

# MAIL ART IS NOT CORRESPONDENCE ART

What is the subject of "mail art"? The subject matter, the content, if you will, apart from the image is the letter, the rubber-stamped imprint (now a thriving business, like offset printers), collaged paraphernalia, Xeroxed or IBM'd pages and pages and leaflets from St. Louis, from Oberlin, dirt from Milano, from Genoa, posters from Brescia, punk tabloids from Montana, from Wichita, from Wichita Falls, postcards from Australia, more leaflets from Warsaw. All and more are now considered under the aegis, Mail Art!

Mail Art is not correspondence art, although they may be distant cousins. The distinction, I think, is a worthy one, worthy of some discourse. Hopefully, you will not be left with mere categories of distinction between these two viable forms of inexpensive art production, but you will be left instead with a sense of receivership, that is, how to receive gently, graciously, how to read things in terms of either their blatant publicity or the cherished notion of true sendership, of true sharing, of giving and receiving, the art of exchange, certainly not beneath even the most debauched artists of recent history. To take the problem too lightly is not the solution, to take it too seriously is even further from the truth of the matter.

Once again, consider the role of the postal service. How long will it prevail? Is it becoming an anachronism, perhaps, within our time. We must humble ourselves to the extent that the transition-phase of our art may be going out of work, may become disfunctional in a few more years, as TELEX systems become more and more efficient and economical, as other computerized information access systems become common fare. Extremes in theory will not suffice at this juncture, only a respectable attitude toward what it means to construct, to make, to select, and to send; in short—the art of exchange, how we exchange, what it all means this economy of art as thought and feeling. This treatise is a call for a more knowledgeable sense of primitive receivership and giving, a sense of what the economy can do for you, what the postal mails are really about, that subtle level of transition.

The term "Correspondence Art" was employed by Ray Johnson in his *New York Correspondance School* some years ago, supposedly over three decades ago (the exact date being difficult to verify given the ambiguous nature of the content). Anyway, the idea—the *raison d'être*—as I understand it, was to make contact with various artists through the mails using whatever imaginative means possible; in short, to establish a circuit or a system for exchanging art, a direct line of information. Spunky-style messages—a "hot line" of art among artists that by-passed the normal channels, the commercial channels, or the "go-to-the-gallery-and-hang-it-up" syndrome (Hang what up?). In other words, this essentially fluxus-related medium (specifically endowed to the larger system of the international mails) could easily by-pass the accepted and acceptable market of sacred art.

The label "Mail Art" won favor among artists in the 60s; but it wasn't until the 70s that the real "Mail Art" hey-day began, aided and abetted by conceptual theories here and abroad. Suddenly, it was all right to do just about anything and call it "Art". McLuhanism had a lot to do with this revolutionary insight in terms of recycling information from one medium to another (hence, the term: "intermedia" for

which, I believe, Dick Higgins has been credited). However, this whole notion of recontextualizing information, when applied to art world jargon and protocol, was ultimately an update of what Duchamp had discovered many years earlier: art *could* be anything. Are not most paintings dependent upon "ready-made" materials, i.e. tubes of paint, gesso, canvas, wood, etc.? Art *could* be anything, as stated in *Apropos of Readymades*, some years ago. The catch here, of course, is the *could*.

For example, one might inquire: Is photography art? Well, photography *could* be art. That is, the medium of photography might express a profound thought or feeling beyond its mere technical capabilities. Since Duchamp, who indeed revolutionized aesthetics in the early twentieth century perhaps more than revolutionizing art, a work of art no longer had to be dependent upon its medium or its technical facility. If anything *could* be "art"—better said: if anything or any material or any idea *could* be used or manipulated as art—then why not consider the mails, the postal service, as an extension of meaning in a work of art. Duchamp's "art coefficient" has two stages: 1) The artist completes the work through a process which may or may not converge upon his or her original intention, and 2) the receivership—the person or public audience viewing the work of art—completes the work by giving it meanings which may be outside the scope of realization given to the artist. Thus, by mailing a work of art, a work considered and fabricated for this purpose, the "art coefficient" is automatically assumed on the second level. The receiver of the mail art will have another take, another thesis of meaning, that completes the work.

Mail art can use anything and become art, contingent upon the faith of the exchange. The community of mail artists apparently accepted this faith of exchange from the ground up. Art had suddenly shifted its focus; it became a matter of *use*. In becoming a matter of use, mail artists made use of the postal system. They plugged into it, as it were. The implications were international; art could be sent most anywhere, except where laws of extreme censorship prohibited it. But usually, mail art has maintained an innocent appearing flare. Just as art has been relegated to after-the-fact decorative impulses, something to go with the couch and green drapes, the censorship of most art that passes through the mails is negligible. Furthermore, good mail art tends to speak in metaphors, devising ingenious schemes of transmission of codes, of signs, of ideas, that artists and intellectuals might share, and use to nourish this sense of a world art community.

Mail art generally addresses itself to a public context, an open-ended visual/conceptual concern; that is, mail art can be made as editions—postcards, posters, books, folios—and sent to 150 or 200 people. Other times, the mailings are less limited and less discriminatory, and literally hundreds or even thousands of receivers get hold of the word through these expansive editions. The context of working in small editions is one way of insuring that the receivership understands the rarity of the object in the same sense that a photograph or print might be considered "rare". But it is not rarity in itself that gives quality to a piece of mail art; it is the substance of its intended use, the nature of ideas, the

force of the message in relation to the *time* it is sent; therefore, mail art has an immediate topical inference. *Somehow the metaphor must connect with social or political issues which are within the grasp of its intended receivership.*

Regardless of how limited or unlimited the mail art edition may be, the issue of Correspondence Art in the true sense of what it *means* to correspond is a more private action, something less relegated to the public sector. Correspondence art implies that the message is more intimate, that the sharing is a one-to-one exchange, something that is particularly intended with the receiver in mind, a direct channel of communication on intimate terms. The history of literature is filled with significant correspondences of this type, though in recent years—since television, telephone, and cassette tapes this kind of written communication or even drawn image/text is less apparent. Correspondence has become less a part of everyday life. Like physical exercise, it is not something that someone else will insist upon in order for action to be performed. To correspond requires a choice, a decision, that two or more people make in consort with one another that they shall, in fact, *correspond*; they shall communicate directly and significantly to one another on less than public terms. (Although correspondences may eventually wind up in public hands, having a public use at some later time.)

Here is an analogy of what I mean. To do a portrait of someone is not simply a matter of taking that person's picture and some posed or indeterminate moment and passing it off as art. There are certain art historians, however, who will insist that Andy Warhol is upholding a revered tradition in western art with his *Portraits of the 70s* or his *Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century*. In fact, Warhol is not doing portraits. He is simply delegating a cosmetic decorativeness to the ortho-image of a public figure or a socialite in order to enhance visual appeal. This is not portraiture because nothing of the person is told to us. There is no presence, only a decorative visage without emotion and without character. This may be contrasted with Picabia's famous portrait of Alfred Stieglitz where the face of Steiglitz is not intended as the portrait but the presence of the photographer is understood through Picabia's anthropomorphic depiction of a camera. Whereas Warhol is unprepossessingly pretentious in decorating his faces, Picabia's portrait is prepossessingly disarming and utterly truthful.

If I can take this comparison one step further and relate it to the present issue of mail art and correspondence art, I would be most satisfied. For it would seem that correspondence art, in the sense of which I remarked a moment ago, is something more than any object or collage or photo-image or leaflet that one might choose to reproduce and to send through the mails. On the other hand, mail art is essentially an idea—a democratic idea, that anyone can give and receive art. To send mail art is a performance gesture usually emphasizing the effect of the visual idea or image inherent upon the page or envelope in reference to a topical situation, aesthetic or otherwise. To correspond, however, is a literary action. The content is less abstract and more directed toward the intimacy of the receiver. Whereas Warhol's "portraits" are outwardly directed toward topical circumstances, as in the images of Elvis, Mao, or Golda Maier, Picabia's portrait is an inwardly conceived expression directed specifically to his friend Steiglitz and the followers of the 291 Gallery who

would enjoy the wit and the insight embedded in the image/text drawing. Thus the content is different in either case, as is the intention. To correspond is an intimate action; to send mail art is a public one, perhaps, less arcane in its meaning.

The action of correspondence, however, reaches beyond the scope of literature in any positivistic sense. The image/text is a term often applied to ideograms; that is, word-pictures which express abstract ideas, mudras on the page, pictographic processes that evolve into communication, into a shared experience, the idea of exchange. Correspondence, therefore, suggests the more personal aura of a community, even if that community be two people, a dyad, the smallest sociological group. This is to say that social, political, economic, religious, and aesthetic concerns may and do enter into correspondence by both word and image or by word-image or by writing, literature in the traditional manner of recording inner-speech.

In 1966, while living in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, Kenneth Kramer, a graduate theology student, and myself made a decision to correspond. In other words, we agreed upon a medium by which we could exchange ideas. We agreed to send our ideas—our exegeses, as it were—through the mails, from Newton Centre to Philadelphia. The reasons—the exact rationale—for doing so were not entirely known, realized, or understood at the time. Kramer and I simply recognized the need to communicate, and therefore, to correspond, to keep in touch with ideas. We avoided chit-chat. We avoided over-conscious narration. The concern was to express inner thoughts openly, wildly, fervently—just the opposite from the academic writing we had both engaged in and would continue to do so. Academic scholarship rarely permits what Barthes called "bliss" in terms of receivership.

As the correspondence progressed, we changed residences several times. The late 60s was incredible: socially, politically, the escalation of a war in Indo-China that we hated. There were difficulties with each of our marriages, financial problems, struggles to be creative and free from the restrictions that our society imposed upon us. Hence, the content of the letters and cards and paraphernalia became intensely penetrating at times, really searching and exploring deep (as well as some frivolous) ontological/psychological/aesthetic/cultural phenomena. The letters were defensive at times, silly, insightful, even sardonic. Interestingly enough, the Kramer/Morgan correspondence has been going steadily onward for 17 years with only a couple of three-month lapses, one in 1968 and one in 1976, both on the heels of divorces. The exchanges normally occur on a weekly basis, if not semi-weekly.

Comparing this action with mail art I have sent, often anonymously to other artists or shows, I sense a considerable distinction. The literary or image/text means employed in a correspondence—not necessarily to discuss "personal" matters, but simply to *write*, to express subconscious ideas and metaphors through highly-charged, banal, and hybrid forms of language; in short, to react to life as it hits us square in the eye—this is more than purely visual; it is a level of conceptual performance.

The fact is that Kramer and I decided to correspond, made a decision, free of intentionality, for the most part, on any conscious level; the correspondence did not begin as an art piece or art action or mail art, but it has by now evolved into

something profoundly intense and interesting. (We each have notebooks and binders filled with the originals plus one copy of each letter. These will eventually be edited sequentially into a manuscript, artists' book, or whatever.)

The kind of language that distinguishes these letters became apparent to me while corresponding from Denmark, where I lived and painted for five months in 1970-71—that the language presented through correspondence had the potential of art without pretending to be it. It could evolve directly from the raw material of everyday life on many levels of consciousness. It could evolve as a simultaneity of thought process, rather than progressing as an imposed linearity working only as a narrative form on one conscious level. The event of writing a letter was close to a diaristic approach except with the "other" lurking in the mind as recipient of the word/image action. All of a sudden, after a warm-up period of four years, the letters started to feel like "art". At one point, I

sent Kramer a single boxing glove found in front of my house in Oakland in 1970—a simple action, an event, communicated through the mails, asking for receivership, asking from completion of meaning, yet without a word or label attached other than the address of the receiver.

Mail art? Perhaps, but not anonymous. Mail art can be anonymous, can be editioned, can be political, can communicate art world messages, but correspondence art is more personal, more experimental, more inward. Correspondence may become self-consciously poetic as well as inadvertently funky, reflective, and abstract. But the potential of correspondence, as in any art, is not one of classical rules or necessarily systems of exchange; the emphasis is not formal, but substantial, an inward set of meanings expressed or told outwardly, given light, as meaningful exchange.

—Robert C. Morgan

*Editor's Note: Selections from the correspondence of Kramer and Morgan are available for exhibition in a library, bookstore, gallery, museum, or alternative space. For more information, contact Robert C. Morgan, College of Fine & Applied Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, P.O. Box 9887, Rochester, NY 14623.*

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