

KEEP ART FLAT!



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Mail Art and the Political 1970s

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Shedding Paper Snakes: Correspondence, Mail Art & the 70s NET

By Chuck Welch

Where is the objectivity of a snake changing its skin? The quest for total objectivity in mail art is a slippery chase. Was mail art a Ray Johnson Pop Art bunny¹ or a Fluxus paper snake² served at a New York Correspondence School Dinner in Katz' Deli on East Houston Street? Was mail art a product of the counter-culture or an attitude changing its mind with the times? Clearly, mail art had no set of established criteria or objectives in the 1970s nor was Mail Art a term in 1970. They called it correspondence art, a more intimate exchange between artists involving writing letters by hand and tapping manual typewriters with red and black ribbons. Meanwhile, in the background there were keyboards and computers mapping and coding a digital age. The world's first microprocessor, the Intel 4004 made its debut in 1971 and new snakes were silently shedding the paper skin of an analog world.

Kenneth Clark published *The Future of Painting* in October 1935 and declared the death of painting, an annoying myth hastened in the 70s by the words of American artist Donald Judd and art critic Clement Greenberg.³ In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, a U.S. State Department official wrote *The End of History?*, attributing, in part, history's demise to "the triumph of the West and the Western idea."⁴ Art critic and *Village Voice* columnist, Greil Marcus wrote in 1984 that "Mail art was an immediately quaint form that excused itself from history."⁵ Apparently, Greil Marcus' arrogant mail art proclamation was correct since "quaint art" was destined to survive Fukuyama's end of history. Oh my! How the history of mail art is filled with these apocalyptic and flamboyant proclamations. And yet, mail art has remained, albeit somewhat changed, in its current digital skin.

Germans have an ideal word to describe "the pain idealists feel upon realizing that the world does not live up to their expectations of what it should be."⁶ It's called *Weltschmerz*. So what happened to the arts and global culture of the 1970s when hippies forged a global catalyst for waging an anti-war movement? It was the

age of feminism, the sexual revolution, drugs and rock 'n' roll. Mass media was rapidly changing the cultural landscape of a world packaged in shrink wrap and plastic. Mail art in the 70s seemed to thrive on the counter culture deli of fast food copy art. It had no more real value to the mainstream establishment than a New York bagel or a French fry in Brussels. Yet mail art had an after life, like a belly ache in William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*. There was no living to make in mail art. Instead, you made an art out of living. Today, there is a preponderance of *Weltschmerz* everywhere, yet mail art somehow lingers on.

Fluxus publisher and artist, Dick Higgins wrote in 1976, "The word is not dead: It is simply changing its skin".⁷ Over three generations of mail artists, art historians and art critics have changed their skin. Sadly, many of them left with contempt and disdain for the tired out mail art zombie. Mail art in 1986 was nothing more than a black hole in cyberspace for anyone caring enough to search for its existence.⁸ Who in the art establishment could believe in a world of contrarian misfits that formed a vibrant zine culture, an underground world of artists' books, artists' stamps, rubber stamps, alternative artist spaces, and art that networked?



Some proclaimed mail art died when Ray Johnson, the father of mail art, jumped off The Sag Harbor Bridge on an unusually warm January day in 1995, backstroking in the Long Island Sound towards oblivion. Johnson left

numerous correspondence clues about his impending death, yet it's far more difficult tracking down how the mail influenced Ray Johnson and made him mail art's "daddy". As a young student just turning eighteen, Johnson's experiences at Black Mountain College (1945-1947) in Asheville, NC would have a major impact on his future life. He studied the relativity of colors taught by the legendary German artist and teacher, Josef Albers. And Ray Johnson met illuminating figures of the American avant-garde including Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Walter Gropius, Robert Motherwell and John Cage. Michael von Uchtrup, a Ray Johnson scholar, wrote that "The New York Correspondence School essentially grew out of this cluster of lifelong friendships".⁹

Ray Johnson returned to New York City in 1949 and began creating small collages of shaped snippets and scraps he called moticos. These mailings collaged with pop culture logos were shared in NYC by Johnson in Grand Central Station, at sidewalk cafes and in the mail with friends and strangers.¹⁰ His art took on an intimate and private persona described as "correspondence art" and in 1962 became known to his correspondence friends as The New York Correspondence School of Art. At any given time, Johnson's mailing list included over 200 individuals he chose to correspond with.¹¹

Ray Johnson's influence, however, cannot be calculated or measured by mere numbers. The Hungarian underground magazine network authority, mail art philosopher and writer, Géza Pernecky points out that the size of Johnson's "school" was important in the way "functioned". The question arguably remains whether The New York Correspondence School of Art amounted to a "network" at all or a glorified list of names, many of them famous artist friends.¹²

Indeed, Johnson disliked "networking", "network" and "mail art" as descriptions of his mail exchanges with others. As the core figure of a "school", Johnson explained his activity "as a writing activity" and to those seeking to find out about his school he advised, "The only way to understand it is through participation, because what I do is made for each person." Johnson continued, "My strange personality determines the whole activity of the Correspondence or -dance School".¹³ Johnson had a clear attitude about who would follow his lead in his dancing school, but this wasn't a "networking attitude" with equal partners.

Prior art movements such as Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Arte Povera, Nouveau Realisme, Gutai, and Fluxus all included various elements of mail play in their activities, but it was Fluxus artists, Robert Filliou, George Maciunas and George Brecht whose Fluxus attitudes during the 1960s heavily influenced mail art's evolution into a global networking phenomenon. Others such as Dick Higgins, Robert Watts and Ben Vautier had experimented with mail art. Robert Filliou drew particular at-

tention to his concept of an "Eternal Network" when he stated that "the purpose of art was to make life more important than art". This was central to Filliou's concept of an "Eternal Network" during the 1970s.¹⁴



Bill Vazan. *Contacts*. Catalogue. 1979. (above).
Archive ref.: 1973-00-00 Vazan 001.

Robert Rehfeldt. *Art in Contact*. Print. 1979. (left, p. 16).
Archive ref.: 1979-06-16 Rehfeldt 005.

An equally significant contribution was made in the spring of 1973 when the youngest of the Fluxus artists, Ken Friedman organized *Omaha Flow Systems*, at Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, Nebraska. There he established the first international mail art exhibition functioning as an extensive form of exchange in which the public was allowed to take artwork off museum walls and exchange works with the likes of Robert Indiana and Alison Knowles.¹⁵ Friedman also created international flux lists as early as 1966 and in the early 70s' he published the International Contact List of the Arts, a list that at times included as many as 5000 names and addresses. But it was Friedman's landmark exhibition, *Omaha Flow Systems*, that catapulted mail art into an intricate public communications matrix reaching far beyond anything Ray Johnson had ever intended. In a 1991 correspondence, Ken Friedman remarked, "Ray got a bit cranky when the network started to become a network. As long as it was a few people meeting each other and corresponding, it was still Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School. Afterward, it was a network."¹⁶

Mail art, arguably survives today through various mutations in both the analog network of postal exchanges and the digital world of mail art networking. Indeed, *Net Manifesto* issued in 1971 by Polish concept artists, Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski articulated the birth of networking as a decentralized concept. Ten years later the British pioneering telematic artist,¹⁷ Roy Ascott was pondering how he might gather a bevy of writers from a variety of disciplines to forge a vision of the future in which “networking” would provide a new global hope. No active mail art networkers were ever invited.¹⁸

In May 1972, during the early years of ARPANET, before a telematic art presence, mail artists birthed the proto-internet. In retrospect, this is the greatest contribution of mail art, it birthed the first global networking culture. This wasn't a business network, a school, a fan club, the work of a telematic genius or the play of an individual serving as an independent central authority. Networking began with a group of twenty six artists issuing a Net Statement and address-list through the coordination of Kozłowski and Kostołowski's. It was created in Kozłowski's apartment in a gathering that was raided by the Polish police state and this held serious consequences to all the artists in attendance. According to Kozłowski, he was “not allowed to travel abroad as a result of his “anti-state” activity as the security police understood his worldwide engagement”.¹⁹

Kozłowski and Kostołowski's *Net Manifesto* set forth in nine points the *NET Statement* establishing a new era designated as open and uncommercial with net origins in private homes, studios, or any other place where art propositions are articulated. They encouraged collaborative editions in book forms, prints, tapes, slides, photographs, catalogues, films, handbills, letters and manuscripts that had no central point or coordination. They theorized before the advent of the internet, world-wide-web that the NET could be anywhere. They visualized that all points of the NET are in contact among themselves in the exchange of concepts, projects, and other forms of articulation. And so, the idea of the NET was about the present manifested in many simultaneous communications. The Net was arbitrarily developed, copied, distributed and reaffirmed by all the initial 26 who signed it. The manifesto was then sent to over 350 international artists and critics.²⁰

Returning now to the beginning of this essay and its original mail art skinny from 1970. Mail art is often nothing more than something else that's saying less. But on one occasion in 1985, the late mail art philosopher and visual poetry artist, David Cole, eloquently said it all at *The Scroll Unrolls International Mail Art Exhibition* in Ein Hod, Israel. “Mail art,” said Cole, “is the literature and art of our time. It is a diary – honest, sincere, and beautiful.”²¹ It's also Dick Higgins in a slapstick, dead-

on Fluxus score - a “metadrama” otherwise known as “Variation on an old theme” “naked man: I have no wings”. Clothed woman: “so I see.”²²

Notes

¹ Ray Johnson's bunny head was an iconographic cartoon image, a kind of “tag” that was consistently used in his correspondences and “add-ons”. Johnson, when asked about his “bunny”, said, “Well, it's derivative of Mickey Mouse or Mickey Rat, or it's a mouse or, at times, an elephant with a long proboscis” (Quotation from “Mail, Etc. Art,” University of Colorado, Tyler School of Art, etc. 1980). In the years since Johnson's death his bunny tag has risen in prominence along with Andy Warhol's iconographic painting of Campbell's Soup Cans.

² Fluxus publisher, Dick Higgins asked Ray Johnson to collaborate with him in a 1965 Something Else Press publication known as “The Paper Snake”. Johnson denied any direct affiliation with the Fluxus art movement although he clearly interacted with a number of Fluxus artists including George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus.

³ Hammer, Martin. (1935, October). “Kenneth Clark and the Death of Painting”. Retrieved from <http://tate.org.uk>

⁴ Fukuyama, Francis. (1989, Summer). “The End of History?” Retrieved from <http://www.ou.edu/uschina/gries/articles/InfPol/Kukuyama@20of%20History.pdf>

⁵ Jacob, J. “Mail Art: Aesthetic Revolution or Personal Evolution,” *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, ed. Chuck Welch, (University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. 1995), 216.

⁶ Ratner, A. (2014, December 10). “The Germans Have a Perfect Word for American Disillusionment”.

Retrieved from <http://theweek.com>

⁷ Von Uchtrup, M. (n.d.). “Always It Is Something Else”: Relevant Quotations for The Paper Snake. Retrieved from <http://blackmountainstudiesjournal.org>

⁸ Apparently, I cared with all the excessive exuberance of a graduate student at Boston Museum School and Tufts University. Oddly, while pursuing my MFA Studio Art degree, I led another life at Tufts in Medford, MA where I was a TA in Art History. While at Tufts I was busy researching a paper I'd eventually publish the following year under the title, *Networking Currents: Mail Art Subjects and Issues*. While visiting John P. Jacob, now Curator for Photography at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, John informed me of something that seemed astonishing. He had discovered that there was no sign of mail art activity or interest over the internet and suggested that I investigate. I was able to verify John's tip on a number of occasions during my graduate studies at Tufts. My interests merging mail art and the Internet occurred then and was documented extensively in my 1995 publication, *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, University of Calgary Press. To my wonder, twenty years later, none of my work interconnecting mail art and the Internet had re-appeared in any major academic publication in North America or abroad. (See “Mail Art-Internet Link” by Chuck Welch, (<http://www.academia.edu>) Projects missing, most notably in Annmarie Chandler and Norie Neumark's *At A Distance*, MIT Press, 2005, are: Telenetlink (1991-1996), Networker Databank (1992), The Emailart Directory (1990), The Electronic Museum of Mail Art (mail art's first webpage, Jan 1995, and the Web's first virtual reality art museum), and also, my Ezine “Netshaker” (1994) which included the “MailArtEmailArt Manifesto in 10 Statements”.

⁹ von Uchtrup, M. (n.d.). "Ray Johnson and the Road from BMC Into - and Out of - New York."

Retrieved from <http://blackmountainstudiesjournal.org>

¹⁰ Wikipedia. (n.d.). "Ray Johnson New York Years. Retrieved from en.wikipedia.org

¹¹ In March 1993, while visiting Fluxus artist, Jon Hendricks at the Silverman Fluxus Collection in NYC, I began studying the add-on collages and correspondences of Ray Johnson. One of my finds included a hand penciled list by Johnson who was apparently tallying 200 individuals he had interacted with through correspondences. The xerox sheet of a black silhouetted pair of horses was penciled over with statistics written by Johnson. I photocopied the sheet with Hendricks' approval and placed it in The Eternal Network Mail Art Archive where it resides today.

¹² Perneckzy, G. *The Magazine Network: The Trends of Alternative Art in the Light of Their Periodicals 1968-1998* (Köln, Germany: Edition Soft Geometry, 1993), p. 50.

¹³ R. Pieper, "Ray Johnson (Conversation with R. Pieper)," Mail Art Etc., ed., Bonnie Donahue and Ed Koslow, (University of Colorado, Tyler School of Art, and Florida State University, 1984), p. 16.

¹⁴ Friedman, K. "The Eternal Network," *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, (University of Calgary Press, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, 1995), xv.

¹⁵ It was also my first introduction to mail art occurring after my tour of duty in Vietnam (December 1971) and subsequent discharge from active duty in Oakland, CA. I was living in Lincoln, Nebraska at the time of *Omaha Flow Systems* and was just months away from starting my Masters Degree in Art Education at the University of Nebraska, Kearney.

¹⁶ Ken Friedman in a letter to Chuck Welch dated February 15, 1991.

¹⁷ Telematic art is defined by Wikipedia as "descriptive of art projects using computer mediated telecommunications networks as their medium". Mail art formed a network language and philosophy from 1971-1996, an exciting era that is frequently overlooked by the academic community.

¹⁸ Welch, C. "Global Network Zines: The Public Face of Mail Art." (Netshaker Press, Peterborough, NH, 2014), p. 9.

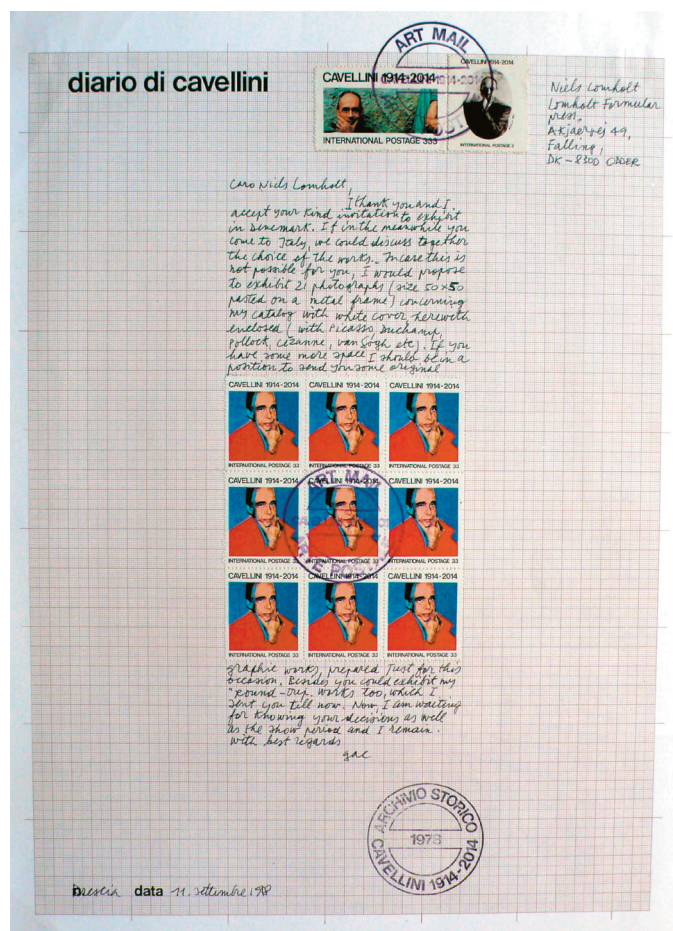
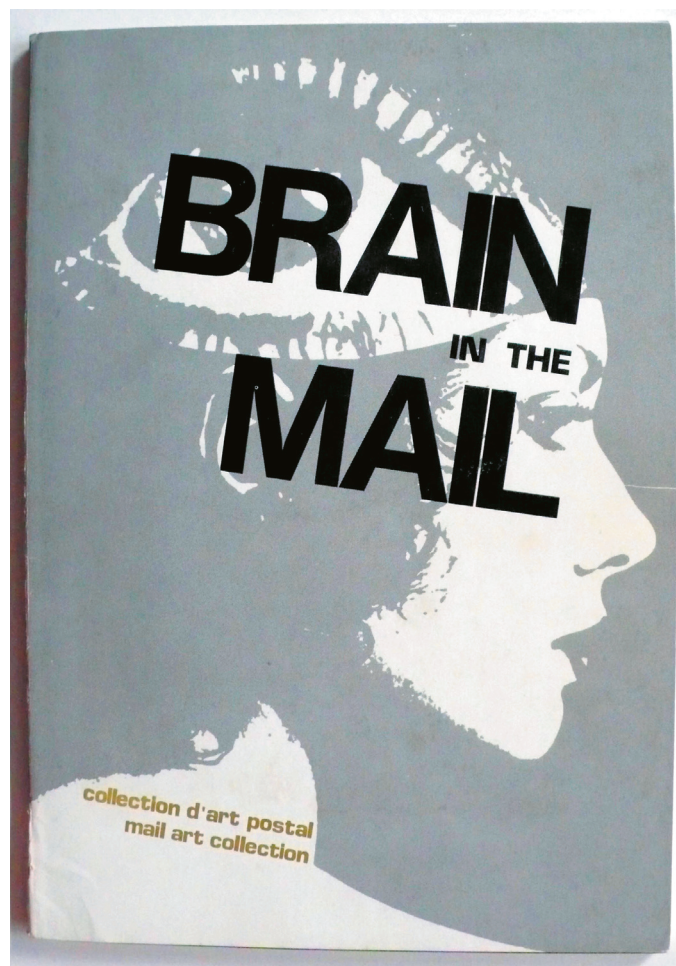
¹⁹ Kozlowski, J. and Magdalena Moskaiewicz. "Shared Language: Interview with Jaroslaw Kozlowski." (Posted on the Internet, September 29, 2015).

²⁰ Welch, C. "A New-Net Manifesto 2012: A 2012 Decentralized Networker Congress Project." (*Postcard*, Netshaker Press: Peterborough, NH) November 2012.

²¹ Cole, D. in Chuck Welch's "Preface: Eternal Network Mail Art Archive." (Netshaker Press, Peterborough, NH), p. 1.

²² Higgins, D. (n.d.). "Metadramas."

Retrieved from <http://www.thing.net>



Istvan Kantor. *Brain in the Mail*. Catalogue. 1979. (top).

Archive ref.: 1979-06-01 Kantor 007.

Guglielmo Achille Cavellini. Print. 1978. (bottom).

Archive ref.: 1978-09-11 Cavellini 001.

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Al 'Blaster' Ackerman. Envelope. 1978. (top).

Archive ref.: 1978-06-05 Ackerman 001.

Leonhard Frank Duch. (above, second).

Archive ref.: 1978-09-21 Duch 001.

Graciela Gutiérrez Marx & Edgardo Antonio Vigo. *Jail*.

Envelope. 1978. (above, third).

Archive ref.: 1978-11-28 Marx Vigo 002.

Graciela Gutiérrez Marx & Edgardo Antonio Vigo.

Envelope. 1978. (bottom)

Archive ref.: 1978-11-28 Marx Vigo 001.

Cover:

Jesús Romeo Galdámez. Postcard. 1979.

Archive ref.: 1979-07-00 Galdamez Exchangeable Photo 009.

Pat Larter. Book page (Transquiet Dressingroom). 1978.

Archive ref.: 1978-12-22 Larter 006 (detail).

Vittore Baroni. *Utopia 31*. Collage. 1979.

Archive ref.: 1979-04-30 Baroni 010.

Inner cover:

Anna Banana. Cavellini is Stuck on Anna Banana. Print. 1976. (front).

Archive ref.: 1976-00-00 Banana no 1.

Guglielmo Achille Cavellini. *Cavellini 1914-2014*.

Postcard. 1978. (back).

Archive ref.: 1978-00-00 Cavellini no 5 001.



