

The Early Days of Mail Art

An Historical Overview

Ken Friedman

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It is difficult to pinpoint the moment when artists' correspondence became correspondence art. By the end of the late 1950s, the three primary sources of correspondence art were taking shape. In North America, the New York Correspondence School was in its germinal stages in the work of artist Ray Johnson and his loose network of friends and colleagues. In Europe, the group known as the Nouveau Realistes was addressing radical new issues in contemporary art. On both continents, and in Japan, artists who were later to work together under the rubric of Fluxus were testing and beginning to stretch the definitions of art.

Correspondence art is an elusive art form, more variegated by nature than, say, painting. Where a painting always involves paint and a support surface, correspondence art can appear as any one of dozens of media transmitted through the mail. While the vast majority of correspondence art or mail art activities take place in the mail, today's new forms of electronic communication blur the edges of that forum. In the 1960s, when correspondence art first began to blossom, most artists found the postal service to be the most readily available -- and least expensive -- medium of exchange.

Today's microcomputers with modern facilities offer anyone computing and communicating power that two decades ago were available only to the largest institutions and corporations, and only a few decades before that weren't available to anyone at any price. Transistors and miniaturized electronics make it as simple today to record and to send a videotape as to write a letter. With teletext, interactive cable, mailgrams, electronic mail, electronic computer networking, video, inexpensive audio, and -- looming on the horizon -- myriad new communications techniques, correspondence art is harder to define than ever before.

While these facts establish a sense of perspective, the soul of correspondence art remains communication. Its twin faces are "correspondence art" and "mail art" Here the distinction is between reciprocal or interactive communication -- correspondence -- and unidirectional or one-way communication, mailed out without any requirement for response.

There are special cases of correspondence art that involve the mails as medium of transmission for purposes other than mail art. Good examples of this included exhibitions of art from Eastern Europe in which the cheapest and safest way of sending art to the United States was through the mail, though the art works sent were actually intended as -- and only as -- photographs, drawings, paintings, or artists' books.

Certain forms of art have become associated with correspondence art and mail art both by virtue of tradition and the ease with which they are mailed. These include postcards, artists' books, printed ephemera, rubber stamps, artists' postage stamps, and posters of various kinds.

The first phase of correspondence art primarily involved individual expression in reciprocal relationships, a natural outgrowth of artists' correspondence. History and tradition honor Ray Johnson as the central figure in this phase of correspondence art. To the degree that he identified, named and himself became identified with the emerging art form, this is true.

Working in the tradition of collage and the *objet trouvé* he was perhaps the first to identify the transaction of art [End page 3] [Start page 4] works and notes with colleagues as an art form itself. Through this stroke of inspiration, correspondence art was born. Johnson gave it focus by promulgating the rubric, "The New York Correspondence School of Art" (The name itself was coined by Ed Plunkett). Thus, by permutation, the world was given the new medium, correspondence art, and its first body of practitioners, The New York Correspondence School (NYCS).

However, correspondence art as such first grew from the work of the European artists identified as the "Nouveaux Realistes," a name coined by French critic Pierre Restany. The core issue of the "New Realism," a movement born in the early 1950s, was the conception of an art made of real elements, that is, materials taken from the world directly rather than pictorially. The group includes Arman, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Martial Raysse, Raymond Hains, Daniel Spoerri and Francois Dufrène, and -- in some senses -- Christo. These artists each used a direct slice of life. The actual sectioning went from the highly tenuous or theoretical projects of Manzoni and Klein to the embedded and snared works of Arman and Spoerri, the decollages of Hains and Dufrène and the world-embracing, massively realized projects of Christo.

The issues and ideas that motivated the Nouveaux Realistes also emerged in the Pop Art of the late 1950s and early 1960s in Britain and the United States, though Pop Art tended to be an art which took reality into its scope in an emblematic way rather than by using direct incorporation or manipulation of physical materials.

Collage sensibility and incorporation of reality are attitudes shared with much later correspondence art. It is in the use of the postal system, of artists' stamps and of the rubber stamp that Nouveaux Realisme made the first gestures toward correspondence art and toward mail art.

These artists created several early key works in these media. Klein's famous "Blue Stamp" was a postal *cause célèbre* and a bureaucratic scandal after it was successfully mailed and postmarked in the mid 1950s. Arman introduced the rubber stamp into contemporary art with his cachets and accumulations of the early and middle years of the decade. Kurt Schwitters had done stamp works as early as 1918. The Russian Futurists had created the first modern art with rubber stamps a few years earlier. Marcel Duchamp had experimented with a piece in the form of a post card, and the Italian Futurists showed interest in using the mails. Even so, the latter were perhaps examples of mailed art rather than mail art and even the use of rubber stamps as an art medium vanished until shortly after the end of the Second World War, when Arman resurrected it in his *oeuvre*. Spoerri not only created ephemeral mailed works and projects, small gazettes and cards, but his involvement with mail art -- unlike that of Klein or Arman -- continued unabated for over a decade and a half spanning the first three phases of correspondence art.

Thus, it can probably be said that the Nouveaux Realistes were the first artists to use correspondence media as art forms in their own right. However, it was Ray Johnson and his circle of friends in the New York Correspondence School who gave the first phase its characteristic sensibility and presence.

If the Nouveaux Realistes created paradigms of correspondence art and mailed art as works, it was the New York Correspondence School that took the notion from paradigm to practice. Ranging at times from seventy-five to as many as three hundred people, the NYCS was summoned into being by Ray Johnson but, at its height, existed around him as many intersecting relationships independent of his direct involvement. Many distinguished artists participated in Johnson's whirling vortex of mailings and events, some of whom, such as Richard C., Ed Plunkett, or Dick Higgins and the Fluxus artists became themselves major figures shaping the ethos and attitudes of correspondence art.

The NYCS relied on direct interaction between correspondents. As a result, the works that one might receive [End page 4] [Start page 5] in the early days were highly personal, often highly crafted. Handmade collages, carefully printed photographs, even framed paintings were fairly common. Odd and lavish objects were not uncommon. Some artists took pride and a perverse pleasure in sending one another the most outlandish objects or projects they could conceive, including objects that were difficult or perhaps impossible to mail. My own favorite project was mailing a series of chairs. I mailed the smaller chairs as single objects. I mailed the larger chairs by taking them apart so that the disassembled pieces fit postal size limits. The challenge was to mail them unwrapped and visible, persuading postal clerks to accept the items according to postal regulations. It was a time when postal regulations were different and substantially more relaxed than today.

In the 1960s, Ray Johnson set the tone for NYCS. *The Paper Snake*, a book on his work, published by Something Else Press, is a good example of the abundance and flavor of the time. Direct and personal interaction were the salient qualities and greatest pleasures of the NYCS and the era of the 1960s. The first phase of correspondence art was also characterized by a trenchant sense of privacy. These were private letters and activities, exchanges among friends. An attitude that only members need apply prevailed. University of Maine art historian Owen Smith suggests that the private, inward-looking attitude that Johnson adopted with his New York Correspondence School was a specific reaction against the exclusionary facade of art history and the exclusive attitudes of Clement Greenberg and his Tenth Street School. This makes sense, but it applies more to other members of the NYCS than to its central figure, Ray Johnson, whose hermetic practices are as much an expression of his personality as a conscious social statement. The transformative social potential and open spiritual quality of the Eternal Network never seemed to interest Ray. He was, and is, an atelier master in the old sense, even though he expresses himself through collage techniques that reach out into the world.

Many of Johnson's best-known works are the numerous lovely, dense printed collages in which he specifically used the names of "members" of the NYCS, occasionally adding or dropping names. These seemed to point inward to a closed circle. This is not to say that it was bad: it's simply the way it was. In the first phase of correspondence art, the paradigm blossomed, flourished and found most of its major practitioners. In the second phase, correspondence art turned outward to the world.

It is at this point, during the first phase of the development of correspondence art -- but looking toward the second -- that it is best to explore the role of Fluxus in the development and dissemination of mail art.

Fluxus germinated in the artistic ferment of the late 1960s. Some of the Fluxus people found each other in John Cage's and Richard Maxfield's classes at The New School. Others met [End page 5] [Start page 6] through George Maciunas' publications, or committees, or the early festivals, and in the moving feasts of the era, such as the ongoing series of events at Yoko Ono's loft on Chambers Street. By 1962, Fluxus was formed and named. A few individuals from Europe and America, such as the Czech artist Milan Knizak, the German Joseph Beuys, Geoff Hendricks or I, came into the group slightly late. Members of the initial cast of characters came and went through about 1966.

Fluxus has always been an unlikely movement: sprightly, hard to pin down, Zen-like in its reluctance to be described, it is hardly a movement at all. One may rather call it a rubric, a forum, an elusive philosophy made real by the fact that real artists engaged one another and the world in real acts under the name Fluxus. The edges of Fluxus have never been particularly crisp or brutal. So it is that Fluxus shares Daniel Spoerri with the Nouveaux Realistes; Christo has occasionally floated into Fluxus, though he has about him always a sense that he can never be part of any particular group with which he may share interests. Half a dozen of the most active and charming participants in the NYCS were very active in Fluxus. At times, even Ray Johnson took part in various Fluxus publications and events.

As elusive and unlikely to proselytize as Fluxus seemed, it also had a very public side. Massive festivals, grand publishing programs, extensive tours of performances and concerts, proposals for social reform and public housing came out of a movement that was as much characterized by these prophetic, even socio-political leanings as by such typically evanescent projects typified by George Brecht's laconic events or Alison Knowles' performances.

At first, the Fluxus artists active in the correspondence art world (including many who did not participate in the NYCS) were quite content to create private works. This is a paradox, because the works were implicitly public. They were printed. They used the mail for distribution. They invited the world to take part. At the same time, however, they went only to a small circle of artists, composers and designers who already knew each other. Some of them were openly skeptical about the value of being too public and outgoing in what they did. This, too, is a paradox, since to be an artist is, by definition, to be a public person, but many Fluxus artists have always wavered between the public character of making art and the private quality of their approach to art and life. It may even be because they see art and life as intertwined that the art has a distinctly private side, as life does.

Still, Fluxus had a public edge and an absolutely public intention, and correspondence art took its place in Fluxus practice along with festivals, projects, films, concerts and all the rest. These included mail art pieces by individuals, and [End page 6] [Start page 7] marvelous series of publications, post cards, stamps and stationery published by George Maciunas for Fluxus artists including Bob Watts, Robert Filliou, Ben Vautier, Daniel Spoerri, and others among us. There was even a Fluxus Postal Kit prepared in 1966 complete with a Fluxpost cancellation mark, permitting an entire, Fluxus-controlled postal exchange to take place.

By the late 1960s, the public opportunities of correspondence art and mail art became manifestly visible. It was then that the prophetic side of Fluxus emerged, establishing the second phase of mail art. Now, for the first time, the correspondence art -- in the previous sense that the term has been used here -- that reached out to the public, embodied not only correspondence art, but also a larger, and admittedly less private, mail art. Through this outreach, the extraordinary latent power for international communication became overt, termed "The Eternal Network" by Robert Filliou (See "End Note" Chapter 42 *ed.*). It was at this time that mail art first created, and began to make real, its potential for social change and for contributing new forms of communication to the world. [End page 7]

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Fluxus was a forum for experimentation. The commitment to experimentation and to research was profound. It was characteristic that Fluxus participants not only asked "Why?" but "How?" -- and then they would generally go on to ask "Why not?" and "How else?" A fair number of Fluxus members came to art from untraditional backgrounds -- Spoerri from ballet, Higgins from music and printing, Paik from music and robotics, Filliou from economics, Brecht from natural and biological sciences, and so on. Others, such as Alison Knowles or Wolf Vostell were trained as artists, yet they developed a highly experimental notion of what art could be. Finally, the ringmaster of the Fluxus circus, George Maciunas, was both pragmatic and experimental. As the chief editor and frequent organizer of Fluxus activities, his paradoxical whims, highly refined organizational sensibility and peculiar administrative quirks gave Fluxus its unique flavor and offered Fluxus artists the wide range of philosophical permissions and encouragements that came to characterize the Fluxus ethos.

Fluxus was the first group of artists to understand the potential of the postal system as a world-spanning, cost-effective distribution system. It was open. It went everywhere. The direct operating cost to the artist was low. If the potential was visible, however, Fluxus did not fill it at first. The implicit public quality of the postal system and its use by Fluxus means that early Fluxus activities were more public in theory than they were in practice. The reason for this is the ability to reach out to almost anyone, anywhere through the mail. This can be as much a guarantee of privacy as publicity. Because of this, many early Fluxus exchanges using the mail were rather like telephone calls for objects. They used a public network, but they were not broadcast. The largest use of the mails at that time involved a kind of narrowcasting, with the mailing of George Maciunas's policy letters and the Mail Order Fluxshops.

Public engagement requires more than establishing potentially public media. It requires reaching out and finding effective ways to open a public dialogue. In the early 1960s, Fluxus was years away from its eventual public impact. Even though publicity was implicit in many Fluxus projects and activities, the activities were not yet fully public. Nam June Paik's ambitious program for renewing television was a perfect example. He was already doing television work in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but he was doing it conceptually, in the laboratory of the Fluxus community and exchanging his ideas in the invisible academy. He reached out with manifestoes and through his landmark correspondence project, *The University of Avant-Garde Hinduism*. Even so, the *University* was more private than public.

The *University* and Paik's mailed pieces implied an eventual public medium, however, and Paik had always shown a genius for publicity. The *University* became an opening salvo in his long-term plan. Using the mail, he perfected a tactic that today would be termed an opinion leader strategy. He used it to establish the network of personal contacts that he would later use to bring his video projects to life. It was a private, narrowcast network. The first public network that gave Fluxus a broadcast voice came with the creation of Something Else Press, and especially the *Something Else Newsletter*.

At first Fluxus artists took part in correspondence art as private individuals. Some were involved in Nouveau Realisme, some in the New York Correspondence School, some as individual participants on the growing network. By the end of the 1960s, a number of Fluxus people had begun to view mail art as a medium offering unique potentials and challenges. We saw beyond the basic issue of art through the mail, and began to explore the reaches and media of correspondence and mail themselves.

Dick Higgins took the first major step when he established Something Else Press and the *Something Else Press Newsletter*. The Press was an innovative publishing house designed to bring experimental and avant-garde work to [End page 8] [Start page 9] the public eye in well-designed, handsome, durable books. It is now acknowledged and admired as one of the early sources of much contemporary art. Higgins himself is famed as the essayist who brought the term "intermedia" into current usage. When Higgins wrote his seminal essay on intermedia in 1968, he sought a format to make it widely known. The form he chose was that of the newsletter.

In his newsletter, he created an inexpensive medium for sharing art and art ideas with thousands of readers. It was through his ever-expanding list of readers, book buyers, recipients of the newsletter and the Press' catalogues that Higgins first redefined the mail art network. This is a significant moment in mail art, even though Higgins did not view the newsletter as a mail art project. For the first time, a correspondence artist consciously used the mails as a regular medium of public communication. Though the newsletter was outbound in its form it had a tone that encouraged response and participation, a fact that Higgins and the voluminous files and archives of his Press demonstrate. Higgins respondents and correspondents moved into the network and into the art world. Staid artists became experimental, and experimental artists came into contact with other experimental artists. Something Else Press, founded as an outgrowth of Fluxus was small, but it was decidedly public in conception. It became the locus of a vast resonating network of correspondents. Something Else Press became a central node in the development of experimental art in America, the entire range of intermedia, new music, concrete poetry and Fluxus work that Dick Higgins termed "the arts of the new mentality." It is vital to note the development of a network intended as a forum through which ideas might be exchanged and through which like minds might come into communication. This was a public realization of the idea inchoate in the New York Correspondence School, never fully realized due to the highly private, personal context that characterized the NYCS. Further, it was through the Something Else Press that the projects of artists such as Robert Filliou, George Brecht, Daniel Spoerri and even Ray Johnson himself first found a broad public.

The next Fluxus contribution to correspondence art and to mail art was the exploration and use of the medium of mail as a communication system. These projects came in three parts. The first had to do with communication, the second with exhibition and the third with publishing.

When Fluxus began, the art world was a much smaller place and experimental artists comprised a far less significant proportion of the art world than today. It was difficult to find out who was who or to reach others who might share given interests. In the early days of Fluxus, George Maciunas regularly published the Fluxus mailing lists and membership lists. This permitted ready access to people about whom one might wish to know more. It also suggested to some of us the notion of contacting those whom one didn't know; to find out who they were, what they were doing, and what made them interesting enough to incorporate the Fluxus list.

Starting in 1966 at Fluxus West, I began to publish annual compilations of the Fluxus lists, adding to those lists interesting artists whom we were able to locate and identify. By 1972, the lists had grown to a point where we published over 1400 names and addresses, together, where possible, with phone numbers. The 1972 list was published in cooperation with Canada's Image Bank. It was released in hundreds of copies, distributed gratis to artists, arts organizations and publishers around the world. The list became the core of the first *FILE Magazine* artists' directory, was used to develop Flash Art's *Art Diary*, and, in expanded and better researched versions, served such staid reference tomes as *Who's Who in American Art* and *Who's Who in America*. The project was an act of social responsibility; access to a fuller universe of information in a professional environment marked by restricted communication. The restriction of communication [End page 9] [Start page 10] is a tool and a weapon. It gives power to those who possess the media of communication and it works against those who lack rich success. It seemed to us that certain individuals at the center of art world media - - critics, curators, dealers -- could reach anyone, while the rest of us had a hard time finding jealously guarded mailing lists to reach others. The wide publication of the lists, right or wrong, changed all that. The reference tools and media that grew from our lists had an impact on the art world that was not foreseen when, in order to gain greater control over our own communication, Fluxus West began the annual directory and publications.

The existence of such substantial numbers of people, many -- if not most -- interested in communicating with one another and experimentally inclined (at least from time to time) suggested new ways of exhibiting art and of preparing exhibitions. The first such notions were rudimentary. It was tough to bring large works of art out of Eastern Europe in crates, but a big drawing or a suite of photos could easily be put in an envelope to be mailed out as a letter, albeit a thick letter. So it was that at first, even as we were using the mail to create experimental works as individual artists, we were also using the mail to transmit fairly ordinary or traditional art works for exhibitions.

Many of the exhibitions presented at Fluxus West were shipped through the mail, not mail art, but mailed art that was then installed as any art might be. Exhibitions of work by many artists came in the mail: Milan Knizak, Ben Vautier, Christo, George Brecht, and group shows like Young Hungarian Artists, Young Swiss Artists, A Small Show and the original Inch Art project that Terry Reid later carried further in Australia.

At the start of the 1970s, a number of exhibitions blossomed simultaneously that were to transform correspondence art and mail art from private activity to public access. The first projects were the major mail art shows organized by Marcia Tucker at the Whitney Museum, to which Ray Johnson's personal friends and New York Correspondence School colleagues were invited, and the 1971 Biennial of Paris, curated by French art historian and critic Jean-Marc Poinot, involving the several dozen figures who were at that time seen as the leading artists in the field.

At first, the mails were used to create exhibitions or used as a forum for private artists whose interactions were exhibited. The leap to a public process seems to have emerged from an idea that I had after my experience with the lists. I reasoned that the lists themselves might be used as the body of artists invited to exhibit. The notion went through stages. When George Neubert then curator of the Oakland Museum, offered me a one-man exhibition for 1972, I chose a one-year project inviting people to correspond with me through the museum. This invitation started with the use of the lists and grew to become public. A second project was mounted at the University of Washington museum, The Henry Art Gallery, in Seattle. At [End page 10] [Start page 11] the Henry Gallery, we addressed the public directly to create enormous regional group participants, incidentally involving participants from afar through extended media and wide public coverage. The final apotheosis was a project entitled Omaha Flow Systems, mounted at the Joslyn Art Museum in the spring of 1973.

For Omaha Flow Systems, we devised a number of projects and sub-projects, using all of the administrative and analytic tools available to us. The show, while serving to model a wide variety of ideas and projects, became best known as the largest mail art project to date -- or since. Thousands of invitations were mailed, and mass media, local, regional, national and international, were used.

Over 20,000 items were received at the Joslyn, with many tens of thousands of additional viewer contacts, in-put/out-put transactions, systems that we could not trace, satellite exhibitions at other institutions across the region and around the world. The recent histories of mail art show that Omaha Flow Systems became the basic model for all mail art exhibitions since 1973, and -- in its sub-projects -- as the model for several uses of mail art and correspondence art in both exhibition and other forms. In many cases, mail art projects modeled on the paradigm developed in Omaha did not come from Omaha directly. Rather, the model was adapted, say, by an artist from South Dakota who invited a friend from Iowa to participate. The Iowan created a mail art show that was an inspiration to some artists from Staten Island. The Staten Island show influenced some people in Connecticut, and so on. Further, several shows developed at the same time as Omaha Flow Systems, also using our lists and research, had enormous direct influence. These included, most notably, Davi Det Hompson's *Cyclopedia*, and the several exhibitions organized by Terry Reid and by the Canadian mail art geniuses at Image Bank. The idea began to take on its own life as a *medium* or an *intermedium*, rather than as the project or work of one artist.

The publishing paradigms developed through Fluxus have had substantial impact on mail art. At first, the notion of newsletters and periodicals was treated playfully, as, for example, Nam June Paik's *Review of the University of Avant Garde Hinduism*, or Daniel Spoerri's magazine from the Greek island of Simi. Dick Higgins, as already discussed, took a further step with the *Something Else Press Newsletter*. George Brecht created the *V-TRE* newspaper. George Maciunas carried it forward, allied conceptually and physically to the production of Fluxus multiples and concerts. Where the Fluxus publishing ethos came directly into the realm of contemporary mail art was in *Amazing Facts Magazine* and the birth of *New York Correspondence School Weekly Breeder*.

Amazing Facts Magazine was a crudely assembled publication created at Fluxus West in 1968. We gathered our mail, put it into a folio with a cover, and sent it out. The idea lasted one issue, but established a notion of gathering as the editorial principle for a magazine. Independently in Germany, Thomas Niggel was creating *Omnibus News*, the first truly gathered or accumulated magazine in multiple editions. These two preceded the better known Ace Space Company anthologies gathered and published by Dana Atchley, and, finally, the *Assembling* anthologies (See Chapter 27 ed.) developed by Henry Korn, Richard Kostelanetz, and Mike Metz, today the best known and most widely disseminated of such periodicals.

More quirky and playful, the *New York Correspondence School Weekly Breeder* was both a joke, and a way to establish regular, weekly contact with other artists. The NYCSWB was published through about ten or [End page 11] [Start page 12] eleven issues at Fluxus West, then passed to Stu Horn, a Philadelphia artist. Horn, already well known as The Northwest Mounted Valise, a longtime friend of Ray Johnson and a talented graphic poet, produced a number of issues for the second volume and then passed the periodical to Bill Gaglione and Tim Mancusi in San Francisco. Gaglione and Mancusi took the idea on, and through their network of friends and correspondents, transformed the NYCSWB into an odd -- and oddly influential -- periodical. Starting with its modest, single-sheet beginnings in 1971, the NYCSWB grew to spark the phenomenon in publishing known as the "Dadazine," a format adopted by mail artists that spread farther to influence artists books and publishing in fields as diverse as punk rock and art criticism.

I feel that mail art has four eras. The first is the private era. The private era lasted from the early 1950s through the middle 1960s. It is characterized by the sorts of exchanges I discuss in the article, and some exchanges characteristic of that era continue even today.

The second era began when Fluxus sought to make mail art public. It began with the *Something Else Newsletter* and it really took off with my projects and experiments aimed specifically at a radical interactive broadcast use of the mails. The biggest projects were the *One Year One Man Show*, *Work in Progress*, and *Omaha Flow Systems*. These projects culminated the experiments of the second era and became the foundation of the third era.

The explosion of the third era began with the *One Year One Man Show*, *Work in Progress*, and *Omaha Flow Systems*. It was also due in great part to Tom Albright's major coverage of mail art. The role he played in putting mail art before the widest possible public was incalculable. My three shows had vast international outreach on the art network and a broad public audience in the regions where the shows took place. Albright's reviews of the *One Year One Man Show* in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *art Gallery* magazine were still located in the art world. His ten-section, two-part series in *Rolling Stone* was a major public signal. These coincided with several other projects of the same time: David Thompson's *Cyclopedia* (1973); the birth of *FILE* magazine (1972); the publication of the first Image Bank *Image Directories* (1971-1972); the largest publication and widest circulation to that time of the Fluxus West *International Directory of the Arts*, done in cooperation with Image Bank (1973); the birth of 'zines with the *New York Correspondence School Weekly Breeder* (1971). All these took place during the same two or three year period.

I feel that I came into mail art at the end of the private phase. When I came in, Ray was still corresponding with only a handful of people. These were almost all linked to one another through being introduced to each other by Ray himself. The Fluxus network was then still small. You can see the exact size by examining George Maciunas' membership lists. Publicity was implicit, but only Dick Higgins had studied out how to make this work public before I came on the scene. He was the only one who had undertaken a workable program of public engagement, devoting the necessary discipline and resources to the task.

Some of us who had been active in the first two eras of mail art were irritated, even angered by the explosion of junk mail and self-serving egotism in the third. For one, I failed to recognize the fact that growth produces growing pains, that new artists need to explore, even to be stupid as they try their hand. The time was marked by hundreds of projects and exhibitions termed "first" and "first international," as artists unaware of history and community each tried to become the leading figure in the network. At the same time, their striving was genuine. The debates had already begun that were to provide a platform for a renewed sense of community. [End page 13]

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Disillusioned, I left the network in the mid 1970s. Ten years later, when the network reached out to me again, I saw that a shift had taken place. The network had become a community, characterized by genuine leaders each speaking for different visions and ideas. Artists such as Carlo Pittore, J.P. Jacob, Leavenworth Jackson, Chuck Welch, Vittore Baroni, Ullises Carrion, Anna Banana, Shozo Shimamoto, Dobrica Kamperelic and H.R. Fricker were not simply making work, but engaging in major discussions and debates -- by mail and in person. The network had produced historian-artists such as Michael Crane, John Held, Judith Hoffberg, and Clemente Padin. This was the fourth era, an era characterized by moral intensity I hadn't seen since the 1960s, by passion, by commitment and by a real interest in the network, a network seen as a human phenomenon more important than art. In this fourth phase, early adulthood, mail art had become a complete art form, practiced by tens of thousands around the world, by history, discourse, and community as any art form is.

It was also a time of blurred boundaries. Carlo Pittore, an American, had an Italian name, aspirations toward a new renaissance of painting, and a position of global leadership as a spokesman for the network. Judith Hoffberg, already a distinguished fine arts librarian and scholar, had emerged as an artist-publisher-archivist. Chuck Welch, J.P. Jacob, and Vittore Baroni had become artist-philosophers.

Even as the art world continued to ignore these artists, they were creating an art world of their own, and creating a world of communication that extended once again far beyond the boundaries of art. When I had last seen the mail art network, it was primarily locked inside the art world, despite our best intentions. It was essentially focused in the centers of the art world in Europe and North America. When I returned, I found an evolutionary growth that brought mail art from a tentative beginning in Latin America to full flower, increased activity in Asia, the birth of activity in Africa and in the Middle East. I also found evidence of the same touchiness, pettiness and egotism that had characterized the 1970s.

Members of the mail art network, in striving to establish a philosophical basis, had sometimes established petty hierarchies complete with rules and orthodox standards of behavior. Women had difficulties with the network and with its behavior, summed neatly with rubber stamp artist, Freya Zabitsky's mail art slogan, "Men make manifestoes, women make friends." Members of the network wanted to be accepted by the art world at the same time as they rejected its rules, leading to the many complications that any love-hate relationship creates. It was a transitional era, exciting and flawed as any time of transition must be. It was marked by earnest striving and by the huge lapses that attend every endeavor that is earnest. Today, in 1992, correspondence art, mail art and the network seem to be in the fourth phase, though I sense hints of a new current emerging. That discussion is not history, but prediction, and it doesn't belong here.

From the beginning, several trends have been clear in correspondence art and mail art. One has been the inherent opposition between private correspondence and public dialogue. Another has been the way in which the network has used the tension between these two polarities to give birth to new ways of approaching art. [End page 15]

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There has always been a sense of playful experiment. At its best, it has been a source of delight, of dialogue, of new art. At its worst, it has exacerbated the shallow egotism that can mark any medium and the self-aggrandizement that attends all the arts, since art always asks the attention of an audience to the work and persona of individuals. In league with one another and in opposition to one another, members of the network have established a community of dialogue that is now entering its fourth decade. When we recall that Dada flourished for a few brief years before dissolving, or that Abstract Expressionism hardly ever existed before it became history itself, that is an interesting fact. It suggests that the network may be a community, while correspondence art and mail art have grown beyond community into art forms, just as easel painting grew from an innovation to an art form. Different artists who use this medium will create the kinds of art with it that interest them.

It is precisely that fact that has made it possible for some members of what Robert Filliou termed "The Eternal Network" to pursue their spiritual concerns, the vision of a global community. It may be their action and concern that give rise to the fifth phase in the history of mail art and correspondence art, or they may simply carry on within a larger frame. That's a story to be told in a few more years.

About Ken Friedman

Ken Friedman works at the intersection of design, management, and art. His research focuses on strategic design and value creation for economic innovation. Friedman has done research in theory construction, research methodology, philosophy of design, doctoral education in design, knowledge management, and philosophy of science. He has done design policy studies for Australia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Wales. In 2007, Loughborough University awarded him the degree of Doctor of Science, honoris causa, for outstanding contributions to design research.

Friedman is Chair Professor of Design Innovation Studies at Tongji University College of Design and Innovation, and University Distinguished Professor at Swinburne University of Technology Centre for Design Innovation, where he formerly served as Dean of the Faculty of Design. He is Adjunct Professor at the James Cook University School of Creative Arts, and Visiting Professor at the University of Technology Sydney Business School.

Friedman is Editor-in-Chief of *She Ji. The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* published by Elsevier in cooperation with Tongji University Press. He is Chief Investigator of the Design Capacity Mapping Project for the CSIRO Future Manufacturing Flagship. He is co-editor of the MIT Press book series *Design Thinking, Design Theory*.

Friedman is a practicing artist and designer, active in the international laboratory of art, design, music, and architecture known as Fluxus. In 2015, James Cook University will tour an international exhibition of Friedman's Events.

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An extended biography and bibliography of Ken Friedman is available in PDF format at:

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For more information, contact:

ken.friedman.sheji@icloud.com

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Other papers are available at:

<https://swinburne.academia.edu/KenFriedman>

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