

MAIL ART ARCHIVING: NOT NECESSARILY BY THE LETTER

by Chuck Welch in a letter to Anna Banana

*"The collection originated due to a mental peculiarity
on the part of its compiler, John M. Bennett"*

Quote from John M. Bennett introducing the John M. Bennett Publications Collection, 1940-1995,
The Ohio State University Libraries

What do art archives about crackerjacks and bananas have in common? A place to study the aesthetics of popular snacks in American culture? No, these are mail art objects collected by two North American mail artists, Anna Banana and myself, also known as CrackerJack Kid. Both Anna and I are on archival quests to help make our decades old collections accessible to larger audiences.

Mail art archives require "moves" beyond simply accumulating stacks of letters. There are limitations of time, space, and location that determine one's ability to carry on the work of private archiving. Many mail artists never asked to collect mail art. Ultimately, after years of accumulation, it requires passion and hard work to "dig it out" of basements and attics, the places mail art artifacts often reside. It takes no small measure of stamina and energy to make these "mailed art" artifacts accessible once again.

Late last year, Italian mail artists Vittore Baroni and Claudio Romeo, made a call for another international mail art congress year to take place throughout 2016. They happened to choose a well timed theme; a universal mail art "wake up" call to Move Your Archives. Neither individuals were necessarily implying that mail artists should relocate their archives or dutifully map them in a digital time frame. Rather, their call was left for interpretation, a kind of signal or metaphor to imply other "actions" like interacting with mail art materials through performance art in unlikely public spaces.

Baroni and Romeo's international "mail art congress call" echoed and resonated among 1st and 2nd generation mail artists. Anna and I are both aging and while the network may be an eternal one, we aren't. Our combined ages represent over 75 years of active involvement in mail art activities; a time when we both amassed over 50,000 mail art objects of all kinds; postcards, letters, rubberstamps, tickets, tags, essays, artiststamps, visual poetry, CDs, sound cassettes, performance art videos, zines, catalogs, artists' books, projects, T-shirts, posters, stickers, badges, photographs, copier art, cybermail, collage, and what not? Did I forget Anna's scientific banana research based on Rorschach Tests and my own handmade paper CrackerJack Navel Academy casts made from the belly buttons of Ray Johnson (photographed by Ray), John Evans, Buster Cleveland, John Cage and the Queen of Bananas herself, Anna B!

Inevitably, our paths merged, first through postal correspondences in 1984 and two years later, during a person to person meeting at a mail art congress event. This first meeting occurred at The Canadian Correspondence Art Gallery Mail Art Congress and Workshop thanks to the efforts of a first generation mail artist, Don Mabie, a.k.a. Chuck Stake who, in 1986, was the Director of Calgary's alternative space, Off Center Centre.

It was nearly thirty years before I saw Anna Banana again. I made a special trip to the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York to meet Anna personally and to see her retrospective exhibition which opened on March 3, 2016 with it's clever title "45 Years of Fooling Around with A. Banana". Anna also gave a public presentation at her Pratt opening, "Anna Banana Artist Talk/Conversation" which was followed by a New York Correspondence School Dinner on Friday, March 4. Before parting, we exchanged a few words after the Correspondence Dinner about the disposition of our respective mail art archives.

For some time Anna had decided to map her mail art archive of many thousands of mail art papers and artifacts. I've been mapping my own Eternal Network Mail Art Archive for over six years now and have created a database which has helped me immensely in the creation of several manuscripts that are in various stages of completion. Among these manuscripts is a comprehensive, 1,200 page Archival Mail Art Diary: 1978-2000. There are over 20,000 items of correspondences, postcards, zines,

Dear Anna,

thanks for informing me of *Archival Organization and Description* by Michael J. Fox (isn't he a film star?) and Peter L. Wilkerson. Copyright on this information is dated - 1998. After reading through this text I found the subject matter about archiving interesting, but in many ways irrelevant to how it pertains to mail art and institutions.

There are moments while reading this document I was reminded of government tax form instructions. Still, I wouldn't call it a waste of your time. There's one paragraph, for instance, that described the "collateral relationship between one or more archives". That certainly would characterize Anna Banana's archive, Guy Bleus', Niels Lomholt's, Mogens Otto Nielsen's or my own Eternal Network Mail Art Archive. All mail art subjects, issues, and documents have an abundance of "collateral relationship".

There are other "general" items of interest that are relevant to mail art such as the heading "Most collections lack any formal means of identification."

- Because there is no formal identification, archivists extract, compile, and extrapolate information from the collection rather than transcribe information from a standardized source". This bullseye is ground zero as it pertains to mail art archiving. The point to remember is that mail art has no established "standardized source" - every mail artist's focus of interests are varied and quite often at odds.

Fox and Wilkerson do suggest that it isn't necessary to describe or list every item in the archive. You can take heart in that and save yourself a lot of time. There are over 20,000 items in my archive... It's enough to arrange them in fields with dates,

size, media, titles, cross references, etc. etc. Clearly, it's your function to determine what is included or excluded. It might not, however, meet my own criteria or agenda. After all, we're not administrative robots. We are artists who give voice to our archives "in the first person". We are not disinterested laboratory technicians. There are no formulas to archiving our mail art. Like Fluxus, mail art archives demonstrate tendencies.

We aren't and can't be impartial. We "are" our archives. I'm comfortable with that view. But in a larger context, as mail art archivists we play a paradoxical role. We realize as we peel away the levels and layers of our networked artifacts that these items were created outside of established systems of identification.

Mail art exchanges could be defined in Latin as a kind of *modus operandi*; a particular way or method for doing something. Or perhaps ours could be a legal definition for committing anti-art in the creation of more than one crime. Certainly the East German Stassi sent informants to spy on Robert Rehfeldt and other mail artists during the

Move Your Archive 2016 (M.Y.A.)

(H.Y.A.) Hack Your Archive 2016



rubber-stamps, artiststamps, posters, essays, mail art exhibitions and related ephemera representing 22 years of international networking between myself and 1,450 fellow mail art collaborators. All of my 400 or more correspondences are annotated as are approximately 2,000 additional letters from mail artists, Ray Johnson, Bern Porter, Edgardo Antonio Vigo, Shozo Shimamoto, Rea Nikonova, Anna Banana, Buster Cleveland, Lon Spiegelman, Graciela Marx, Clemente Padin, Fluxus artists Ken Friedman, Jean Dupuy, Dick Higgins, Geoff Hendricks, and many more.

Preparing this archive involved several excursions to major institutions housing mail art archives. The research took me to Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts Archive (University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA), The Museum of Modern Art Library, (NYC), The Ray Johnson Estate, at Richard L. Feigen & Co. (NYC), and The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. Some of what I learned during this process I offered as advice in this recent correspondence posted to Anna Banana.



Cold War. But such paranoia by the state and it's Keystone Cops is somewhat laughable. For if mail art objects are often created to taunt the very systems that impose established authority and structure, how can a stored away mail art archive challenge the status quo of an institution such as the Getty, or the Prado? Our interaction as equal authorities and our networking collaborations were often chaotic, undisciplined approaches to cross cultural communication. Remember "Burn your archives"? So few actually did. Again, the paradox. I read somewhere that the "most important part of mail art has not been in the products which have been created, but the structure of interaction which has evolved". The Getty document portrays this observation about the "structure of interaction" as "content analysis". And they recommend that "content analysis" is a skill developed by working under the guidance of an experienced archivist. The "system's criteria" for quantifying archival mail art is as useful a recommendation as forcing a round peg into a square hole. I imagine there are few "experienced mail art archivists" within the the Getty. Experienced mail art archivists must be invited before they can assist institutions holding mail art archives. In 1995, I corresponded with Eric Vos, an independent researcher, publicist, and critic living in Amsterdam where he was an Assistant Professor of Literary Theory at the University of Amsterdam. During that year he referenced mail art in a leading anthology, *Integrand Poetics: Essays on the interrelations of the Arts and Media*, edited by Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, Hans Lund and Erik Hedling (1997). Eric Vos is important for his scholarly efforts to organize "Archival Materials from the Jean Brown Collection" at the Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities. He wrote in a letter to me dated March 14, 1995, commenting about archiving that still resonates today. Vos, upon reading my University of Calgary Press anthology, *Eternal Network* (1995), agreed with my criticism of the Getty's system for classifying mail art. Vos stated that his organization of Jean Brown's materials "had to be executed not from a scholar's point of view, let alone from an artists, but from a bibliographer's". In 1992, The Getty didn't want Jean Brown's Archive for it's mail art, they were interested in Dada, Surrealism and Fluxus artifacts. Today, they might consider consulting with a mail artist, but it has taken nearly twenty five years for them to reach this point of consideration. Vos described his frustration with what he described as "common ground" required for linking two bibliographic parameters, "format on the one hand and the various, highly divergent systems of classification through subjects headings/local field headings on the other". Vos cited the example of Rare Book Genre headings, "If a work consists of less than 16 pages, it is 'automatically' regarded as ephemeral, implying the use of Special Collections classification headings, which may differ from the systems used to classify similar works of more than 16 pages. None of the systems are well-equipped to deal with the fact that some materials were originally gathered as a collective enter-

prise, e.g. a mail art show". In describing the subject fields such as correspondence and periodicals at The Getty, Vos wrote: "Hovering above all this is the almighty thoroughly idiosyncratic God of the Library of Congress Subject Headings". Nearly two decades after Eric Vos' correspondence, I made the following observation: "The passage of time has accomplished little within academia for an online solution that will enable art historians access to prime sources for information, especially materials gathered in the collections of leading participants of the mail art movement". Returning for a moment to The Getty's *Archival Organization and Description* by Michael J. Fox and Peter L. Wilkerson, on page 21 of this "how to archive" text appears an Inventory/Register Template. A standard for archiving is presented here, but I think more clarification can be found if you look at University of Iowa's listings for Buster Cleveland's archived boxes, The Dick Higgins Collection, or my own NC92 Networker Databank Congress of 443 indexed items. Still, I want to underscore my comment that the subject fields for "making sense" out of mail art archives and collections is still evolving and that "traditional methods" are insufficient and often contradictory. Anna - it's your archive, you're the authority, and you understand the material, methods, and terminology far better than someone in academia. You need to invent and/or rework what "traditional templates" you are finding online. You will want your archive to "make sense" without making too much sense. Your archive will present a problem no matter which institution you take it to. It's your responsibility to form your archive in spite of the institution's template for cataloguing it. Hope this helps. In short, I've said it in previous correspondences - don't dwell on standard forms. Start by "doing" the deed... jump into the middle of your archive. Doing such will make as much sense as starting from the beginning or the end. Treat the process as one of your biggest works of art - and possibly, your most important CREATIVE statement. Borrow from multiple sources, because... believe me when I say this: there is NO CORRECT FORMULA, not mine, not The Archives of American Art, and not The Getty. There is inevitable overlap between archives, always search what CORRESPONDS and then formulate your own field of topics, subjects, media fields, etc.

It's late and I have another file to finish.
Cheers,
Chuck

P.S. My Archiving System resembles aspects of MARC & SAA, but to be honest it's CRACKERS.

ARCHIVIARE LA MAIL ART: NON NECESSARIAMENTE ALLA LETTERA DI CHUCK WELCH, IN UNA LETTERA AD ANNA BANANA

"La collezione ha avuto origine grazie ad una peculiarità mentale da parte del suo compilatore, John M. Bennett"
Citazione di John M. Bennett dall'introduzione alla John M. Bennett Publications Collection, 1940-1995, Biblioteca della Ohio State University

Cos'hanno in comune archivi artistici dedicati a petardi (crackerjacks) e banane? Un luogo ove studiare l'estetica degli spuntini più popolari nella cultura americana? No, si tratta di oggetti d'arte postale raccolti da due mailartisti nordamericani, Anna Banana e il sottoscritto, non si sono mai posti l'obiettivo di collezionare la mail art. In definitiva, dopo anni di raccolta, richiede parecchia passione e duro lavoro "estrarre" i contenuti di un archivio da scatinati e soffitti, i luoghi dove spesso vengono conservati i manufatti postali. Occorrono resistenza ed energie in non piccola quantità per rendere di nuovo accessibili questi manufatti di "arte spedita". Alla fine dello scorso anno, gli artisti postali italiani Vittore Baroni e Claudio Romeo hanno diffuso l'invito per un nuovo Congresso Internazionale della mail art che si terrà per tutta la durata del 2016. Hanno scelto un tema

