail art object illustrate a trend in mail art history, the primary goal of which is focused on deriving the object's meaning from its physical journey through the postal system. While this aspect is undoubtedly an important one, further investigation of the mail art object is necessary when examining the work of mail artists within my personal network. Glenn Adamson's book *Think Through Craft* provides a basis for a comparison between mail art practice and various issues surrounding craft.¹⁶⁸ Adamson presents various ways in which the term "craft" has been conceived of, both in theory and practice, with respect to modern art. There are a number of compelling parallels between craft and mail art practice in Adamson's arguments. Most persuasive is how he positions craft as a cultural

¹⁶⁵ Madelyn Starbuck, "Clashing and Converging: Effects of the Internet on the Correspondence Art Network", University of Texas at Austin, accessed March 25, 2014, <https://www.lib.utexas.edu/etd/d/2003/starbuckmk032/starbuckmk032.pdf>: 111.

¹⁶⁶ Chuck Welch. *Networking Currents*. 24.

¹⁶⁷ Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part One: A Medium or a Movement?", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_1.html.

¹⁶⁸ Adamson, I. Adamson distinguishes craft in theoretical terms from "the crafts" i.e. specific processes carried out in specific materials.

practice that draws attention to certain fundamental problematic issues in the modern conception of art, which can also be applied to mail art.¹⁶⁹

Adamson starts his first chapter with the claim: “the main suppositions upon which modern art rests: that it is an autonomous field of practice.”¹⁷⁰ This claim has a number of implications for craft. Most relevant to a discussion of craft in mail art is that modern art must somehow transcend its materiality in order to achieve this goal, and, therefore, craft must be invisible.¹⁷¹ This idea that modern art must transcend its materiality is precisely Lumb’s argument and is indicative of an aforementioned trend in mail art history. However, modern art’s claim to autonomy is decidedly false because an artwork “cannot exist outside the structures that enable its own creation.”¹⁷² Historically, this has made art a powerful commercial commodity, presumably made more valuable if an object is perceived to be well crafted or by an artist who is known for his or her skill and/or technique. This is an important aspect of mail art practice for both those who argue for and against mail art being considered an art form. By concentrating on the materiality of mail art objects through a discussion of craft, the same argument can be made that like craft, mail art practice, which has been straddling art and life since Johnson sent out his first motico in the 1950s, shows that art is not so removed from the everyday as we might expect. Conversely, it can be argued that like craft, mail art practice is not so far removed from art as we might expect.

One of the most problematic issues when making an analogy between craft and mail art practice is the underlying implication that such a comparison is based on

¹⁶⁹ Adamson, 2.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷² Ibid., 9.

qualitative judgments of the mail art object. Historically, mail art practice has been a melting pot of skills, backgrounds, and techniques as practiced by all manner of artists and non-artists alike. There is no such thing as a mail art amateur or expert as such a distinction would imply a value judgment and would upset the egalitarian ethos upon which the network is based. However, craft by Adamson's definition does not imply a qualitative judgment of how well something is made but rather represents a "way of doing things, not a classification of objects, institutions, or people."¹⁷³ His discussion of amateurs with respect to craft brings up some important points as to how the variety of skills, backgrounds, and techniques employed by mail artists has helped propel the whole genre forward as both an art and non-art practice.

First and foremost, Adamson notes that amateur pursuits "constitute their own world of reference," which may or may not be difficult for outsiders to understand.¹⁷⁴ This is especially true for the contemporary mail artists from my personal network that will be examined in this chapter as the majority of their engagement with their respective audiences or networks exists on the Internet or via the postal system (i.e., outside of the art world.) However, the flip side of Adamson's remark is that "the amateur mindset implies a complete indifference to the self-critical values of the avant garde."¹⁷⁵ Ray Johnson and Fluxus artists are two of the most well known avant-garde figures within the context of mail art history, but do not seem like primary influences on the mail artists surveyed in this chapter based on an examination of their respective work and

¹⁷³ Adamson, 39.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

websites.¹⁷⁶ But given the diversity of the mail art network, it should come as no surprise that not all mail artists share an affinity with the values of the avant-garde, Johnson, Fluxus, or any other mail artists. Adamson maintains that this mix of artist and non-artist or amateur and expert that exists within the mail art network may actually be a good thing:

In practice, though, the line between the two [amateur and expert] is often a blurred one. The boundary must constantly be policed, both through the power of institutions and the maintenance of skill or conceptual difficulty among individual professionals. Some have argued that the upward pressure of amateurs is a primary means of propelling creative fields forward.¹⁷⁷

The positive pressure that amateurism applies in craft was an important part in Fluxus ideology as it embodied a way to be creative that was a “communal, participatory, and an open-ended alternative to the traditional forms and functions of art making.”¹⁷⁸

Dick Higgins remarked on this subject in a letter to George Maciunas in the 1970s:

I do not believe in amateurishness: that isn't what it is all about. But in amateurism, is simplicity. An art (by which I also mean non-art, if you prefer, so long as it is aesthetic in some way) on which one cannot hang a cycle of professional crafts and dependence. An art which by its very nature denies its perpetrators their daily bread, which must therefore come from somewhere else. Such an art must be given, in the sense that experience is shared: it cannot be placed in the market place and in this way it differs profoundly from the Fluxus-derived “movements” of earth-works or media-hype forms of concept art. Much of that work I enjoy – I even love...I must reject, not because it isn't officially Fluxus, but because it isn't free. It's just so many hat racks for careers to be hung onto. When the name of the artists determines the market value of a work and not its meaning in our lives – beware!¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ For more information and examples of Cara Mullinary and David Solomon's work, see their respective websites. Cara Mullinary, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://caramullinary.com/>; David Solomon, *Because I Really Felt It: The Art of Snail Mail*, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://ireallyfelt.blogspot.com/>.

¹⁷⁷ Adamson, 141.

¹⁷⁸ Smith, in Chandler and Neumark, 123.

¹⁷⁹ Dick Higgins to George Maciunas, November 19, 1974, in Smith, 123.

Critically, Higgins points out that as long as the work is aesthetic, it does not matter if one considers it a work of art or non-art, just as long as it is not made to be sold as a professional piece of art or craft. It is in the spirit of this quote that contemporary mail artists in my personal network have taken up amateurism as a form of simplistic aesthetic engagement that exists outside of the art world. The simplicity of handcraft that unites the various works that will be examined in this chapter embrace the freedom of Fluxus ideology, but in a different way than their mail art predecessors.

A New Relationship with the Postal System

The newest generation of mail artists has the unique distinction among generations of previous mail artists of having grown up with email and the Internet as a primary means of communication. As a result, their relationship with the postal system is very different than their predecessors. Additionally, the rising cost of postage has meant that mail art objects are inherently more expensive to send.¹⁸⁰ The cost and inefficiency of sending mail art through the postal system may actually have enticed some mail artists who are nostalgic for handmade tangible objects and see the postal system as an outdated structure that can be imbued with new meaning. As a result, mail art (sent through the postal system) is in most cases a secondary means of communication after initial contact has already been made either through email or via a website. Thus, the secondary communication, the mail art object, must convey a different meaning and value than the

¹⁸⁰ USPS, "Rates for Domestic Letters Since 1863", Postage Rates and Historical Statistics, accessed April 20, 2014, <http://about.usps.com/who-we-are/postal-history/domestic-letter-rates-since-1863.htm>. Postage rates for domestic letters have risen by \$.15 from 2001 to 2014.

primary means of communication via the Internet. The consequence of this setup is a hierarchy with the Internet acting as the primary less valued form of communication while the postal system is the secondary more valued form of communication.

Perhaps one reason why the use of the Internet and the postal system have changed recently has to do with the speed at which technology has caught up with mail art practice. The previous generation marveled at the ability to expand the network all over the world as the Internet was in its infancy. Now that the newness of the Internet has worn off and rapid communication has become more common, the postal system's glacial speed for delivering the same communication is more evident. Additionally, like the postal service, the Internet was once a playground for artists looking for a space free from institutional forces. Now that the Internet has become a significant cultural and economic phenomenon, it has become more difficult for artists to maintain their independence from institutions without worrying about falling into obscurity or lack of financial sustainability.¹⁸¹ Now that the postal service no longer serves as a primary means of communication for many individuals, mail art via the postal system has perhaps become more attractive.

Contemporary Mail Art from My Personal Network

As most contemporary mail art is not yet historicized, I will be using examples from my own network of mail artists and personal contacts to discuss current mail art practice. Like the mail art network itself, my personal network expands and contracts on

¹⁸¹ Rachel Greene, *Web Work: A History of Internet Art*, accessed January 30, 2014, http://www.sfu.ca/~jstockho/courses/iat100/media/RachelGreen_WebWork.pdf.

a regular basis, but I estimate that it consists of roughly twenty to thirty people at any one time. Some are active participants with whom I regularly correspond, and some are passive participants who receive my work and only occasionally or never respond. Although it is difficult to generalize about the varied nature of my correspondents, the mail artists discussed in this chapter – Cara Mullinary and David Solomon – both reside in the United States and are in their twenties. Some of the works featured in this chapter have been collected from the mail artists themselves, and some are examples collected from the mail artists’ respective blogs or websites.¹⁸² I came into contact with my network of mail artists who will be examined in this chapter through our mutual participation in a documentary entitled: *Making Mail* that was funded through a crowd sourcing campaign on the website Kickstarter.¹⁸³ Director Mike Polk explains the idea behind creating the film:

Making Mail is a documentary exploring the beauty and community surrounding mail-art...the film looks to discover why slowing down through the postal service in this fast paced world really means a great deal.¹⁸⁴

Mullinary and Solomon constitute two of the twelve mail artists featured in the film from across the United States.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² For more information and examples of Cara Mullinary and David Solomon’s work, see their respective websites. Cara Mullinary, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://caramullinary.com/>; David Solomon, *Because I Really Felt It: The Art of Snail Mail*, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://ireallyfelt.blogspot.com/>.

¹⁸³ For more information about *Making Mail*, see the film’s website on Kickstarter. Michael Polk, *Making Mail: A Documentary*, *Kickstarter*, accessed March 19, 2014, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/8161373/making-mail-a-documentary>.

¹⁸⁴ Mike Polk, quoted in Ashley Fears, “Making Mail: The Movie”, *The Uniqueness of Being*, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://uniquenessofbeing.blogspot.com/2013/02/making-mail-movie.html>.

¹⁸⁵ Amber Esner, Poster for the Documentary *Making Mail*. Digital. 2013, accessed March 19, 2014, <http://amberesner.com/making-mail/>. At the time that this thesis was written, the film had not yet been released.

Although every mail artist has his or her own personal style, each mail art object exchanged is unique and created specifically for the recipient(s). Cara Mullinary is one such example of a mail artist in my personal network who creates mail art entirely by hand. Her technique consists of two major elements: cutouts of people from magazines and hand drawn repeating patterns, typically in white and black ink. In addition to these main elements, she also utilizes a plethora of other materials such as colored paper, ephemera, glitter, sequins, and doilies to create her designs and give them the illusion of depth. Typically, the recipient's name(s) and address provide the only text in the overall piece, although occasionally Mullinary employs quotes, sayings, or words of encouragement or discouragement.¹⁸⁶

Figure 14 is a typical example of Mullinary's style both in terms of the materials used and its playful elements. The front and back of an envelope are decorated using her signature magazine cutouts and hand drawn repeating motifs in a vaguely tribal pattern that clash with the figures portrayed. Her cutouts of a woman holding a crab and a man drinking from a carafe humorously reference the male and female recipients while the white patterns on the respective backgrounds mimic the illusion of water raining down on the woman and squirting into the man's mouth. By taking these relatively ordinary figures out of their original context, Mullinary has created a generic individual(s) that can be associated with her recipient(s), much in the same way that Johnson used his various cartoon head motifs to stand in as generic portraits for friends, celebrities, artists, and strangers. Johnson's distinctive hand drawn motifs that are indicative of his style and

¹⁸⁶ Cara Mullinary, "Mail Art 2009-2012", accessed March 25, 2014, <http://caramullinary.com/mailart/>.

function much in the same way that Mullinary's altered magazine figures function in her mail art: as a flexible starting point from which to create multiplicity of meaning.



Figure 14. Cara Mullinary, *Untitled*, July, 2013. *Source*: Private collection.

In another example (Figure 15), Mullinary's hand drawn patterns do more than simply form a background, they extend on top of her figures' faces. The image shows four separate pieces, three of which feature large groups of individuals pictured in a

traditional family portrait style facing forward. On the exterior image with the address and stamp, Mullinary has used rectangular Lego-like bars over each person's eyes to remove their identity, while in the other two images she has replaced her hand drawn motifs with glitter and sequins respectively to the same effect. These additions recall the work of John Baldessari and function much in the same way as a method for humorously effacing individuality and directing the viewer's attention to look elsewhere in order to read past the clichéd image.¹⁸⁷ Despite the fact that Mullinary has essentially removed the identity of the specific individuals pictured, it is obvious from the information visible in these are three distinct "family portraits" of sorts. The similar clothing and grouping of the figures suggest that these individuals relate to each other in such a way as to imply the shared bond of a family, such as in the first image of a family with matching clothes and similar hairstyles, the second image of a group of performers, and the third a group of scouts. By removing the identity and original context of the specific individuals and grouping together in a single piece, the familial bonds that these three groups have in common is emphasized.

¹⁸⁷ Oliver Godsell, "John Baldessari: Connecting the Dots", *Artwrite 49: The Dot*, accessed June 20, 2014, <http://artwrite49.wordpress.com/john-baldessari-connecting-dots/>.



Figure 15. Cara Mullinary, *Untitled*, January, 2014. *Source*: Private collection.

There is also a humorous side to these images that occurs from removing the original context of the images and replacing it with bright colorful backgrounds, patterns, and sparkly embellishments. This playful aspect is a common theme in Mullinary's work, as evident by Figures 14 and 15, and also recalls the wry witty humor of Johnson's work. While Johnson took the art world as his subject, Mullinary takes the personal connections she shares with her recipients via mail art as her subject. The various elements that she adds by hand effectively personalize her generic figures to the individual(s) who are to receive her work.

David Solomon is another mail artist in my personal network that utilizes a handmade aesthetic in his work. Like Mullinary, Solomon's style relies heavily on magazine cutouts taken out of context. Figure 16 is indicative of Solomon's mail art style with a single figure cut out from a book or magazine. Unlike Mullinary who utilizes colorful paper and loud patterns, Solomon's designs and color palette are relatively subdued. Different kinds of paper in a mixture of textures and patterns provide a striking background to the black and white figure while white bubbles display the sender and receiver's addresses in a typewritten font. Unlike Mullinary, Solomon writes and addresses his mail art both by hand and with the use of a typewriter.¹⁸⁸ However, there is still a handmade quality to these labels as the bubbles are not perfect ovals and the receiver's address does not conform to a straight line. A rectangular piece of paper ephemera that reads "feed this direction" frames the receiver's address and covers the figure's eyes. The effect of covering the figure's eyes is the same as it is in Mullinary's work of essentially removing the identity of the figure by taking it out of its original context and blocking out his identity. However, unlike Mullinary's work, Solomon's composition has a less humorous tone. The most salient element of the composition, namely the instruction to "feed this direction," can be interpreted metaphorically as an instruction to feed the information into the depicted figure. The eyes are obscured by the instruction and, as in Mullinary's work, can be associated with the identity of the sender. The text placed horizontally in the background seems to be from a work of fiction, which perhaps is what should be "fed" to the figure.

¹⁸⁸ David Solomon, *Because I Really Felt: The Art of Snail Mail*, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://ireallyfelt.blogspot.com/>.

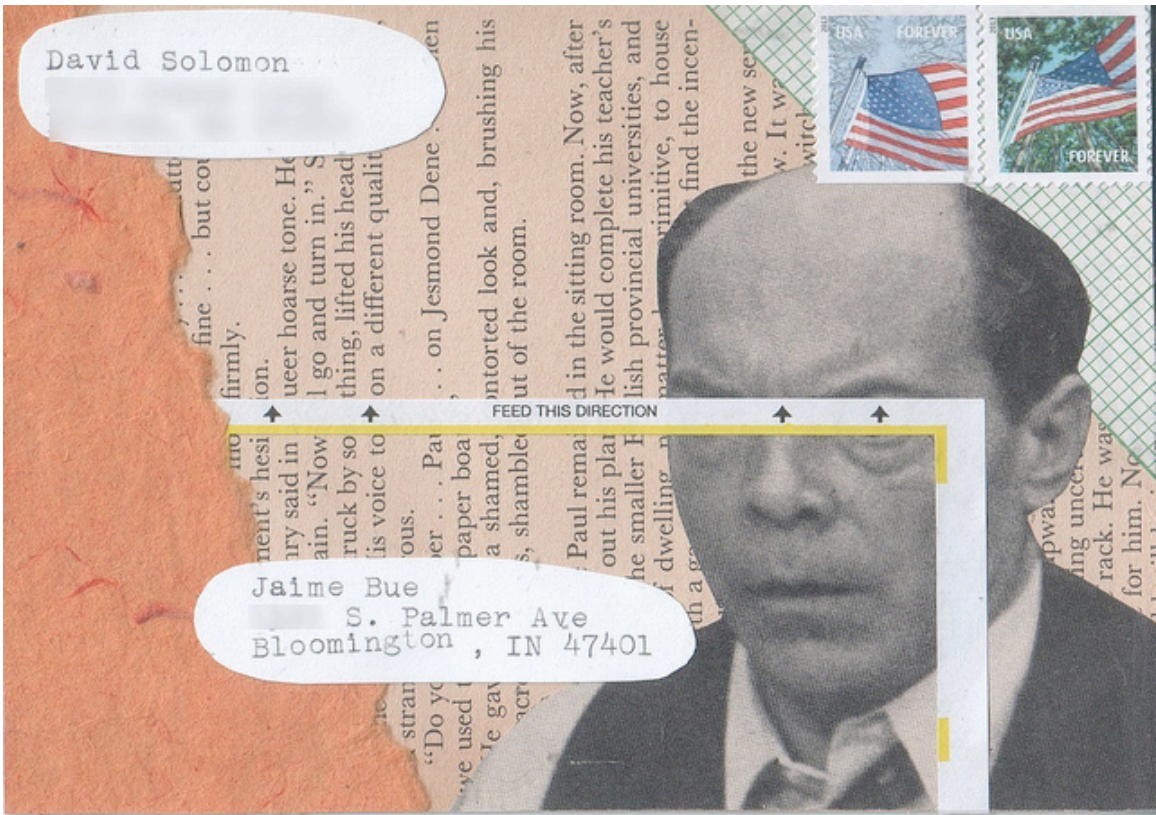


Figure 16. David Solomon, *Feed This Direction*, 2013. Source: Private collection.

In addition to the aesthetics of his envelopes, Solomon also experiments with the contents of the envelope. Figure 17 is an example of both Solomon's handmade style and conceptual investigations. On the exterior, a black and white magazine cutout of a man pointing serves as an arrow directing the viewer to the recipient's name and address. Red and blue colored masking tape (which is commonly referred to as "Washi tape") around the edges not only hold the letter together, but also mimic the look of an airmail envelope. This particular example also utilizes a typewriter on both the outside and the

inside, but on the outside, the lines that make up both the sender and receiver's address are typed on the diagonal to repeat the diagonal lines of the Washi tape on the sides.

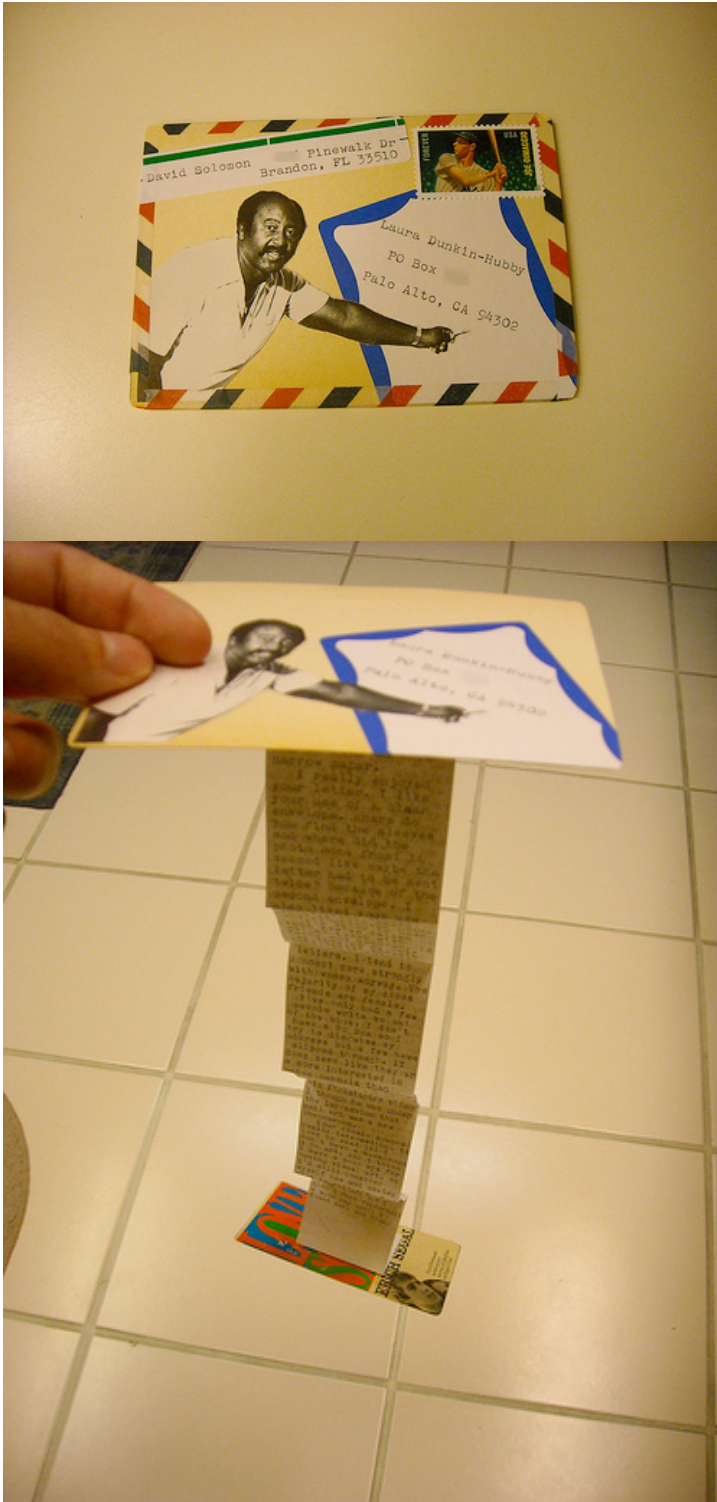


Figure 17. David Solomon, *Accordion letter*, 2013. Source: Private collection.

However, what is remarkable about this piece is not merely its exterior, but its interior. Upon removing the tape, a typewritten letter folds out like an accordion with either end attached to a postcard. Solomon's piece has a sculptural quality to it that draws attention to the act of reading the letter. The dynamic quality of this piece is reminiscent of *Postman's Choice* and *Mailbox Event* by Vautier and Brecht respectively, whose works highlight an action within the process of mailing or receiving a letter. When closed, the object looks like a fairly ordinary letter, but when open it takes on a new form that demands interaction on the part of the receiver. While these elements are not strictly speaking Fluxus inspired, the performative quality of this mail art object has a degree of Intermedia about it falling in between various artistic and life media.

Confetti Letter (Figure 18) is another piece by Solomon that incorporates ideas of chance and randomness to achieve its success. On his blog, Solomon explains the idea behind the letter:

The confetti letter is written on several small sheets of paper. Each contains an independent thought or paragraph. Think of it as a letter split up and then shuffled. With the confetti letter, there is no beginning or end, no page numbers, no defined order. The envelope is opened. The pages fall out, scattering. The recipient picks them up to read, one at a time. The idea is to create a unique experience for the reader. In theory, the letter will never be read the same twice.¹⁸⁹

Like *Postman's Choice*, *Confetti Letter* relies heavily on the postal system to shake up the contents of the packaged letter so that it will "shuffle" the page order. Additionally, like most Fluxus mail art, *Confetti Letter* has the potential to be repeated many times with each subsequent recipient reading the letter, possibly in a different order. Although

¹⁸⁹ David Solomon, *Because I Really Felt It: The Art of Snail Mail*, accessed March 6, 2014, <http://ireallyfelt.blogspot.com/2013/03/confetti-letter.html?view=magazine>.

Solomon does not include any instructions to the initial recipient to send on the letter to someone else, the idea of a letter's sequence offering a different experience every time it is read implies either more than one reading or that it should be read by more than one individual. In this sense Solomon's letter is somewhat of a combination of Johnson's add and pass mail art, such as Figure 2, which relies on the recipient for completion of the work, and a Fluxus DIY kit, such as Figure 6. All three pieces put a certain degree of control in other's hands, such as the postal service and the recipient, in order to complete the work. While Solomon's piece isn't necessarily a recipe for someone else to follow, the idea is fairly simple and the recipient or anyone could potentially create his or her own *Confetti Letter* using Solomon's letter as a template. However, despite the formulaic nature of the piece, Solomon's letter is still handmade and crafted specifically for the recipient. The idea behind the letter is still a personal in nature, however, the recipient must determine the narrative that the letter creates by selecting each individual page.



Figure 18. David Solomon, *Confetti Letter*, 2013. *Source*: Private collection.

Identity and Mail Art

In addition to having a penchant for similar materials, both Solomon and Mullinary manipulate the theme of identity in their work. Identity has long been an important aspect in mail art practice going back to Ray Johnson and his semi-fictional clubs. Fluxus founder George Maciunas recognized the power that an individual artist's identity had with respect to the value of his or her work, which is one of the reasons why when establishing Fluxus, Maciunas stipulated that all works were to be authored by the

group name “Fluxus” as opposed to each individual contributor.¹⁹⁰ Identity has always been an area of experimentation that mail artists have worked with expressly because they have historically used the postal system to transport their creations. Mail art has always been a genre in which fictional identities can exist alongside real ones, allowing the mail artist to choose how they present themselves. For example, Chuck Welch, who also goes by the alias “CrackerJack Kid,” chose to use his real name when he published *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology* yet often uses his pseudonym “CrackerJack Kid” when sending mail art.¹⁹¹

With the advent of the Internet, mail artists have even more control of how they present themselves, their work, and their respective agenda and/or ideology through their online presence. This is perhaps why many mail artists in my personal network choose to display their work on their personal blog or website as opposed to a mail art exhibition as they have full control over their online presentation and limited control over their contribution to a mail art exhibition. Additionally, both Mullinary and Solomon often display their work almost in the form of a Fluxus kit with multiple elements such as the front, back and interior of the piece, displayed together as a single unit. Many other mail artists in my personal network have taken a similar approach sometimes including multiple images of a single piece on their blog or website. This ability to control how their mail art is displayed recalls a Fluxus initiative to present a collaborative mail art project, such as the *Flux Post Kit 7* (Figure 6), as a single kit. Although Fluxus kits were sold in a mail order catalog (Figure 7), the decision of how to photograph a kit,

¹⁹⁰ Jon Hendricks, foreword to *Fluxus Codex*, (Detroit, MI: The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection, 1988) 27.

¹⁹¹ Chuck Welch, “Contributors’ Addresses”, in *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995) 253.

categorize, and then present in a specific format is a form of control that both the Solomon, Mullinary and many other mail artists in my personal network utilize in their respective blogs and/or personal websites.

Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century Mail Art Exhibition

The ability to share and display work online has had a positive effect on the popularity of mail art exhibitions as they still continue to thrive both on the Internet and in real life. However, as the genre has evolved, so too has the curatorial format of the mail art exhibition.

In 2008, 24 years after the controversial *Mail Art Now and Then* exhibition at Franklin Furnace, another mail art exhibition took place in New York at the Center of the Book entitled *Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century*, curated by Champe Smith (Figure 19).¹⁹² Like *Mail Art Now and Then*, the exhibition was a both a contemporary mail art exhibition and an historical survey of mail art practice that was coupled with collateral panel discussions.¹⁹³ The key difference between the 2008 and 1984 exhibition was that *Mapping Correspondence* was by invitation only and did abide by the typical mail art exhibition format (i.e., all work shown, no entry fee, credit given to participating artists.)¹⁹⁴ In the exhibition catalog, Champe Smith discussed who was chosen to participate:

¹⁹² John Held Jr., *Where the Secret Is Hidden*, (Sacramento, CA: Bananafish Publications, 2011): 86.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

In Mapping Correspondence, fifty artists were chosen to participate. Each artist could invite up to three other artists or individuals whose professions lie outside the arts.¹⁹⁵

Smith's approach of inviting specific artists was much more in keeping with a traditional art exhibition, yet her statement implies that the focus of the exhibition was at least in part to show pieces from artists and individuals who worked outside of the art world context. Smith goes on to explain that many of the invited artists did not consider themselves mail artists one of the main purposes of the exhibition was to "see what kind of responses we would get from a broad range of artistic disciplines."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Champe Smith, "Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century", *The Center for Book Arts*, accessed March 25, 2014, <http://www.centerforbookarts.org/exhibits/archive/fullview.asp?showID=167&catalogpage=16>. The exhibition catalog is available online through the Center for Book Arts in separates pages.

¹⁹⁶ Champe Smith, "Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century", *The Center for Book Arts*, accessed March 25, 2014, <http://www.centerforbookarts.org/exhibits/archive/fullview.asp?showID=167&catalogpage=16>.

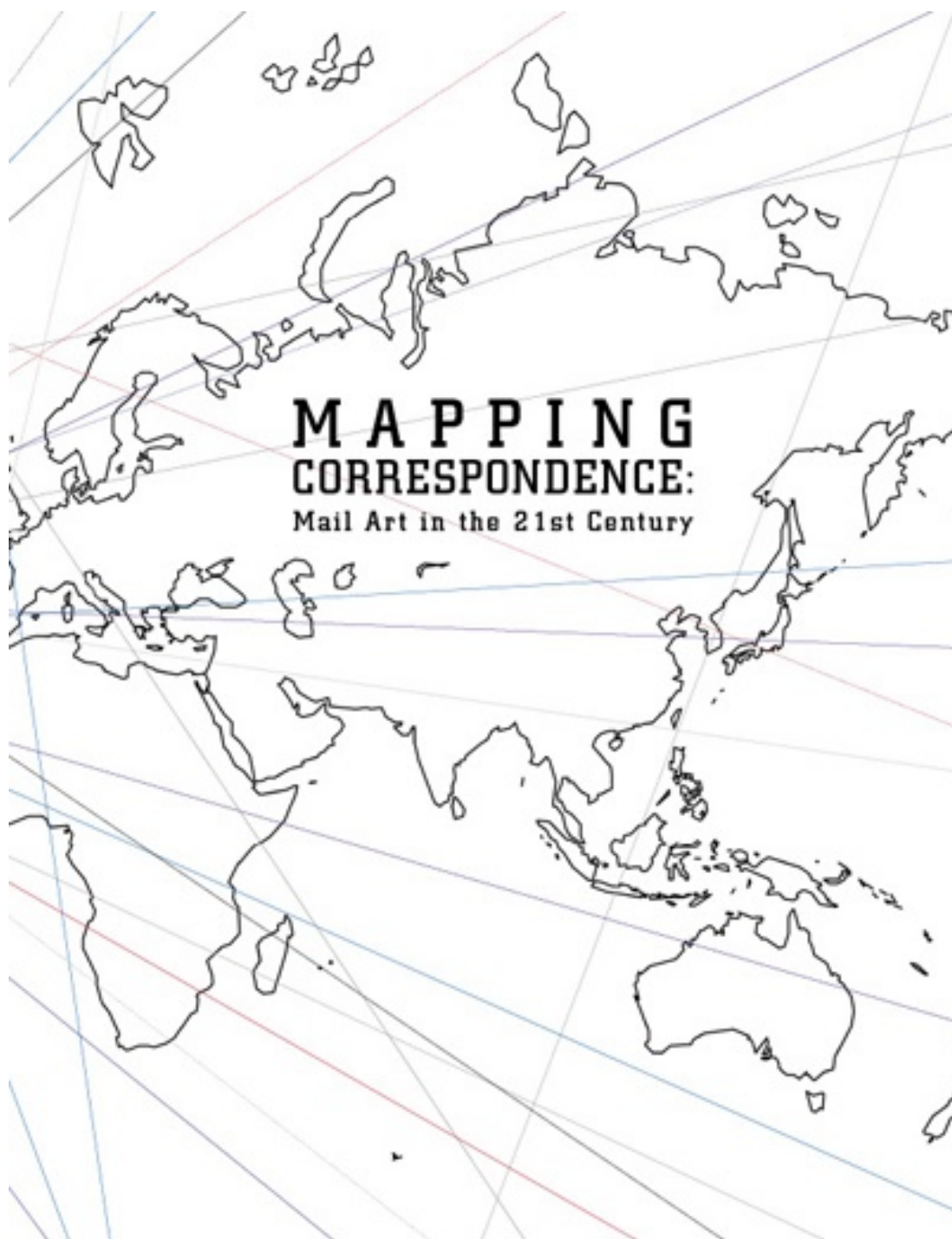


Figure 19. Champe Smith, *Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century* exhibition catalog, April 11 – June 28, 2008, Source: The Center for Book Arts.

Even more surprising is that despite not following the standard mail art exhibition format, the mail art community raised relatively little objection to the exhibit. However, as many veteran mail artists discovered, one of the reasons why the exhibit did not warrant the same response as the 1984 exhibit was because many people were not aware of its existence.¹⁹⁷ Another possible reason is that the exhibit did not send out an open “call” for mail art to the network like a typical mail art exhibition. Smith’s decision to both curate and solicit work from specific individuals is a *mélange* of both old and new curatorial practices. Although Smith selected many examples of mail art from various archives and collections, (ironically, Smith also included work from the Franklin Furnace exhibit in 1984) contemporary artists who were invited to participate were given a free hand.¹⁹⁸ Like the Franklin Furnace exhibit, the curated pieces were selected to provide a context for the larger correspondence art continuum.¹⁹⁹ By allowing the artist to create whatever he or she chose, but only “calling” on specific artists and not the whole mail art network to participate is evidence of Smith’s unique approach to the mail art exhibition format.

However, collaboration was really at the heart of the format that Smith chose. She explains in the exhibition’s catalog that the original artists could decide the level of engagement that he or she chose within the group, whether the group would work collaboratively or independently.²⁰⁰ In the catalog, Smith detailed exactly how each group went about collaborating with each other, some using the postal system and some

¹⁹⁷ Held, *Secret*, 92.

¹⁹⁸ Champe Smith, “Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century”, *The Center for Book Arts*, accessed March 25, 2014, <http://www.centerforbookarts.org/exhibits/archive/fullview.asp?showID=167&catalogpage=16>.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

not.²⁰¹ As the title of the exhibit implies, details of the collaborations were key to the exhibition and thus were very well documented. Figure 20 mapped how each grouping worked with one another, showing who was invited by the original invited artists, who collaborated within or outside of their group, and who did not collaborate at all.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Champe Smith, "Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century", *The Center for Book Arts*, accessed March 25, 2014,

<http://www.centerforbookarts.org/exhibits/archive/fullview.asp?showID=167&catalogpage=17>

²⁰² Champe Smith, "Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century", *The Center for Book Arts*, accessed March 25, 2014,

<http://www.centerforbookarts.org/exhibits/archive/fullview.asp?showID=167&catalogpage=21>

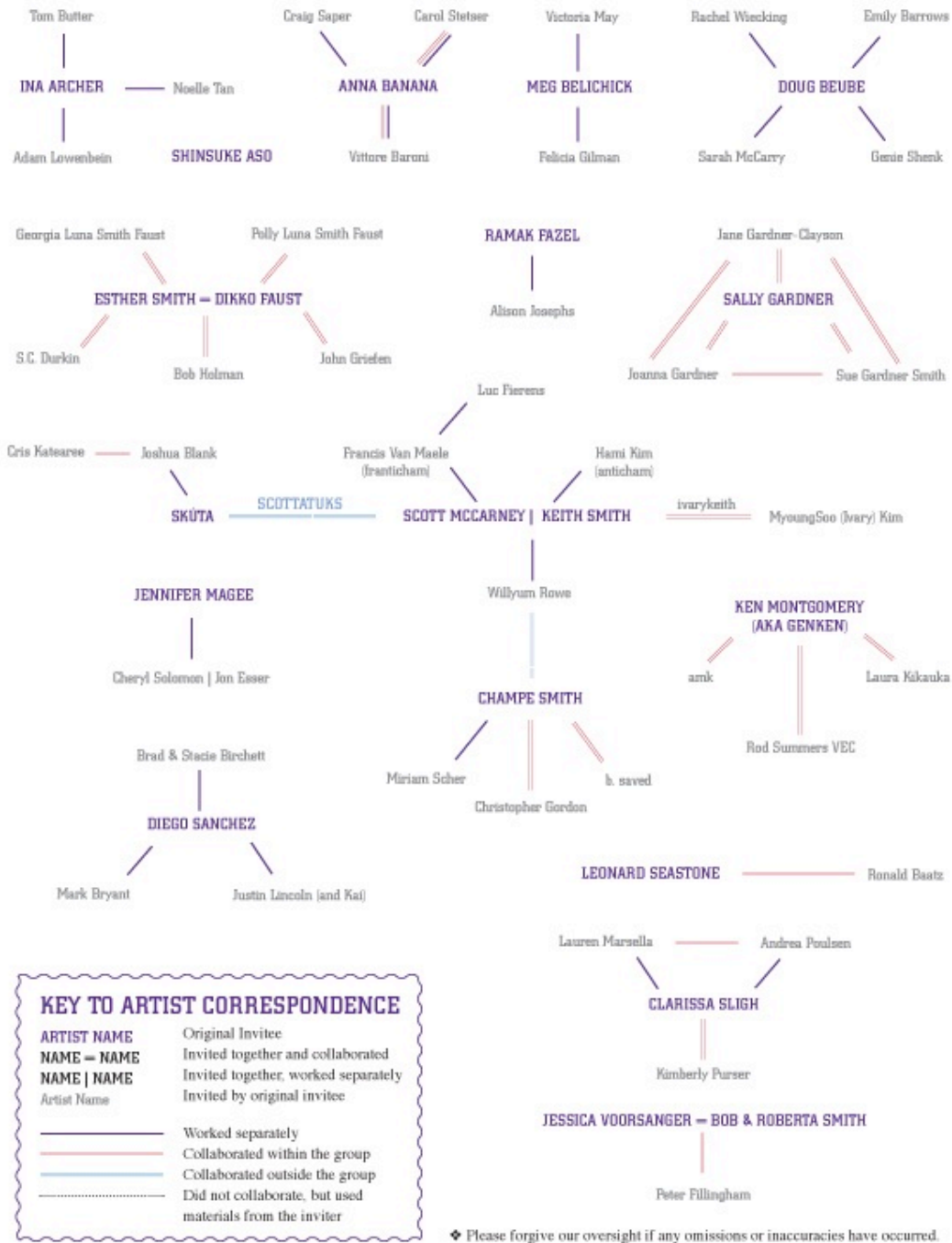


Figure 20. Champe Smith, *Mapping Correspondence: Mail Art in the 21st Century exhibition catalog*, April 11 – June 28, 2008, Source: The Center for Book Arts.

Smith's emphasis on collaboration also seems to have had an effect on the work produced. For those who worked collaboratively, either circulating a work with each individual adding to it, or working on a piece at the same time, the evidence of their collaboration showcased an interest in craft, specifically handcraft in the finished works. The collaborative aspect of the exhibition intentionally mimicked the intimacy of a nominal mail art exchange via the postal service, resulting in finished works that reflect the relationship between mail artists, as opposed to the one-way transmissions that are more common in traditional mail art exhibitions. The works in the exhibition catalog foreground the intimacy of the invited mail artists' collaborative efforts, which are reflected in their respective engagements with craft.

Despite Smith's nontraditional curatorial decision, *Mapping Correspondence* exhibited many traditional mail art principles in both its creation and display. Although the entire mail art network was not invited to participate, Smith's invitational approach to inviting artists, specifically targeting those who work outside of the network, effectively expanded the network by asking them to create work for a mail art exhibition. Additionally, by mapping the relationships formed between artists in Figure 20, Smith highlighted one of the most important principles of mail art practice.

Mapping Correspondence reflects broad changes in mail art practice from the exhibition format to methods for expanding the network and encouraging collaboration. In one of his most recent publications, John Held mused on how this exhibition may hold clues about the future of this genre [emphasis in original]:

Perhaps this IS the state of Mail Art in the 21st Century: a wider approach taken to the creative use of the postal medium. Mail Art has become so widespread, practiced by such a diverse pool of participants, that to insist

on a singular approach to its exhibition (open call, no fee, no jury, documentation to all) seems moribund.²⁰³

Smith's bold decision to buck tradition may become the new format for mail art exhibitions or it may be simply another experiment in the ever-changing practice of mail art exhibitions.

Reflecting on the Past, Moving Towards the Future

The mail art object has never been more important for its physical qualities and its ability to connect people through its exchange. In previous years, mail artists and historians have focused their efforts on keeping mail art an open, democratic forum for experimentation rather than critically examining the mail art object. However, as technological advances have made communication easier and faster than ever, contemporary mail art from my personal network shows a renewed attention to the mail art object and an engagement with craft. While emphasis has shifted, the importance of the relationship formed through mail art practice remains a consistent priority for mail artists both old and new.²⁰⁴

A shared interest in producing handmade objects is encapsulated in the work of two mail artists from my personal network: Cara Mullinary and David Solomon. Like Johnson, both mail artists utilize a variety of materials such as magazine cutouts, paper ephemera, pen, and glitter to create highly individualized handcrafted missives for their recipients. In addition to Mullinary and Solomon's personal styles, they both share common themes of identity in their work that evoke aspects of Johnson and Fluxus.

²⁰³ Held, *Secret*, 93.

²⁰⁴ David Solomon, email message to author, August 2, 2013; Cara Mullinary, email message to author, August 6, 2013.

Identity is a consistent theme in Johnson, Mullinary, and Solomon's work. However, unlike Johnson's semi-fictional clubs that were humorous takeoffs of celebrity fan clubs and art movements, Mullinary and Solomon's subject matter directly addresses the relationship between sender and receiver, without reference to outside world.

Additionally, Solomon's interest in the performative aspects of mail art practice reflects an interest in Fluxus ideology. However, neither Solomon nor Mullinary take a stance with respect to the art world with their work. Unlike previous generations, the unifying factor among Mullinary, Solomon, and other mail artists in my personal network revolves around a handmade mode of working as opposed to a shared ideology.

This shared interest in a method of making has also affected the format of the mail art exhibition. Champe Smith's exhibition at the Center for the Book in 2008 bucked tradition of soliciting an open call for work from the mail art network. Instead, Smith's exhibit was setup to focus solely on the collaborative potential that is inherent in mail art practice. As Matt Ferranto notes, it is this very aspect of mail art practice that sets it apart from any other kind of art:

Mail art introduces the possibility, even the necessity, of the collective into the visual arts and even extends the idea of collaboration to a host of participants, witting and unwitting.²⁰⁵

Reactions from the mail art community were mixed because although Smith disregarded the egalitarian ethos that had become gospel to many mail artists, the exhibition effectively expended the network and put the collaborative efforts of the participating mail artists on display in addition to the work they created.

²⁰⁵ Matt Ferranto, "(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part Four: Paradox and Promise: The Options of Mail Art", *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_4.html.

The *Mapping Correspondence* exhibition provides a different approach to the ethos of mail art practice. Previous generations of mail artists have focused on keeping the network open and furthering the conceptual impulses of mail art practice. Contemporary mail artists from my personal network have returned to the mail art object and an engagement with materials bringing mail art practice full circle back to its art world roots. This common engagement with making and materials seems to result in a more intimate relationship between sender and receiver than a shared conceptual basis. *Mapping Correspondence* is an example of how with a few minor tweaks this intimacy can be incorporated into the traditional mail art exhibition format. Surprisingly, while this generation and the previous one have very dissimilar opinions about mail art practice, they share a common goal of connecting with one another through this unique format. One can only hope that their combined efforts will continue to expand the mail art network and take mail art practice in new and exciting directions.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The preoccupations of previous generations with respect to the conceptual basis of mail art practice as well as an engagement with craft have had a hand in shaping the trajectory of this young genre. While the latest crop of mail artists have returned to a handmade way of working reminiscent of Johnson's work, previous generations have taken Fluxus ideas that underscore the mail art network to its logical conclusion. Mail art congresses and tourism were a natural outgrowth of the ideological pursuits of the second era of mail art in an effort to define their practice outside of the context of the art world. These events allowed mail artists to not only meet and discuss ideas more efficiently, but also to bring out the performative aspect of mail art practice that Fluxus artists had originally capitalized on.

However, these events would never have been possible without the creation of the mail art network and parameters for the mail art exhibition that Johnson and Fluxus established in the first era of mail art. Their material contributions, both in terms of an engagement with craft and a rejection of it, have been equally as important as they established a visual precedent that would influence both succeeding eras of mail artists. Johnson's handcrafted style remains a relatively dormant strand of mail art history. However, an engagement with craft has become a more pressing issue with the addition of new research from contemporary mail artists from my personal network to a discussion of mail art history. Adamson's discussion of craft provides a guide to navigating the various issues of making and materiality within contemporary mail art practice as they relate to modern and contemporary art. A return to not only a handcrafted way of working, a continued use of the postal system despite the ubiquity

and cost-effectiveness of the Internet, and emphasis on one to one correspondence, signals a shift to an earlier way of working that is more reminiscent of the first era of mail art.

Upon examining the three eras of mail art history from an art historical perspective, two primary aspects of mail art practice emerge. A conceptual basis for mail art practice has proved to be a valuable asset as it has allowed mail artists to find common ground and shape their respective practices. However, a pure conceptual basis does not suffice when examining mail art by the definition given in chapter one, as a practice of sending artistic and/or creative communication through the postal system. The materiality of these objects that are being exchanged have an inherent aesthetic quality that must be addressed. Craft has emerged as one of the most popular and common gathering points (or rejections) within this genre, yet has been largely ignored. However, as the exhibition *Mapping Correspondence* has demonstrated, there is a link between craft and collaboration within contemporary mail art practice. Foregrounding collaboration in the exhibition led to more intimate relationships between mail artists, which was evident in the crafted quality of their resulting works. Whether or not this engagement with craft was the cause or result of more intimate correspondence, examining craft more closely can be useful in unlocking another side of contemporary mail art and adding to a richer picture of mail art history.

There is much room for more scholarly research on mail art as an art form as this genre is still being developed. As museums and archives have started to acquire mail art, what was previously only available to those who practice mail art is now widely

available.²⁰⁶ Additional online resources such as archives, personal blogs and websites, communities, publications, and a number of other resources have made the once private world of mail art practice available to anyone with an Internet connection. Ray Johnson and Fluxus are still some of the most prominent mail artists recognized by art institutions, although many mail art scholars lament that mail art is still largely ignored by the art world. While the most prolific period in mail art scholarship during the second era is over, recent academic literature in the last 20 years may signal a renewed interest in the subject.

One of the most exciting and challenging aspects of discussing mail art is that fact that it is a living art form. Kasha Linville, writing for *Artforum* in 1970, observed this difficulty when she reviewed the NYCS exhibit at the Whitney museum remarking that “it seems a shame to catch a living thing in flight, to pin it down and make a museum display out of it.”²⁰⁷ Ferranto has reiterated this aversion to intellectual inquiry as some mail artists deem it contrary to the spirit of mail art practice.²⁰⁸ However, the fact remains that mail art is now a public phenomenon that has existed for more than 60 years. As a result, a historical perspective is needed if we are to understand the basis for contemporary mail art practice.²⁰⁹ Mail art’s lack of boundaries will allow it to change

²⁰⁶ For more information on mail art archives and collections, see Chuck Welch, “Appendix 4: Mail Art Archives and Collections”, in *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995) 259-269. Additional resources include Oberlin College of Mail Art Collection, <http://www.oberlin.edu/library/art/mailart/Default.html>; Mail art archive at the Staatliches Museum Schwerin, <http://www.museum-schwerin.com/headnavi/science-research/mail-art-archive/>; The Getty Research Institute, <http://www.getty.edu/research/>.

²⁰⁷ Linville, “New York”, 86.

²⁰⁸ Matt Ferranto, “(Mis)Reading Mail Art, Part One: A Medium or a Movement?”, *Fluxzone: The Spare Room*, accessed March 25, 2014, http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_1.html.

²⁰⁹ Welch, “Introduction”, in Welch, xvii.

and evolve as each new generation of mail artists take up the practice, despite the fact that art historical accounts, such as this, attempt to give its indeterminate past a logic.

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