

# INTERVIEW WITH ANGELA PAHLER & PETER KUSTERMANN by Dobrica Kamperelic

## THE NETMAIL TOUR

### How and when was your project born?

The idea began in summer 1991, when Angela's mother forwarded a letter to us from conceptual artist, H.R. Fricker, in Switzerland announcing 1992 as a year of worldwide Decentralized Networking Congresses. Fricker's invitation reached us in Japan, where--as a part of our World Art Tour--we were participating in Tajima Performance Festival through Masami Akita. We had been on this world tour since 1990 and wanted to continue as long as our savings would last.

Since we would not be able to organize a Congress in Minden ourselves in 1992, we decided to travel a bit faster in postmen's uniforms, carrying mail art from one Congress to another, all around the world. We appreciated the congress idea very much, since Peter had organized one in 1986 at home in Minden.

The combination of travel and Congress reminded us of Creative Thing's public marathon run in Los Angeles, where he transported Mail Art from and to his local networking friends posted along the route. So we decided we would do the same thing on a bigger scale: to repeat over one whole year what he did in one day, over 100,000 kilometers instead of 42 kilometers, with several hundred participants instead of a dozen. May you member Creative Thing's commemorative artistamp sheet about his action? We started producing similar sheets this year, a very rewarding activity.

So back up in the mountains in Japan in 1992, Angela got so enthusiastic that she immediately carved our NET MAIL Personal Delivery logo image as a linocut, and then we started printing our invitations during the night of that Japanese Festival to mail them out into the network as far as we could, to keep the project from the beginning as democratic and open as any mailart and networking activity should be, especially with regard to the Decentralized Networking Congresses (now cited as DNC).

### When and where do you start, how many friends did you meet in 1992, and how many countries did you visit?

We started in Trogen, Switzerland, as an homage to H.R. Fricker as one of the fathers of the Congress idea. At the first second of 1992, we collected the first piece of NET MAIL from him: an artist's envelope, which we delivered half a year later to Shozo Shimamoto in Japan. Eventually we carried more than 200 kilos of Net Mail, which would have cost over 20,000 dollars in normal postage. In our big registration book, we registered almost 4000 single pieces. On 31 December, we ended our project in the same place and in the same way we started, i.e. with Fricker, and the great Congress coordinator Kaufmann, in Trogen, Switzerland, looking back upon about 170 Congress meetings in 35 countries, during which we met roughly 350 networkers to bring to and also to carry their mail to other places. During these meetings, we wrote several dozen Congress Reports on current network topics from "The Role of Fe-Mail Artists" to "Com-

puters in the Network" and "The Network and the War." Also, we portrayed a series of networkers for Fagagaga's "Face" booklets. But many more people got involved in our NET MAIL project: visitors of our congress meetings, performances, exhibitions (e.g. in Split/Croatia and Oberlin, Ohio), slide shows (e.g. in Lebanon, NH and in Novi Sad, Serbia and in Brisbane, Australia; class lectures such as in Hannover, Germany and in Naples, Italy. Even train conductors got interested just by seeing us work (e.g. between Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Minnesota, Minn. on an Amtrak train) and travel agents (e.g. in Kowloon, Hongkong) and museum and library directors (e.g. the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Central Artists House in Moscow, and the Tate Gallery in London. This fully met our intentions to keep the network open to all sides according to Joseph Beuys' definition of art and the artist. So, all in all, the total number may well be double the 350 networkers we cited. If you consider the countless media reports on our tour, we probably "infected" even more: newspapers spread the message in many languages as well as radio stations, TV reporters from Australia to Ukraine loved the very visual aspects of our tour: the uniforms and all those colorful pieces of mail. Many a postal carrier contributed an official badge, pin or sticker to our evergrowing fantasy outfits.

### Did you have some special experiences during your whole year's travel?

Yes, certainly. Let us just mention a few of the surprises in the mail that were carrying:

1) the kangaroo bone from Tani in Australia to his native American friend, Rosy Gordon in Dallas, Texas: Rosy hung the bone with his other bones in his traditional open air collection on the veranda outside his house;

2) the umbrella covered with images of Mickey Mouse from Minden to Daniel Daligand in Paris, the leading Mickymousologist in the network, a specialist for his "Mickey" collection;

3) the art beer bottle from Marcel Stussi in Basel, Switzerland to the congress meeting in Milano, Italy, where it was shared by Fernanda Fedi, Gino Gini, and Paolo Barile. We transported this bottle across an international border within only 7 hours (including a train delay), and thus beat once more the official, slow, dreaded, expensive, monopolized state postal GPO services. And above all, our transport was free of charge!

4) the heavyweight tightly glued and wrapped photo album with all the photos of a whole love story of Mike Dyar, San Francisco, now sealed so closed that it can never be opened again to watch the lovers. We carried this voluminous book object to Jose Oliveira for his art book collection to Portugal, and it occupied half a backpack.

5) our official German passports with many a colorful artist's rubberstamp in it and the visa from Tui Tui (Dogfish in Seattle) caused a customs officer to refuse us entry into Quebec at first. We could hardly prevent her from confiscating our unique ID's. At last, she accepted their very mail-art contents as beautiful.

And here are a few exotic ways of transport:

1) swimming with the mailbag through an icy blue lake in Finland under the midnight sun to deliver NET MAIL to Reima Makinen in Kaugasala;

2) arriving by coach and horses at the daily afternoon shootout in the central square of Jackson, Wyoming in America's Wild West, to meet Gary Connors;

3) sliding down a snowy Swiss Mountain path on a sled to collect the first piece of Net Mail from Fricker in his home village of Trogen, and again to deliver the very last one to him.

#### **How did our networking friends react to the situation in the (ex-)Yugoslavian countries?**

They gave us their Net Mail to carry, often very special notes of support and solidarity, and at the same time, they warned us not to go to countries at war. It is very difficult abroad to realize where the limits of this war are and to judge the actual situation in the different new countries.

Canadian GPO refused to transport our preparatory itinerary letters to Serbia if we wrote "Yugoslavia" on them, though our Serbian friends claim that they still live officially in Yugoslavia.

Croatian GPO did not accept any letters to Serbia at all; we had to carry them ourselves, together with those from our friends. They and their friends even used us as a surrogate postal service to Serbia--an unexpected new function of our project.

Several networkers showed initiative of their own as well as civil courage by organizing supportive actions against the war and against the blockade, e.g. Lon Spiegelman and his Los Angeles ZTZU friends with their appeal to write to one's congressman.

Andrej Tisma's defense of mail art in the face of war has stirred many emotions and reactions in the network, like the foundation of his institute of love, as well as Rorica's and Dobrica's Open World netzine.

The readiness for artistic and intellectual support from the network for all (ex-)Yugoslavian friends is quite notable, provided they do not fall into hatred and nationalism. But nobody from abroad dared to go there this year, not even those who had registered for the excellently prepared, sponsored and well covered DNC congress at Karlovci. A bitter experience for the organizers, who felt unduly stigmatized.

#### **What are your impressions of Yugoslavia and Serbia after your visit?**

It is dangerous to rely only on mass media reports. Personal visits were definitely better, though we still feel that we did not get full objective information. Every day, life was grotesquely normal, even full of hectic consumerism such as in Split and Beograd, Novi Sad, and Odzaci. The actual war area is rather limited in former Yugoslavia. Still the war is a horrible genocide, unimaginable in the 20th century, in the middle of Europe, explainable only from historic roots, though there is no excuse. Our networking friends make great efforts to stay cosmopolitan and pacifist within very narrow horizons. Their biggest heroic deed seems to occur in their hearts, attitudes and consciousness.

We wanted to integrated all of our Yugoslavian networking friends into our NET MAIL delivery of course. Beograd, for example, is a train stop on the way from Athens to

Budapest. So why not go and meet your old acquaintances there? We found ourselves, however, in the unexpected role of celebrated cultural blockade breakers. We were honored and pleased; it is nice to be in the center of attention, where you can speak out and be heard. But it was also a burden. We would have liked to talk much more about other networking issues than just about war and anti-war activities. But we had to realize that this was the most important networking issue then and there, that in this extreme situation every aspect of life becomes automatically related to the terrible war situation, including art, mail art, networking, of course. As Nenad Bogdanovic put it: "If the network really functions, we measure our friends in it by their readiness to share our grief and trouble."

We experienced a rich variety of witty contemporary networking performances by Bogdanovic, Supek, Kamperelic, Tisma, Jovanovic--always against the background of the war. Artists of such different ethnic origins like theirs (Hungarian, Serbian, Slovenian), who congress together like that, will certainly also be able to practice international solidarity, provided we all give them a chance to do so.

At the congress discussion in Odzaci, it became very clear that it is the artist's duty just now to speak up against the war and the blockade loudly and ever again (there are better international means to force an uncontrolled militia into peace talks). Not only do the Serbian mailartists need the network, but we also need them: the continuous artistic positive creative impact of ex-Yugoslavian countries on the network becomes evident in the mail art magazines from Beograd by the Kamperelics and from Split by Sojetlana Mimica. Valuable documentary work is done on the analytical level by art critics, Andrej Tisma and Balint Szombathy.

We would like to come back "after the war at 5 p.m." as the brave soldier Schwejk used to make appointments, to enjoy the genuine hospitality of our networking friends in a normal, relaxed, and open situation without the imminent urge to thank each other for more than just that. We would really like to network with our Serbian and other ex-Yugoslavian friends on more subjects than just this horrible war.

#### **Did you have creative art meetings apart from just visiting (un)known Mail Art friends and handing them mail art gifts?**

Yes, we participated in a series of bigger DNC Congress sessions with many participants (though by definition, every meeting with a networker was already a congress):

1) at Ed Varney's Museo Internacional de Neu Art in Vancouver

2) at Tui Tui independent territory, organized by Dogfish and Dragonfly

3) at Lon Spiegelman's Bugress meeting in Los Angeles

4) at Part II of the Serbian Congress in Odzaci in Nenad Bogdanovic's courtyard in Serbia

5) at Bill Gaglione's Rubberstamp Museum in San Francisco

6) at the opening of Vladimir Sutjagić's First Mail Art Exhibition in White Russia's capital, Minsk, entitled "Apokalypsis"

7) at Klaus Groh's Literaturium in Edewecht, Germany

8) at Atomic Arts' Congress in Woollouggabba, Australia

9) at the Rubberstamp Carving Workshop in Henderson State University, Arkansas

10) at the opening of Steve Perkin's Zine show in Iowa City, Iowa

11) at the Multicultural Festival in Trondheim, Norway through Roger Aasegg

12) at Mike Dyar's Spiritual Seance with Joseph Beuys' spirit in San Francisco

13) at the Congress in London's Tate Gallery with librarian, Meg Duff

14) at the Mail Art Museum in Koshiengudii, Japan through Shozo Shimamoto

15) at the New York Hilton Hotel Congress upon invitation of Clive Phillpot, librarian at MOMA

16) at the Court Session with Michael Duquette's union in Toronto against the closing of postal stations

17) at our Public Arts Postal Station with Dawn Redwood in Oxford-Cowley, England

18) at Anna Boschi's country estate performance session celebrating 30 years of Mail Art as an homage to Ray Johnson in Bologna, Italy

19) at the Museum Book Fair in Split, Croatia through Svenciliste Evening School

and not to forget all those slide shows we held about the history of mail art and networking, all those class lectures, all those performances, all those rubberstamp workshops which we held this year in our postmen's uniforms--plus all those radio, television, and newspaper interviews, just like this one.

The creative effects of our meetings are our own contributions to the running mail art projects of the friends we visited, e.g. Dyar's homage to Beuys, Mittendorf's "Who eats whom and why," Yaroslav's deblockade project. We, ourselves, produced above all color artistamp sheets about our congresses with participants' portraits. This was made possible through the helpful knowledge and technology of our North American friends, and their patience during long nightly hours of manual work over perforators and in copy shops. A very creative experience was the physical involvement that personal encounters in the network offer to everyone who is ready to expose him/herself to them:

1) Mayumi Handa shaved the postman's head completely (a highly recommended rite of initiation to the network), so that he could transport art messages for peace on his bald skull from Japan to Canada. Giving up your hair is a sacred act in Japan. Peter experienced with his body a cultural encounter.

2) Angela and Henning Mittendorf transformed us with white foam into ugly post-nuclear war monsters, a warning against the ever-imminent atomic threats.

3) Jerry Reid welcomed the postman in his Vancouver bathroom: he had taken Ruud Janssen's "Congress in the Bathtub" literally, so Peter was sitting together with him in his bathtub delivering his Net Mail. This all happened during a congress meeting. The participants found it especially hilarious that the bathtub was not filled with normal water, but with around 100 litres of green jelly pudding: networking sticks!

4) Angela painted an homage to Shozo Shimamoto on Jim Simm's head with natural ochre colored earth from the

local ground in the Congo in a 5000-year-old technique from the aboriginal Australians;

5) On the whole, our visit to neighboring countries in a uniform was a peace-practicing exercise, while coming as a German in a uniform has a disastrous tradition: our fathers and our grandfathers came as occupant soldiers, whereas we came as pARTners for joint art activities, wearing the "postman's uniform as a game, in order to change a historical pattern through an art action by personal creative involvement. We understand this travel not only as a chance, but also as an obligation.

#### What is your opinion on our "great project" as it ends?

This year has been a series of intense good vibrations; it has broadened, concretized, and deepened our understanding of the abstract network idea. On the whole, this project was an extreme **physical** experience, which was only possible in mutual support and constructive criticism between the two of use:

1) carrying all those bags and backpacks full of mail and a few personal belongings, with depots in Hongkong, Minden and Moscow

2) getting used to different climates quickly: from -45 C in Siberia to +45 C in the central Australian desert

3) experiencing the microclimates of every participant's and host's personal environment, not only on a physical level, but also very intensely on an emotional level, and, of course, also mentally: behind every single postcard, we found a whole creative personality: attractive, adventurous, inviting, worth our undivided attention

4) sleeping in trains, youth hostels, woods, airports, tents or being the welcome guests of our hospital networking friends, most of whom even restricted their smoking habits for us and geared their kitchen to us as vegetarians

5) lots of energy went, of course, into the mere organizing of such quick hit-and-run traveling. We would have liked to stay longer with quite a few networkers and carry home a series of appointments and invitations to visit each other, also for bigger mutual projects.

6) constantly writing our documentary diary with photos and text, which at the same time serves as exhibition material and will go as free documentation in several hundred copies to all the participants.

This project has also revived an historic art form in us: storytelling. We find ourselves again in a wonderful old oral tradition and experienced that re-personalization of an evergrowing network, which originated as a reaction against anonymous mass-art circuits and is more than ever subject to deterioration into meaningless photocopy mail trash today.

We need time now to relax and work on the documentation. We do recommend to all networkers to play art postal carriers themselves for a while: there is no copyright on our idea, and the experience is definitely worth the effort. NET MAIL HAS CHANGED OUR LIVES.

Postscript: In the Congress Year 1992, we carried more than 220 kilos of Mail Art over 100,000 km across 50 borders to and from over 300 networkers. Our Free Personal Deluxe Net Mail Delivery Service is over now; we have enjoyed being your guests and postal carriers. We are working on the handmade documentary book now to let each participant have a free copy.

## ART READER

**Art Paper** for January/February 1993 created an issue that is untrimmed, unbound, and "coverless"--what readers of **Umbrella** understand and others call a "self-cover". It includes wonderful interviews with Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Keith Antar Mason, an interview with Carolee Schneemann with Carl Heyward, and interviews with Ian Hamilton Finlay, Pavel Buchler. Art Papers, P.O. Box 77348, Atlanta, GA 30357.

**Whitewalls**, #31, is dedicated to Culture, Identity, & Colonialism, including work by Danny Tisdale, Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Lisa Bloomfield, among others. Whitewalls, P.O. Box 8204, Chicago, IL 60680.

**The Binnewater Tides** of the Women's Studio Workshop, P.O. Box 489, Rosendale, NY 12472 in its Fall issue for 1992 includes an article on Artists' Books: The 3 R's: Readin', 'Ritin', Recession by Karen Wirth, as well as an article on the life and times of Charlotte Moorman by Beth Haber.

**M/E/A/N/I/N/G** #12 features a forum on Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie with artists such as Susan Bee, Jane Dickson, Mimi Gross, Yvonne Jacquette, Joyce Kozloff, Ellen Lanyon, Erika Rothenberg, Miriam Schapiro, Nancy Spero, May Stevens, Martha Wilson, among others. There is also a fascinating critique of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* by Nancy K. Miller.

**Artlink** in Australia has reprinted its Volume 10, nos. 1/2 on Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art. It is 128 pages with 48 pages in full color. From Dreaming to rock music, this issue is an important contribution to the understanding of the aboriginal art phenomenon in Australia. \$17.95 including airmail postage to Reply Paid 6, Artlink, 363 Esplanade, Henley Beach South, Australia 5022 or Fax: (08)235-1280.

Artlink's Summer 1992-93 issue is dedicated to **Naive Art, Outsider Art, Garden Art and Tattooing**. This is a must issue and should be ordered from Artlink, 363 Esplanade, Henley Beach South, Australia 5022.

**The Print Collector's Newsletter** for January-February 1993 in "Artist's Book Beat" by Nancy Princenthal drops its usual reviewing format and interviews artists who were included in a three-venue Fluxus roundup - *FluxAttitudes*, *Fluxus: A Conceptual Country*, and *Ten Years on Broadway: Fluxus 1982-1992*--recently on view in New York (and now, in part, touring). The questions asked were: "What historical part did Fluxus take in the development of artists' books?" and "How does that relationship play out today?" The answers are sometimes funny, spirited, sometimes hostile as is customary in discussions of Fluxus. Artists interviewed are Davi Det Thompson, Mike Kelley (sic!), Barbara Moore, Nancy Dwyer, Ray Johnson, Alison Knowles. An enlightening angle!

**Fuse Magazine** for Winter 1992-93 had a hard time finding a scanning company to prepare images for publication, since the one they have been using refused to work on the the magazine's latest issue, believe it or not, dealing with

censorship. In fact, the offending material was not sexual but religious: a photo in the magazine by Calgary photographer Diana Thorneycroft, which depicted a masked woman draped with toys, props and a crucifix. They found another company to print their issue on Censorship, with articles such as Censorship and Mainstream Media, The Rhetoric of Degradation: How the anti-porn lobby sold us out, Obscenity Chill: Artists in a Post-Butler (he owned a video store and rented sex videos) Era and a lot more. Available at your favorite newsstand or write Fuse, 183 Bathurst St., Toronto, ON M5T 9Z9, Canada. \$3.50 Canadian.

**art journal** for Fall 1992 is dedicated to Recent Native America Art, guest edited by W. Jackson Rushing and Kay WalkingStick. Published by College Art Association

**ARTnews** for February is devoted to "The New World of Art and High Tech," a very important new direction for all the visual arts.

## ATLANTA ARTS CLEARINGHOUSE

The Atlanta Arts Clearinghouse is a new comprehensive arts information and resources referral center for individual Atlanta artists, local arts organizations, other members of the City's arts community and their audiences. Laura C. Lieberman, the former editor-in-chief and co-founder of the regional arts publication **Art Papers** serves as the director of the facility.

Included is the Arts Hotline, a 24-hour service on exhibits, performances, classes, etc.; the Materials for the Arts program soliciting surplus materials, ranging from clay to canvas to office equipment in a recycling program; the Art in Education program with the first 8-week session of artists in residences begun last October with international artists, long-term residences, Headstart programs, etc.; and the Facilities Referral project to disseminate information regarding the availability of studio spaces, theater and performance spaces, etc. The Clearinghouse also maintains an Information Resource Center.