

Jon Foster 10 Years of Mail-Art

-jon foster, monday april 1 2019

<http://thejonfoster.blogspot.com/2019/04/jon-foster-10-years-of-mail-art-jon.html>

I've sent about 50 copies (maybe more) of my 10 Years in mail-art letter. A few more have probably seen it online through my blog. Five or six mail-artists have sent me handwritten comments (some as a piece of art) on what I wrote, most positive. Since the reason for writing the letter was to start a conversation, it was nice to see that people were interacting with my words. (...)

When I was digging on the IUOMA webpage, I noticed that I started sending mail-art (officially...does that make sense?) ten years ago. Sending mail-art has been a slowly evolving thing for me. Something I initially did sporadically began to take over more of my creative and not so creative time. The speed of the metaphorical mail-art ball rolling down hill has gained a lot of momentum in the past ten years. I can't see the ball slowing down anytime soon. For no reason I decided to list and briefly describe some of the things I've learned about mail-art in my first ten years. Some of these things are utterly unimportant while others are genuine points of fascination. You'll disagree, you're supposed to.

Please share the things you've learned.

Warning. I am not an authority on mail-art, I simply make it. I have no point in creating this list other than eliciting discussion or a mild smirk. No one's going to move me up the list of important mail-artists, that list was lost years ago. I'm probably not talking about you and if I am, what does it matter. I hold no PHD in mail-art, fluxus, dada, or any of the other super out there art movements you profess to love.

No one likes add and passes but everyone makes them.

For the first few years I never knew what to do with add and passes. Mostly I kept them in the envelopes, rarely adding anything to them and never moving them on. A decade later and I make a lot of them, mostly at work, and mainly because I can create them anywhere and then print them later. They're a way for me to be creative when I'm sitting at the computer far away from my paper toys at home. Some mail-artists have an aversion to add and passes like they have an aversion to the plague. I completely get this impulse. I get too many of them myself. Somehow I'm known as an "add and pass guy" even though I don't care for them all that much. I'm going to keep the 4 x 4 Add and Pass going for years to come, make it a consistent thing to see how it naturally changes over time.

There's a real division between mail-artists and those perceived as "crafters."

Maybe this is something that's been addressed out in the open...I don't know. If a self-proclaimed mail-artist (not all) gets a whiff of a craft like vibe there is an immediate and silly rift that's opened. The perception is that people who craft aren't mail-artists, and mail-artists aren't crafters.

Not enough people use color paper. I love color.

I use color paper. People make things in color so why not use color paper.

Europe has bigger paper than the U.S.

This is not an issue, not one that matters at all. Bigger European paper annoys me because of my interest in organization mainly because the paper won't fit on the plastic sheets I've already purchased. If I buy new plastic sheets to protect the paper then I'll need to buy new folders to put them in. To me, someone who likes things nice and neat, this is an utter idiotic nightmare.

I'm impatient in life but patient in mail-art.

I'll randomly receive a postcard or a letter from someone on the other side of the earth. It'll take me a few weeks to make a mark in my book and then another few weeks to mail a response. When I mail collaborative books out to folks I have no timetable of when they should come back. Rarely do they come back anyway. Nothing is ever urgent. This approach is the exact opposite of every minute of my waking life. Every minute of my day is broken into an hour block, or a twenty minute block, or five minute block. With mail-art it'll happen when it happens.

New mail-artists want to know the second you received their mail.

Folks new to the game have a slight worry to their approach. I don't think I've ever received a message of concern about a piece sent from someone who's made mail-art for a while. Not that they don't care about their creations, it might simply be the lack of preciousness related to the creation. Some things just don't arrive and you

have to get used to that.

Mail-art O.G.'s tend to test the newbies.

In my first few years of sending, I only thought of this as a theory. The longer you're involved the more people know you and the more lists you end up on. Because of this you get a mild reputation as being one of the "mail-art tent poles." While I'm not the first, second, third, or even fourth generation of mail-artists, I get it. So often you send to folks that quickly disappear. While it's bad mojo, I often send these folks broadsides or add and passes as my first bit of communication—something easy for me to make. On the second time around they'll get a collage. I have no way of knowing this is what the OG's automatically do, but I feel like it happened to me, and I feel like I do it as well. It takes time to build trust.

The cities don't seem to be the places where mail-art gets made.

San Francisco is a big city with a lot of mail-artists, but it doesn't seem proportionate. I would figure I'd get more stuff from NYC or LA but that isn't the case. It seems the country tends to produce more mail-artists than the densely populated cities. Maybe it's the space needed or resources, I don't know, but mail-art doesn't feel like a "city thing."

Mail-artists are old.

I think the biggest problem facing the community is that most of the members and almost all of the figurative leaders, (spokespeople?) are older.

Being creative and making great work has no age requirement, but for the health of this whole thing I wonder if we aren't doing enough to encourage younger folks who'll push it forward. In a decentralized community this work (I'm sure it happens) goes unnoticed.

Brazilians are motivated.

I set up this silly blog to have an easy to find database for mail-artists' addresses.

(<https://mailmesomethingart.blogspot.com>) The folks that jumped on the opportunity were overwhelmingly from Brazil. I began to look through my book and noticed page after page contained addresses from Brazil. Hell yeah Brazil, send that shit.

Where are the Chinese?

If I play armchair diplomat here, I can guess why the Chinese aren't present but that doesn't seem to be the whole story. It could be the lack of a proper ambassador that's keeping them from joining en masse? VPN's exist. Tons of Chinese have cash to use on things like stamps and UHU glue sticks. While I've thought about looking into this more, it seems like a useless endeavor all by myself. If I'm basically pissing into the wind with most of my projects, I imagine sending a few cards to select art museums and groups in China would be utterly useless. Who can we send over to rally the paper cutting troops?

Unsolicited mail-art rarely gets answered.

I know I know...the idea of the gift is often

central to mail-art even if that gift is mystifying and incoherent. While I like this idea of the gift and subscribe to this idea (mostly) I can only support it so far. This past year I got a PO BOX just so I could send items that might feel like an intrusion for the average person. Nothing offensive, nothing bad, just maybe a little too random for most folks. My favorite activity was to send mail-art to a whole building in Chicago. A couple friends who'd been there earlier in the year loved the building, made the suggestion. I sent to everyone in the building. I got nothing back. I sent to art museums all over the country and to ones just across town, nothing. I sent on the behalf of friends and to people who said they were interested in making things, nothing. I set up a "school" of N.C. mail-artists, sent out three or four times to the twelve people who said they were interested, but never saw any work produced. The invisibility does kill me sometimes. While I'm trying to help motivate people, stimulate conversation, and simply say hello...stamps are fucking expensive. The only pieces of unsolicited mail I sent that someone responded to came from a person I super admire at Dischord Records. His work was great. I continued to send to him (we're talking about Ian, here) after getting that card in the mail. A one percent response rate isn't that bad, right. I know many more looked at the mail for a while completely dumbfounded. I should have put a camera on the outside of the letter.

Every “civilian” is intrigued by the phrase “mail-art.”

When someone mentions in mixed company that you make mail-art, a certain group of people perk up. It's novel enough for people to want to ask about, but never clear enough for people to stay interested through a two minute conversation. If they're being polite I just tell them I “make postcards” and then mail them to strangers. If they look interested I'll dive deeper which will almost illicit a blank expression within seconds. I tell them to give me their address and I'll demonstrate what I mean. I mail them something and inevitably get no response. I'd rather spend 50 cent on sending them something they don't care about then having to lecture for three minutes to wondering eyes.

Mail artists need to get over their infatuation with Ray Johnson.

Yes, Ray Johnson is important but we don't need to keep copying him. The infatuation with his work is great to ignite the spark (that's what happened to me when I watched How to Draw a Bunny) but we have to move away from it. Cultivating your own perspective is a must. Less bunnies more belt sanders.

I still don't know what Fluxus means.

Mail-artists tend to wean themselves off of Ray Johnson by continually printing / shouting Fluxus over and over again. I still don't know what it means even after reading a couple books about some of its more famous proponents. I know it

involves hats of some kind.

It's great to put a face to the name.

While communication through the network is expected, the point even, there's only so much you can learn from cryptic messages, rubber stamps, and short salutations. I've been fortunate enough to meet a few folks I've corresponded with. I've met György Galántai in Hungary, Katerina Nikoultso and Chorianopoulou Maria in Greece, Allan Bealy in New Orleans, and Richard C. at various storage units in Thomasville and Charlotte North Carolina. In Charlotte I got to meet Marla Kittler when we dug through Richard's archives. In saying hello their artwork makes more sense, their mythology a little easier to understand. I hope to add more to this list.

Confusion equals art, I guess.

I've been brainstorming things throughout the week, just writing whatever came to my mind. "Confusion equals art" is something I wrote even if I'm not sure what it means. It feels profound but I doubt it is. I have nothing to follow up with.

There's a real division between mail-artists and those that call themselves "collagists."

Theirs a pecking order, it goes from crafters to mail-artists to collagists. People who call themselves collagists only seem to dabble in mail-art, but mail-artists often make collages. I was once told that "mail art is ephemera" and while I agree with that, so are the creations

made by collagists. The only different might be the quality of paper they put their collage on, and whether or not they're "serious" enough to sell it. When there's so little at stake, I guess people want to make sure their perspective is given enough space. Maybe the difference is just ambition.

Richard Canard's example has guided me.

The second or third person that ever sent me a piece of mail-art was Richard. He was encouraging and kind from the start when he didn't need to be. For four or five years I didn't make anything that was worthy of praise. Over time I learned that he was born in the same county as me in North Carolina. We had coffee one day. A few times I've helped him do a little rearranging at his storage units in North Carolina. Once he dropped off stuff at my house in Winston-Salem without ringing the doorbell. (I always try to not get caught when delivering to friends front doors). He gave me a lot of his old artworks as well as materials and most importantly, insight. He'd tell stories about this person or that person, what he did at SECCA, and a lot about his process of making things. He assumed you knew a lot and engaged you. In looking at his posts on the IUOMA site, I've noticed he's extended that kindness and insight to everyone he interacts with and he sends to everyone. He sends to the new folks that have just started and those that have been around since the 70's. He's humble and kind and genuinely interested in the creative world around him. He's my mail-art mentor.

There are too many nicknames, it's confusing!

I have a small list of human names (maybe an alias) and the nicknames that go with them in my neatly organized address book. More than once I've noticed I've sent things to a human name only to confirm it was a nickname months later. I bombed them with the same stuff for months. I've got an alias now so I'm part of the problem too.

The most distinctive mail-artists are the ones I can identify just by looking at their work while it's sitting in my mail-box.

My mailbox has a metal flap at the top. Whenever the postal carrier drops the mail in, they usually shut the flap. When they don't I can see the very top of the envelopes when I unlock my door. If I can tell who the mail is just by the very tip of the letter then that person is onto something.

There are a lot of inactive mail-artists that love getting mail without reciprocating.

"Get as good as you receive" I've been told, but I've also noticed a lot of folks with names that pop up over and over again that rarely send mail out, or at least not to me. Often these folks are the most vocal proponents for mail-art. I guess if you get to a certain plateau you can only send to select folks and still have a lot of new items in your mailbox. From my list of about four or five people (it's a small list) I try and mail something once a year to provoke a response. Year after year I get nothing back. A few of these names are cheerleaders for this whole thing,

active commentators.

The USPS has made it difficult to send packages out of the country.

Prices for US postage goes up all the time. Just this week (starting January 28th 2019) domestic stamps went from 50 cents to 55. Not terrible, much better than most of the rest of the world. International stamp prices are still at 1.15, which isn't bad either. Packages are out of fucking control. Every time I make add and pass books or something similar, I have to send the smaller ones overseas. A six page board book costs about ten dollars to send out of the country. While I still do this sometimes, I have to limit what I send and package things as lightly as possible. Because of the pricing I end up sending less adventurous mail out of the country.

Definitive statements about mail-art are met with sturdy resistance.

Don't write about mail-art, don't talk about mail-art, and don't have a sense of humor about mail-art...unless you're sending mail-art, then you have to. Say nothing that might implicate you in the understanding of sending or receiving art through the mail.

Microsoft Paint is enough for me.

While I don't use too many digital tools I do use Paint. I've tried the others and they seem too hard. I like Paint, it's easy and trashy and barebones like my postcards and broadsides. The early punk kids making flyers for house shows

didn't have a lot of tools so why do I need them?

I've only stopped sending to one person on principal.

Whatever people create I'm happy to receive, that's them, that's their creation. It was the mildly shady behavior that bothered me. I'd mail something relatively expensive for a project and then they'd tell me they didn't want to do it anymore. This happened twice in quick succession. I stopped sending things to them.

Mexican addresses are long.

Nothing more to say about this.

The proclamations of mail-arts death are numerous.

Someone seems to make this statement frequently; something to the effect that mail-art is dead or has recently died. Every now and again you'll see a post saying that it's been dead for some time and even give the date it left this earth. Who cares? The proclamations always come from people that want things to stay the same as when they first encountered them. Of course it's changed, of course it's morphed in order to keep people excited in it but that doesn't mean that it's dead. How could something die that has no proper tether to any ideology? If it dies it then could easily be resurrected with some glue sticks, bits of found paper, and a stamp.

Mail-art feeds into my thrift store obsession.

Before I became super engaged in making mail-art, I had a thrift store addiction. Mostly I bought

various forms of media and the super fashionable threads I wear on my back. It was an obsession but a limited one. Now that I'm constantly looking for materials for all sort of current projects, anything that looks usable ends up coming with me. I'm at thrift stores three or four times a week. The loot ends up in my car, gets dragged to the foot of my stairs, and then neatly organized into random piles upstairs where I make stuff. Sometimes it gets dragged back downstairs and around to the garage where I paint it, sometimes quickly, and sometimes over a period of weeks. All of it ends up getting placed in piles to be mailed out, and then it goes out, either with a stamp or metered. And then, like clockwork, I go back to the thrift store to start the process all over again.

Cool post-office workers.

I know one super cool post-office worker. Every time I end up in her line we chat about the stamps on the front of my packages, what's inside, and what new things she can expect to see. She's nice and seems genuinely interested. She recently told me that she accidentally overcharged me a dollar and twenty cents on postage from a visit I made weeks before. She saved it, but couldn't find it. The other two could care less, just more work. The folks who deliver to my mailbox change so often that I don't have a report with them.

Popping up in a show is always a nice surprise.

Rarely do I remember sending stuff for shows. I

send it and forget it. I almost always avoid the ones with themes since I can never think of anything clever enough. Months later, after everything has been scanned and shared and people have looked at things, I'll get a notice. My name will be in a long list of mail-artists, mostly as a tag on Facebook. I inevitably think to myself, "Oh yeah, I sent them something." The show in Ukraine in that small windowless concrete barn was the coolest.

People love telling me ways I can monetize my work.

90% of everything I've made in the past ten years I've mailed away. Once in a while I'll have things that I don't mind selling. Sometimes I'll put specific prices on collages / prints/ or canvases but most of the time I let the person decide their price. Trying too hard to make money takes away from the precious time I have to create. If I wanted to be a businessman I wouldn't have started in this direction in the first place. I just don't want to spend time trying to sell things; all my attempts to sell are half-hearted. My goal is to create and share. If I can make money to fund other projects, then I'll go for it...with fleeting energy.

That pointing hand rubberstamp is overused.

You know that one? Yeah, you do...its overused!

Not having physical evidence of years spent making terrible things is wonderful.

It took me a long time to make something I thought was interesting. I didn't go to art

school. I didn't draw things in notebooks when I was a kid. Any technique I have I randomly stumbled across it. I have no art making vocabulary. The tape-rip-method happened by accident one day. Making transfers in the sink happened the same way, by accident. Years of terrible mail-art is sitting in someone else's house, thankfully.

Mail-art is my punk rock.

Punk rock is all about the creator's noise and their passion they put behind it. Punk rock is about building community and finding a way to be creative while doing it, which to me, is the most exciting aspect of mail-art.

And that's all I know.

John Held Jr. wrote / riffed on everything Jon Foster wrote on his letter... check online at Jon Foster's blog to read the transcription of John Held comments.

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