

THE QUESTION OF MAIL ART

by Guy Bleus, John Held Jr., and Carol Stetser

Introduction, by John Held Jr.

I received the following letters from Guy Bleus and Carol Stetser on the same day (March 29, 1991), and they seemed to encapsulate a dichotomy that is prevalent in Mail Art; namely, the contradictory positions that the phenomenon should, or should not, become historified, preserved, and unhinged as a free and unencumbered creative act very much in the tradition and spirit of Dada.

As I have frequently written about Mail Art, I take criticism such as Carol Stetser puts forth to heart. Besides writing, I have lectured on the subject and amassed a substantial reference archive. I have acted as if I want Mail Art incorporated into art history, and I do. It's important to me and a lot of other folks on the planet that have labored long and hard under its yoke. We see Mail Art as having opened new avenues in a global approach to thinking about art and life, and in breaking down the boundaries between artists and non-artists (and exploring what the definitions and/or differences are). By acknowledging its rightful place in the progression of twentieth century avant-garde tradition, more people will be exposed to the medium and become aware that the thrust of progressive contemporary art is not towards the commodification of the art object, but towards the elimination of boundaries between people of different cultures, and an understanding that we possess a great many more similarities than differences. This is true not only in the practice of international Mail Art networking, but of its practitioners as well.

But above all, this is art that is fun, pure and simple. Mail Artists enjoy looking forward to the postal encounter every day, and we all want to keep it that way. The question boils down to: will all this self-examination ruin the joy of Mail Art?

I say no. Mail Artists have been their own curators, critics and archivists. We have set ourselves up as an alternative to the mainstream and have progressed on a parallel course. No one tells the Mail Art story better than Mail Artists. We are being ignored by the establishment that profits from artistic gain. They perceive us as weak and ineffectual, posing no threat to the status quo of art as commodity and investment.

Mail Artists say that boundaries are made to be crossed. Just as the lines between artist and non-artist are blurred, so is the notion of a quality art object. Who dares set himself up as judge? In Mail Art all contributors participate on an equal footing, their progress only measured by the energy they devote to posting letters and communicating within the Eternal Network. The power of Mail Art is the energy one receives in return from the energy expended.

The essays by Stetser and Bleus represent a fortuitous convergence that encapsulate two divergent viewpoints. I believe in the "correspondences" which occur in the mailbox.
--John Held Jr.

WHERE A MAIL ARTIST DELIVERS THE MAIL

I've written about my travels all around the world, but I've never written anything about my experiences in mail art. I guess it's because I'm still doing it. As Colette wrote somewhere, "You can't write about love when you're making love." But I can tell you the hows and why I got started.

In July 1978 *Umbrella* reviewed one of my self-published photography books. The periodical contained lots of interesting information, so I subscribed. I had no idea what the frequent references to mail art meant.

By January 1979 I still didn't know what it meant but I took a leap nonetheless. I can still recall my excitement when I mailed a postcard of a Martian umbrella into Judith Hoffberg's *Umbrella Mail Art Show*. And when I received the catalog full of so many wonderful images and such playful exuberance -- I was hooked. I knew what Mail Art was, but I couldn't explain it.

At that time I lived in a rebuilt tin shack that was once a miner's cabin in the small town of Oatman, Arizona in the Mohave desert. Wild burros still roamed the hills and the coyote trail passed in front of our house. Summers we had rattlesnakes on the front porch and scorpions in the bathroom. The water pipes froze in the winter and the asphalt roads melted in the summer heat. The human population numbered 200 and consisted primarily of retired people and bums. I had no telephone and no TV. The closest gas station was 15 miles away, the supermarket was 25 miles. But in this "authentic Western ghost town" of Oatman was a post office where I worked for several years. And in my mailbox was mail from all over the world.

In a small town you spend a lot of time discussing the weather, the potholes in the road, who is sleeping with whom, and who got drunk last night. The gossip bonds a community together and helps pass the time, but it does have its limits. My correspondence had no limits. Mail art opened the world to me. It brought me information and stimulation and friendship from all over the globe. It gave me hope and kept me from becoming as crazy as my neighbors.

Mail Art also taught me the relevance of my own life. The artwork I received fed my brain, but the personal notes fed my heart. I loved receiving pictures of my mail art friends, their families, their studios, their homes. I liked to hear about their vacations, their jobs, their moods, their likes and dislikes. And I finally realized that my correspondents liked hearing about my life too; that I was as interesting to them as my artwork. Mail art radically changed my perceptions of myself as well as this world we all share. As the world became