

From: **john held** <johnheldjr@aol.com>
Date: Wed, Dec 16, 2020 at 8:03 PM
Subject: Re: Tourism Essay

Mail Art's Contradictory Future: Correspondence or Congress?

Mail Art was acknowledged an artistic disruptor during the 2020 pandemic year. Physically distanced exchange proved to be Mail Art's greatest asset. With galleries and Museums emptied, Mail Art became more relevant than ever, receiving unanticipated public and print attention, including positive mentions in the *New Yorker* and *Art in America*.

The contradiction of Mail Art's current circumstance lies in the fact that for years Mail Artists have perpetuated the proposition that "personal contact," and collective "Tourism" increased the potency of Mail Art by encouraging correspondents to meet one another. This reflected the satisfaction Mail Art took in developing social strategies, in addition to the simple exchange of objects.

Drawing upon the historical avant-garde in challenging mainstream cultural structures, Mail Art challenged gallery/museum curatorial practice, insisting on cooperation over competition and free exchange above commercial intent. Expanding internationally, Mail Art became an important means of multicultural interaction among artists.

Travels by West German artist Klaus Groh to East Berlin in the mid-1970s, exposed Mail Art to Robert and Ruth Rehfield, who in turn propagated the medium throughout Eastern Europe. Forced to flee Chile under political threat, Guillermo Deisler relocated first to Bulgaria and then East Germany, spreading a credo of cultural community throughout his travels. Fellowship became a hallmark of the movement, equally benefitting Western artists and those isolated by politically repressive regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin American. Each had a story to share.

From its inception, Mail Art cradled community and friendship. Schooled at Black Mountain College, Ray Johnson was personally acquainted with intentional cultural community. Attempting to replicate the communal energy dominating his student life, Johnson's New York Correspondence School came replete with thematic meetings and instructions for correspondents to "add and pass" his missives to an ever widening network.

In the essay, "Personal Words or Cultural Strategies?" the late Mexican artist/philosopher Ulises Carrión wrote that, "Mail Art shifts the focus from what is traditionally called 'art' to the wider concept of 'culture.' And this shift is what makes Mail Art truly contemporary. In opposition to 'personal worlds,' Mail Art emphasizes 'cultural strategies.'...The Post Office provides the artist with a distribution network but it doesn't define the work. The Post Office is not an essential element of the work and it could be replaced by other transportation systems."

Mail art rendered obsolete the necessity of artists to congregate in population centers like New York and Paris, putting isolated correspondents in contact with a geographically diffused community. This exponential expanding community of thousands of artists from some thirty countries decades before the advent of the internet, intuited forthcoming digital communication networks soon to become omnipresent.

Fluxus, formed in 1962, the same year as the NYCS, both distanced communication and personal contact in the promotion of group solidarity. Fluxus adapted postal procedures and practices, such as postcards, postage stamps and rubber stamps for artistic purposes. They championed multiples, zines, assemblings, intermedia and visual poetry, which became pillars of Mail Art in the decades to follow. Fluxus toured together, protested together and gathered for exhibition openings, grounding Fluxus membership in personal as well as postal interaction.

In her history of Canadian Mail Art, Anna Banana writes of Dana Atchley, who was teaching at the University of Victoria in 1969-1971, stating that he produced "one of the first projects that began the consciousness of a network." Naming his activities the Ace Space Company, he organized one of the first assembling projects

asking contributors to forward 250 copies of up to ten pages for his *Notebook* project. About 60 people contributed.

"Atchley did a second project called *A Space Atlas*. The project drew over 120 participants from 7 countries. Atchley received a Canada Council grant to meet participants in the *Notebook* and *Space Atlas*. He traveled in a truck containing his archives. "This started him off on a ten year *Road Show*, which is what he titled his presentation of slides and stories about his work."

Shortly after Atchley's wanderings, Mail Art received successive jolts driven by unprecedented positive exposure by articles in *Rolling Stone* and *Art in America*. Many have remarked that this marked a demarcation point in the expanding network, culminating in correspondents gathering in what Anna Banana described as a "grand finale of all this cross fertilization, and which does seem to coincide with the end of the first wave...the *Deccadance*, which took place in Hollywood in February, 1974. It was in fact, the most incredible collaboration between artists from Toronto, Vancouver, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, that I have ever witnessed. All had come to know one another, and come to work together on this project, via the mails."

Written from her perch in the early-1980s, Anna Banana had witnessed a dramatic expansion of the Eternal Network over the decade, made possible, in part, by her own well publicized travels with partner Bill Gaglione to meet correspondents in Italy, Poland, the Netherlands and elsewhere in the mid 1970s. The pair was but an early manifestation of a new wave of Mail art meetings soon unleashed as *The Decentralized Worldwide Mail Art Congress*.

This unprecedented gathering of hundreds of Mail Artists in 80 sessions from over 20 countries took place after an initial proposal from Swiss Mail Artists, H. R. Fricker and Günther Ruch, to hold a centralized gathering examining the dynamics of the widening global network of cultural workers. The proposal was eventually modified to "hold a Congress, wherever two or more Mail Artists meet."

AFTER
FLUXISM
MAILISM
COMES
TOURISM

It was Fricker's conviction that Mail Art, to remain a contemporary avant-garde forward thinking movement, should embrace physical contact between correspondents as a means of unshackling the movement from the bonds of the postal system. "Tourism is the execution of the mail-art concept. The activities of the correspondence-artists, mail-artists and the networkers, with the assistance of the postal system, developed worldwide relationships among artists. The tourist doesn't trust the postal system. However, he uses mail-art and it's developed channels before starting."

Fricker wrote that, "After a visit to NYC at the studio of Carlo Pittore, I started with the Tourism Campaign...I wanted the mail artists to move away from the tables filled with rubber stamps." Fricker first followed with a plan to connect Swiss Artists, but when the idea of a *World Wide Congress* was proposed by fellow Swiss artist, Günther Rüch, Fricker suggested, "Not at one place, but at many places. Not one organizer, but many...No program but offer an open principle: *decentralized world-wide mail-art congress where two or more people meet there a congress will take place...* With this it becomes possible, that in South-America, Australia, in East-Europe, in small or large cities, in houses, halls or at the beach, congresses could take place. The length of the period should make it possible that there would be congresses at different moments, so an artist with a love for travel could visit many congresses."

By successfully examining Mail Art's past and proposing prospects portending the future, the *Decentralized World-Wide Mail-Art Congresses*, left an indelible mark on the movement. Six years later, in 1992, Fricker and co-organizer, Peter Kaufmann, convened a *Decentralized World-Wide Networker Congress* to identify and cooperate with shared alternative cultural networks, such as zine culture, visual poetry circuits, and the emergence of digitation for both graphics and communication. At the conclusion of the *Networker*

Congressyear, Swiss organizer Peter Kaufmann reported 500 artists from 25 countries had taken part in over 250 events.

The Mail Art Congress years of 1986 and 1992 encouraged participants in the Mail Art network to consider the importance of personal meetings, as well as correspondence, in being an essential component of the Mail Art experience. While some were content with the sending and receiving of envelope-sized artworks, others replicated Carrión's assertion that the medium was a social strategy, employing "Tourism" and "Congressing" as a stimulus to peaceful cross-cultural interactions.

While informal meetings between Mail Artists occurred at spontaneous moments of opportunity, the idea of the Mail Art Congress would not die. Vittore Baroni, one of the most active networking artists, insisted that the concept should be replicated every six years (the interval between the Mail Art and Networker Congresses). And so, the following thematic years have continued:

1998: Year of Incongruous Meetings

2004: Year of Obscure Actions

2010: Art Detox

2016: Move Your Archive

Each of these events were rigorously documented by Baroni, and demand our attention in attuning ourselves to the concerns of Mail Artists at a particular time in the movement's history

To be sure, there are dissenters in the ranks. Pseudonyms and post office boxes are rife in Mail Art, providing a measure of postal privacy to those requesting anonymity. Many prize an equalitarian stance, instead of the constant venturing forward, chasing the new. An effable fellow from Manchester, master typographer, Keith Bates, opined that, "Tourists were active, sensation-seeking travellers, publicists, diarists and letter-writers who were full of their experiences. They thought of themselves as the avant-garde, outflanking the postman... To be on the Mail Art map, to be an important Mailartist or even a real Mailartist, you had to congress. Mail Art's contradictory future would be the return to a physical community of artists."

A "contradictory future" awaits us as Mail Art and a shell-shocked general public exit from 2020's pandemic year. Do we continue to confine ourselves in the wake of the virus, or once again venture forth? Ray Johnson's NYCS Meetings, Fluxus, *Deccadance*, Atxheley's Space Atlas, Carrión's philosophical musings, tours by Banana and Gaglione, reaching a crescendo in the Mail Art and Networker *Decentralized World-Wide Congresses*, Mail Art escaped the bounds of the Postal Service, fracturing geographical, cultural, linguistic, political, and religious barriers. Embracing the "contradictory future" laid before it, Mail Art continues to offer a secure route for art distribution until museums and galleries reopen, and we are once again able to open ourselves to one another once again.