

MAIL ART EXHIBITIONS & COMPETITIONS

POST HASTE: REFLECTIONS ON MAIL ART

Mail, Etc., Art: A Travelling Correspondence Art Exhibition, edited by Bonnie Donahue, Ed Koslow, Michael Becotte and Robert Fichter. Published by the University of Colorado, the Tyler School of Art, and Florida State University, Boulder, Colorado, 1980. unnumbered pages \$5.95

Mail, Etc., Art is an intriguing publication. Conceptually challenging, it is in many ways executed well and in as many ways severely flawed. It demonstrates the opportunities and problems inherent in the exhibition and study of mail art, and in those publications which attempt to discuss and to present an art form which over the last few decades has grown from a small underground network to a major international art movement. The mail art movement is certainly major in the number of its participants and exhibitions, though rarely major in the quality of historical influence of many of those participants. Of course, as they say, not every painting. . . (fill in the blank.)

The catalogue grew from a valuable basic idea. The University of Colorado launched a mail art show in January of 1979 at its Fine Arts Gallery. The show, over the next year, traveled from the Colorado campus at Boulder to the University of Southern Illinois, Edwardsville; Tyler School of Art, Elkins Park, Pennsylvania; Florida State University in Tallahassee and back to Boulder again. It is now on a new round of travels. Participants have been welcome to send work to any and all stops of the exhibitions.

Each of the exhibiting institutions was to help with the publication of the catalogue, preparing and printing their own section. The exact mechanisms of this collaborative publication—costs, printing and other aspects of this venture—are not explained in the text. Therefore, one of the most worthwhile aspects of this experiment is sadly not detailed for those who might attempt to study it as a model for other exhibitions.

Each of the sections of the catalogue has a distinctly different look. The section designed at Colorado is designed as work in itself. Filled with color printing and richly patterned pages, the works illustrated are subsumed into an overall collage of images. Some of the images are striking—Ed Koslow's mailman and a postcard from the always poetic Richard C. catch the eye. A delightful concrete poem by John Fisher stands in the pattern-poem tradition typified by the 17th-century Englishman, John Herbert. The lush use of color throughout the Colorado section overwhelms most of the individual works. Perhaps this is appropriate. The majority of the works tend toward the look of casually tossed-off postcards or the stupidly "naughty." An example of the first is the rather senseless series of cards by the mail art entrepreneur from Cleveland named Baron. The second is typified by the contribution of "Fast Cheap and Easy Graphics" depicting a Bobbsey Twin girl with a Hitler moustache, superimposed on a background including patterns, stars and Swastikas. It simply doesn't seem productive to waste the energy, design and printing that went into pages such as these two.

The Tyler section was presented in a much more straightforward way by Tyler's photography department. While the

presentation was not as studiously "innovative," the work was far better. Each work was chosen with regard to its qualities as a work of art, presented as a work of art which can stand on its own. Great care went into the selection, photography and presentation of the Tyler section. As a result, fewer but stronger works were included in this section than the last. Among the most interesting works seen is Craig Anderson's mailed ladder. The ladder is historically related to the genre of the mailed object, an area neglected by recent artists. This piece is a reminder that more can be done with the mail than postcards and printed collages. Even so, collages can sometimes work well—as Barbara Aubin's angelic salute to the exhibition demonstrates. One suspects that Aubin's card is better suited to the texture and style of color photography in illustration than to the object form in the real world, but in this printed format, it works well.

Hand-sewn object is represented by Sas Colby, neatly and elaborately drawn handwork is represented by James Maxwell's cards. Frances Butler's cut-out hands are clever constructions which must have worked well as physical art objects, and they remain thought-provoking here. The Tyler presentation is most satisfactory.

FLORIDA STATE SECTION

The cover to the section from Florida State is strong—a black and white reversal showing a mailbox with the show title emblazoned on it. Highly effective treatment. The section itself is not as entirely rewarding. The selections seemed to be chosen neither for overall design of pages, as in the Colorado material, nor for individual excellence, as at Tyler. Rather, a selection of typical mail art entries almost suggests that the material which arrived on a given day was chosen as a sampler. Three items in the sampler are worth noting.

Paul Carter's latest project is represented by a descriptive form. The form is not "typical" of Carter, however. It represents the first phase of a current project. The first phases of Carter's projects are never "artistic." They are used to gather in the materials and information from which he creates his engaging, ingenious art. His works often involve friends and colleagues in collaborative ventures.

Now, through the "Mail Art Intelligence Centre" he is widening his circle of collaborators. Karen Anderson's piece, *Midnight in the Alley*, is strange and disturbing. It's a work within which content is important. Narrative, perhaps even autobiographical, nonetheless mysterious, it includes three photos: a sculpted male statue wearing what appears to be women's panties; a photo with a vague image of a woman in sack-like, patterned clothing; and a shot of a woman, nude from the waist up, lying on asphalt or perhaps on a carpet. The photos are taped to a paper on which some overdrawing is worked, together with a drawn and redrawn title line. It makes one want to know more.

Finally, two pieces from Mirosljub Todorovich. A reproduced manifesto of his "Signalist Project" looks quite good. Todorovich through his signalist movement and terminology however has tried improperly to subsume other, more original art under his rubric and influence by purporting to have named it and framed it within the context of Signalism. The second piece on his page, four stamps, demonstrate the po-

verty of much of his own art. He fails to spend as much time considering his work as considering his posture in the art world: a cautionary example by which many artists can profit.

SCHOLARLY CONTENT

The scholarly content of the catalogue deserves attention. Jean Edith Weiffenbach is to be congratulated for encouraging and aiding this adventuresome exhibition. One note must be made. She speaks of the "complexity of design" of the catalogue as "congruent with the phenomenological complexity of mail art." Mail art is *phenomenally* complex. But *phenomenology* entails study, analysis and description. Genuine attention to those three modes of relating to mail art is scarce. Only a few scholars have given serious attention to mail art. One of the finest of these is Michael Crane, Gallery Director of California's San Jose State University. His history of mail art is the first full study in the field. Another major scholar who has discussed mail art is the anthropologist Marilyn Ek Dahl Ravicz. Her doctoral dissertation at University of California, Los Angeles covered some aspects of mail art and her recent articles have dealt with it in depth. Other critics have written on mail art widely and well, including Thomas Albright, Jean-Marc Poinsoot, and Thomas Cassidy. Nothing resembling either phenomenological study or a genuine scholarly or historical viewpoint is evident in *Mail, Etc. Art*. Nor do we find any serious attempt to write a critical or analytic overview. It is unfortunate that in encouraging the participants to create their own show, Prof. Weiffenbach did not insist that they bring to the "scholarly" side of this exhibition the same attention to excellent scholarship that she brings to the projects she organizes.

ESSAYS & INTERVIEWS

The catalogue essays and interviews deserve analysis for their flaws as well as their merits. Ron Gasowski, a teacher at Arizona State University, interviews himself in the guise of his alter ego, Marc D'Chump. He has some apparently reasonable things to say in support of his view on art. He even makes a neat distinction between correspondence art and mail art. He gives a good philosophical defense, whether one agrees with his view or not, in support of "trashy collages." Despite all this, he falls sort of proving that his loose philosophy serves the high ideals of democratic art-making that he espouses.

R. Pieper interviews Ray Johnson in a text which is somewhat informative. It would be very useful if placed in a context which neither Pieper nor Johnson provided. For over a decade and a half, my writings and lecture praising Ray Johnson have been public evidence of my belief in his genuine importance as a figure in the history of mail art. However, he is not the only important figure in mail art, nor the only well-known artist to deal in mail art or to influence its development. Ray's interview obscures history in a rather self-serving way. He notes, for example, that the dates for the establishment of the New York Correspondence School cited by the careful scholar, Michael Crane, in an essay published in the *Lightworks Envelope Show* catalogue, are incorrect. Johnson does not state that he was, on over a dozen occasions, written to and telephoned by Prof. Crane to ascertain dates and facts. He does not state that Prof. Crane

sent copies of his writings for commentary and correction by Johnson. And Johnson does not mention that the incorrect dates were actually supplied to Crane by Johnson himself. It is an act of bad faith, even of fraud, to supply incorrect information about one's own work to a scholar and then to condemn him for poor scholarship. Pieper, in making historical statements, has neglected careful research as well. In citing, for example, the important influence of the Canadians, their publications and lists, he describes them as a major locus of the growth of mail art. He neglects to point out the sources of their lists, or the major shows in Paris in 1971, and the Whitney Museum in 1970, which established precedents. Or the three major shows at Oakland, Seattle, and Omaha in 1972 and 1973, which were not only the first large international exhibitions, but shows of such size that no mail art project has ever included more participants from a wider geographic spread. Johnson is coy. He accepts the adulation implicit in his "fatherhood," and almost claims his own "grandfatherhood." He mentions that the Canadians stole his ideas without mentioning that the Canadians contributed their own ideas. Or that they were influenced by others. Nor did Johnson bother to mention those others who influenced the field of mail art. Pieper read some articles, to be sure, but the field of mail art. Pieper read some articles, to be sure, but did not come prepared adequately for an interview. As a result, the interview veered between homage to Johnson, Johnson's claims on his own behalf, his comments against others, and the delightful stream of conscious punmanship for which Ray Johnson is justly famed. The punmanship serves Johnson well. The one upmanship does a disservice to Johnson and to those artists whom he slights and to the readers of this catalogue.

Jim Field's introduction to the catalogue follows the Johnson interview. He discusses the show. But he, too, veers into a historical viewpoint which glorifies Ray Johnson while neglecting the several dozen artists equally important, such as Ben Vautier, Nam June Paik, Dieter Roth, George Maciunas and others. These many artists were not only represented in the Paris Biennial of 1971, but given prominent coverage in Poinsoot's *Mail Art*, the first historical anthology on Mail Art, also from that same year. Field's essay is intelligent. But the careful evidence gathered by scholars such as Crane has been ignored here to buttress the interesting philosophical observations of this essay with supporting evidence, and to augment the narrow range of historical facts with a richer attention to the facts would have been valuable. Otherwise, this piece ought to have introduced the show and attempted nothing more.

The final piece is a personal collection of thoughts on mail art by Barbara Jo Revelle. It discusses projects by artists such as Don Celender, Bruce Helander, Dick Higgins, and Revelle herself.

It's clear that the book is interesting. It is interesting enough that one can usefully devote a fair amount of precious copy space to its analysis. That is precisely because mail art is an important medium of contemporary expression. The sad fact is that the medium has never been given its due. This is unusual, given the many tens of thousands of artists who are creating mail art regularly. Even more deplorable, the lack of critical attention given to mail art has made it impossible for artists and scholars to carefully think

about and understand works of art which emerge through mail art. Discourse on art always helps the art: the opportunity to think, reflect and have the thought of others helps the artist. Those catalogues on mail art which do appear tend either to be overly congratulatory or ill-defined. Or as often happens, inappropriately prepared. Enough time and money was spent on this show, and certainly on this catalogue that the organizers could have done better. Mail art must be subject not only to the enthusiastic thoughts of its unquestioning proponents, but to the enthusiastic questions of those who support mail art without accepting every flawed premise or flawed work offered. Only when it is subject to thoughtful criticism will mail art mature. And only as a mature medium will mail art finally rise to its potential.

—Kenneth S. Friedman

● Aragon Centre, Documentation of Mail Art, is asking for original works, postcards, publications for an archive and for International Expositions about the area of the Integral Naturalism, a conception of Pierre Restany. Send materials to Bruno Talpo, Via Longo 9, 24100 Bergamo, Italy.

● From 6 - 26 March 1980, the Comune of Pescara exhibited work from the Center of Documentation, 1979, 100 works from the Museo Cavelliniano, a didactic show on mail art, with a catalog including essays on mail art.

● Since their inception in 1872, picture postcards have for the most part remained the same. Now we have American Audiographics Inc. of Waukesha, Wisconsin, which has come up with a new twist, the talking postcard.

Talking Picture Postcards look like oversized versions of those ordinary ones that have been purchased by tens of millions each year. But blended into the center of each picture is a six-inch acetate record that can be played on any 33 1/3 rpm phonograph. The first series is on Hawaii (for example, the Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor carries a radio news broadcast of the 1941 attack). The surfing postcard has the sound of waves. Each message runs 2½ to 3 minutes.

● The Postman Always Rings Twice, the mail art show last October at Santa Monica College, now is documented in a beautifully printed, tabloid size catalog which boasts the names and addresses of all participants, as well as an essay by Don Emery, one of the curators, and a statement by Lon Spiegelman, the other curator and executor of the catalog. Available to all participants, or write to Santa Monica College, Don Emery, 1900 Pico Blvd., Santa Monica, CA 90405 for further information.

TEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT GUGLIELMO ACHILLE CAVELLINI (for his brief stay in California in May 1980)*

*Sent to 750 of his California correspondents before his arrival

- 1) I do not speak the English Language
- 2) I suffer from art and stomach illnesses
- 3) I do not like cheese
- 4) I suffer when it's cold
- 5) I appreciate modern comforts
- 6) I like women
- 7) I like receiving compliments
- 8) I am very ambitious
- 9) I want to meet my American friends
- 10) Together we'll decide on the new destinies of art

Common Press deadlines:

No. 31: **Meetings**, edited by Pier Van Dijk and Robert Joseph, Vechtlaan 42, 7555 KZ Hengelo, Holland. 14.8 x 10.5, black and white. **Deadline: 1 June 1980.**

No. 33: **Meanwhile June 7th 1980**, edited by Russell Butler, 908 Main St., Gurdon, Arkansas 71743, USA. Format: 5 x 7 inches, black and white. **Deadline: 1 July 1980.**

APRIL SHOWS

Kent Gallery, Radford University, Radford, VA 24142. Any size, any media, any content. **Deadline: 1 April.**

DecaSHADennial Postcard Art Show. George Brett, Pitt Community College, P.O. Drawer 7007, Greenville, NC 27834. **Deadline: 16 April 1980.**

Outerspace Mail in Postcard Sale. **Deadline: 23 April.** AKA 2, 1649 Dwight Way, Berkeley, CA 94704, exhibited at Outerspace in Oakland.

Artless Art/Art Smart/Mail Art. Temple University Art Department. Exhibition 28 April - 5 May. All works to enter archives of the Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122. **Deadline: 23 April.**

ART WORDS/ WORDS ART. Open exhibition for Detroit area artists. 3 May - 24 May. Entry fee \$3.00. Juried by Ken and Ann Mikolowski. Shown at Detroit Focus Gallery. No mail entries.

Does Printed Matter? International Mail Art Exhibition, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia, USA. All forms including Xeroxes, books, photographs, quick copy art and rubber stamp art. **Deadline: 1 May 1980** to Richard Copy, c/o Dept. of Art, VPI, Blacksburg, VA 24061.

First Annual Montana Trout Art Derby. Postcard art will be photographically cataloged in the August 1 edition of Missoula Trout Review. Displayed at Downtown Design Studios 132 W. Front, Missoula, MT.

Rhode Island Show. Take a Polaroid SX-70 photo out your window in the direction you believe Rhode Island, USA to be. Then make an SX-70 of what you imagine Rhode Island to look like. Photos were due on 1 April to Philip Palombo, 65 Hillside Ave., Providence, RI 02906.

First International Workers Day, May Day 1980, Mail-In Art Show. No limit, no returns. Send to San Francisco Poster Brigade, P.O. Box 31428, San Francisco, CA 94131. Show from 27 April to 9 May at Intersection Gallery, 756 Union St., San Francisco. **Deadline: 25 April.**

MAY DEADLINES

The Fast International Biennial of Mo'airmail Art 1890. No special theme. Catalog returned to all exhibitors. All submarines and missions will be exhibited. After exhibition in June 1980 they will be sent on to generals, stenographers, bandmen, athletes, gardeners, conductors, drivers, bishops,

mayors, lords, etc. Only London Mail Art exhibition since Post-Impressionism at the Royal Artillery Armoury. Organized by Ti Parks and o'o. k.s. arp for Artlink. Deadline: 25 May. Mail to o'o k.s. arp, 106 Charlton Rd., London SE7 7EY, England.

Suitable for Binding Mail Art. Gray Gallery, 15 May - 15 June 1980. Format: 8½ x 11 with ½ reserved for binding. Deadline: 5 May 1980. Mail to Director, Gray Art Gallery, Jenkins Fine Arts Center, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27834. Catalog.

Contart Mail Box Print Biennale 1980, Krakow, Poland. Deadline: 1 May 1980. Contart Mail Box. Theme: Art in Contact. R. Rehfeldt.

JUNE DEADLINES

Intermedia and Performance Festival, 4 - 6 July, Wuerzburg, West Germany. Organized by Bazillus Art space. Send artists' publications, photos and documentation on performances, information about other art spaces and groups, manifestoes, life-histories, etc. Photos and other documents will be returned by request. This is not a mail art show. Proposals for performances are being requested for execution at the Festival. A catalog/bibliography of the contributors will be published and mailed to all participants. Deadline: 1 June 1980 to Peter Below, Bazillus, Steinheilstrasse 12, 14/8700 Wuerzburg, West Germany.

Mail Art Exhibition. Drawings, collages, objects, information, documents, photographs, films, tapes, video, poems, etc. for Centre de Documentacio d'Art Actual, which opens in September. Deadline: 15 June 1980. Send to Rafael C.D.A.A. ESPAI, Berlines 9/11, Barcelona 22, Spain.

First International Badge Show. No selection, no fees, no returns. Three sizes only for the buttons: 3 cm., 4.5 cm., and 6 cm. Deadline: 15 June 1980. A special badge show issue of Arte Postale magazine will be mailed to all participants.

JULY DEADLINES

Things to Think About in Space. Send for form to Mario Lara, 4124 37th St., San Diego, CA 92105, USA. All returns will be compiled as a catalog and sent to all participants. Donation of \$1.00 requested to help print catalog. Deadline: 1 July 1980.

Fashion Plate, an international showing of art on the theme of fashion. Public Bath House, Santa Barbara, CA. Sponsored by Surreal Guild, Pat Fish, P.O. Box 777, Santa Barbara, CA 92102. Send FashionPost. Catalog to all participants.

Marginal Art and Sociality. Comune di Monza, Galleria Civica. Curated by Nicola Frangione and the Alternative Art Magazine, Armadio Officina. Send for form to Nicola Frangione, Via Ortigara 17, 20052 Monza, Italy. Deadline: July.

AUGUST DEADLINES

International Fool! Mail Art Show. No returns. Catalog to all participants. Send to Le Point d'Ironie, c/o Jacques Juin, Am Schutzenplatz 191, D 2819 Riede, West Germany. Deadline: 1 August 1980.

Send postcards regular and oversized to Mail Art "gallery between the staircases", c/o R. Saunders, OK Post East, Currier Gallery of Art, 192 Orange St., Manchester, NH 03104, USA. No fees, no returns, everything shown. All who respond and affix a return address will receive a postcard from R. Saunders. Deadline: 31 August.

SCREE magazine is looking for material on photography and poetry/language for its next special issue. All submissions should be accompanied by a self-addressed stamped envelope. A review section will review photography and related poetry/ literary publications. Send for review to SCREE, Photography Issue, Duck Down, P.O. Box 1047, Fallon, NV 89406.

Everywhere in Chains. 1980 Show, Postcard Preservation Society. Send sound cassettes, videotapes, 8mm and 16mm film, cards, printed materials, posters, documents, books, photographs, stamps, Xerox, etc. No returns, no awards, a catalog to all participants. Deadline: 31 August. Send to S.D.H.S., Boundary Rd., Dubbo, N.S.W. 2830, Australia.

L.A. 200. Mail art exhibition celebrating the founding of the City of Los Angeles. 4 September - 3 October 1980. Theme: Images and Delusions of Los Angeles. Deadline: 17 August 1980. Sponsoring artists include Joan Borgman, Jerry Dreva, Jeffrey Burdett and Joseph Shuldiner. Send entries to Traction Gallery, 800 Traction Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90013. Exhibition opens 4 September 1980.

BRUNO TALPO VIA LONGO 9 24100 BERGAMO ITALIA

Experiments in non profit art



LOUIS ARAGON E . . .