

An Overview of Mail Art (Literature Review with Reference List)

Correspondence Art has contributed greatly to communication borne of a political orientation rooted in 60' s ideology (Crane, 1984) with a far-reaching trajectory of three political ideas: democratization, search for alternative systems, and a rejection of capitalist economies. The mechanics of aesthetic communication involved *production* and *posting* of the artworks. The artist retained absolute control over production by virtue of his/her own actions. Conversely, the artist was subject to governmental restrictions when posting; the cost of postage could be prohibitive to their practice. The postal system, while integral to correspondence art, was not considered the "medium" with which the artist worked. The system allowed the artists to engage in an art exchange however it was considered neither the object nor the subject of the art. For many artists mail art was an alternative to the ritualized protests of the time period; particularly as widespread communication became increasingly dependent upon expensive electronic intermediaries (Poinsot, 1984) such as the phone and more recently the Internet. Artists chose to produce mail art as stimuli (Crane, Hoftberg, Ravicz). Each package's intent was to unite cognitive and perceptual characteristics in order to shape a public awareness. Visual culture was charged with unleashing consciousness by ordinary language and common images. Artists who sent messages without requesting recompense generated an unusual awareness within society, one outside the boundaries of a capitalistic market place (Cassidy, 1984). The goal of correspondence artists was often to provide society (often internationally) with a meta-language for questioning and pervasive change. The art form was legitimized globally as 'everybody's medium' forged in content versus style, assessment free (no juries/price tags). By resisting commerce and unveiling common

absurdities, mail artists sought to reform community (Ravicz, Groh) by instilling a commitment to awareness as an alternative life style. As behavior began to gesture towards the unrestricted, creativity sought democratization.

Correspondence artists were influenced by a host of philosophers, but more importantly by conceptual art movements including dada and fluxus (Crane, Friedman, Groh, Higgins, Poinot, Ravicz). The influence of dada was reflexive of change experienced in society and the natural environment and the simulacra effect produced within the artworks. Artists filled the distance they traveled away from the market place with attempts to retrieve their individuality and humanism often through whimsy and irrationality. Collage was used to reveal a new sensibility in the spirit of critical commentary with an inclination toward contradiction.

According to Crane, mail artist Ray Johnson's prolific mailings were infamous, sent through the network commonly known as the *New York Correspondence School* (NYCS) in the 60's, yet his body of work dates back to the 40's. He introduced correspondence art to more people than any other single artist. The content of his mailings concerned relationships between people and/or objects. Known as The Master, Mr. Citizen, and Dada Daddy of the Network he used the NYCS from 1962-79. In 1970, the Whitney with Johnson produced the first exhibition of mail art in a major museum. Johnson killed off the NYCS through a "dead letter" in the New York Times obituary column.

George Maciunas coined the term fluxus (Latin translation to flow) in 1961 in anticipation of a magazine, which never materialized. As a movement, fluxus was cooperative. The artwork experimented with intermedia (fusion of multiple medias resulting in a new media) and conceptual art (less emphasize on objects, focused on the use of text and photography.) In 1962, Maciunas collaborated with Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell in West Germany on the first fluxus event. The fluxus movement generated a rash of fictitious organizations, galleries and archives whose publications were fabricated via photocopy machines. All of which established a precedent for the production of all manner of alternative publishing, including artists' books and dadazines.

In 1992 artist and critic Ken Friedman (also a member of NYCS) published an International Contact List of the Arts, a collection (eventually 5,000 entries) of names and addresses of artists and those interested or of interest. He established and edited the initial 12 issues of *dadazines* a NYCS Weekly Breeder publication.

Two lesser-known forms of mail art are ARTTEXT and Language Painting. Kenneth Coutts-Smith (1984) developed ARTEXT as a personal response to "return both the content and the practice of art to a social commitment and to a creatively progressive moral viability." His practice began with a series of Dadaist image and text statements of social and cultural criticism (made with alphabet rubber stamps) often conceived for specific exhibitions and distributed through the mail. For Schede in Brussels Coutts-Smith provided a rubber stamp, which read "ARTWORK CANCELLED BY CULTURAL CONSUMPTION," (p. 78) a stamp pad and a mounted rigid board.

Viewers indicated their consumption by canceling a portion of the work with the stamp provided. The procedure continued until the text and meaning was entirely eradicated; in the end consumed. In his struggle to transcend the capitalist marketplace his language paintings, acrylic paintings using texts, also sought content over style. The text was often a quote somehow related to visual culture.

An additional art form of subversive commentary that is distributed by hand or mail is the zine; non-professional, non-commercial, small circulation magazines produced, published and distributed by individual authors. Zines, according to Stephen Duncombe (1997) have a history of giving voice to the marginalized while simultaneously creating a fraternity of underground publishers. As with all marginalized peoples their power lies in their ability to express their interpretation of the circumstances with which they find themselves. They do not wait to accumulate credentials that would allow them access to professional publications. Zines privilege the personal rather than the powerful. There is an urgency to zinester's communication that is wrapped in a freedom of speech guarantee. *Fanzines* were a method of communication among science fiction fans in the 30's and by punks in the mid-70's. In each instance, counter-capitalistic culture groups found a voice by publishing their own periodicals. Demographically, zinesters have been typically of white middle class heritage. However, they are more aptly identified by the beliefs they subscribe to. Eventually the prefix "fan" was dropped and an explosion of zines developed within the following cultural groups: science fiction, television, film, politics, music, sports, political agendas, identity, cultural critique, personal, underground scene,

zine network, cultural fringe, religious, vocational, health, sex, travel, comix, literary, art, and all issues unable to neatly conform to any of the above categories.

Although there are some collectives, most zines are owned and operated by one individual who typically will accept outside input. Production costs vary depending upon circulation but swapping via a barter system is a practical (decreased postage) and common practice. It is estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 titles are in circulation. A zine's lifespan can encompass several years or be fully realized within a single issue, a 'one-shot'. Zines characteristically begin with an editorial, leading to opinionated essays or 'rants,' and interviews, followed by reviews of other zines, bands, books etc. From cover to cover poems, hand drawn commix or illustrations, and reprints from mass media (for information and/or ironic effect) are assembled in a makeshift cut-and-paste layout. (With the increase in accessibility to desktop publishing of recent years, some zines have taken on a more polished aesthetic.) The mandate of a zine is authentic communication, albeit on the perimeter of society, soliciting answers to the following universal questions: How to contribute as an individual, how to build a cooperative community, how to create value in life and produce something that is theirs? As contrarians their mission is to answer such questions while simultaneously situated in opposition to mainstream society. The community they seek to build and protect is that of their circulation, their 'network.'

Two networks (feminist and punks) joined in the 90's to establish the unified zine *Riot Grrrl*. Founded in Olympia, WA, *Riot Grrrl* networks are in cities across the nation and hundreds of zines are published by girls who share an allegiance to the freedom of

expression about issues that personally concern them. Within the covers of *Riot Grrrl*, female authors articulate and counter the established demands of males and the media about how girls *should* look, behave, think, and speak within society with a revolutionary agenda of their own. Through testimonials the writers are reflexive of their feminist predecessors of the 70's in their zeal to raise the consciousness of the dominant society to one that provides an equitable voice to all.

Kate Eichorn (2000) posits that *Riot Grrrl* is predominately produced by queer and/or bi-school girls. She attributes the proliferation of lesbian publishers due to their innate alienation by mainstream media. Because these girls feel invisible within their student body, the zine offers them an outlet of expression and to some extent a public venue to act out and be validated in return for their efforts. This has proved especially beneficial to girls in a rural environment who suffer from isolation as well as alienation. The boundaries of their isolation are erased by the size of their zine's circulation. The girls are able to seize control of their oppressive situation if not in their classroom in their network.

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