MAIL ART 1955 to 1995

Democratic art as social sculpture

Thesis by Michael Lumb – UK

This thesis was written by Michael Lumb in the year 1997. In that year the thesis was not published, but as a help I published it on the Internet where is has been accessible over the years (fortunecities offers free hosting still today, but by Google they are considered as a dangerous site because they have malware active on their servers)

In 2010 I collected the files from that website and made this book out of it. Especially for Archives and Museums this format is easier to deal with. Unfortunately the footnotes and illustrations were never published on the website and therefore are not included in this printed version of the text of his thesis.

MICHAEL LUMB.

1997.

MAILART 1955 TO 1995:

DEMOCRATIC ART AS SOCIAL SCULPTURE.

ABSTRACT.

This thesis evaluates the importance of mailart in the
late 1990s, traces its development and examines the
reasons for the changes that have taken place in the
nature of mailart practice.

The first three chapters identify the phases of mailart
as; Ray Johnson orchestrating his circle of
correspondents and the New York Correspondance (sic)
School, Fluxus and conceptual artists exploring the
postal system as a subject for artwork and finally the
democratisation of mailart through the considerable
increase of participants as result of Mail Art Projects.
Chapter four explores the politicisation of mailart and
debates that took place between mailartists on the way
in which mailart developed in the 1980s.

The final chapter identifies mailart in the second half
of the 1990s as being open to all with the means to pay
the postage. It argues that mailart networking, situates
itself outside the Fine Art canon, by eschewing
identifiable producers and products and has no ambitions
to become part of that canon. The main focus of the
thesis, using Beuysian theories, identifies the
democracy of mailart, not only in accepting all who wish
to participate and everything that they wish to use in
their interactions with other networkers, but also in
having no control system, no hierarchy, no judges or
jurors and no selection of either its producers or its
products.

The thesis discusses mailart as being non-judgemental,
privileging participation over content and style. It
argues that a mailartist is defined simply by
participation, rather than training, experience, age,

gender, race, religion or ability. The thesis
demonstrates that mailart does not define its art by an
individual sending (nor by something received), arguing
that the artwork being intangible is not exhibitable
because it is the network as a whole, a social
sculpture, the interaction between peoples that is the
artwork.

MAILART 1955 TO 1995:

DEMOCRATIC ART AS SOCIAL SCULPTURE.

BY MICHAEL LUMB

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for the degree of Master of Philosophy in the University
of East Anglia, School of World Art Studies and
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

my belief in what mailart is, as will become clear from
a reading of this work. Networkers have been chosen
because they conveniently illustrate a point that I wish
to make. In the firm belief that mailart is egalitarian
and in the public domain, as well as being in support of
Anticopyright and Plagiarism I have sought no permission
to reproduce anything that is quoted or reproduced
within this thesis, although all references are
credited.

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Chapter 4. Re-considering Mailart.

Chapter 5. An Evaluation of Mailart in the Second Half of the 1990s.

PLATES.

As the majority of the plates are of photocopies, they have been reproduced as such in order to maintain consistency, the plates that are not of photocopies have been reproduced in the same way. All dimensions of works have been given where known.

I have argued that the 'object' in mailart is not the artwork and it is for this reason that I have only reproduced works where it is important in order to understand the text. The considerable number of reproductions of Johnson's work is intended to clarify the points made in the text.

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INTRO

It is perhaps ironical that mail-art attracts shy individuals who by definition tend to be aware of the network of people, from all walks of life and not necessarily artists, who communicate their creativity through the postal system. Thanks initially to the printing of Michael Leigh's listing of current mail art projects in the journal Artists' Newsletter since 1989 the network has become more accessible to a greater number of people in Britain.

My own involvement with mail-art predates my knowledge of the network by some eight years. In 1980 I looked to the postal system as another vehicle for conceptual ideas and sent my first piece to a friend living in France. Entitled 'Nothing to declare' it grew out of the frustration that I had encountered when trying to get permission to take one cubic foot of English soil through the customs to exchange for one cubic foot of French soil. 'Nothing to declare' was the inscription inside the nine envelopes sent and 'Artwork' was the enscription on the customs docket. A tenth envelope was the return to me of the nine.

In 1981 I made my first attempt at "Pass the Parcel, Package Tours." which was an idea based on playing the children's game in reverse, i.e. that the package that I sent would be added to and sent on to another artist, to travel the world and ultimately to return to me. I chose an artist at random and received no response, similarly the following year I tried again with another artist, who like the first was evidently not a mail-artist.

The same year, whilst trying to while away the time invigilating an exam, I occupied my mind with the question of

how many ways it would be possible to stamp a second class letter in terms of different denominations of stamps, I soon realized that it was not a job for my level of mental arithmetic and subsequently worked out that the answer was 275. This was to become the score for my second mail art project whereby I ran through the permutations, at the rate of one per day for 275 days, sending the stamps on identical envelopes with a rubber stamped address to a friend in Devon. For me this work was important in several ways that I was later to realize are the constituent parts of mailart's public. Firstly I found that my local post office initially expected me to take the equivalent value of stamps in a different denomination and so it became necessary to explain the project to the post-mistress who soon became as fascinated as was I by my weekly purchase and the aesthetic appearance of the subsequent envelopes. This work must also have been noticed by the postman who emptied my local box and by the delivering postman at the other end, however over the entire 275 days he (the delivering postman) steadfastly chose to refrain from making any reference to the work to the recipients. Lastly of course the Work was enjoyed by the recipient and his family. Further, the work mounted on 40 mount boards each of one week's worth of envelopes made an impressive and incidentally visually minimal work in a subsequent exhibition.

Later that year, I produced a whimsical work entitled 'Artwork for customs' whereby with the help of the postmistress I selected a different small and lightweight child's toy each week and enclosed it in an A5 envelope with the inscription 'Artwork for customs' on the docket. These envelopes were sent to my friend in France and latterly returned to me in their entirety by mail (perhaps to my disappointment unopened by

customs) to be exhibited as a work in the traditions of Dada and Fluxus.

It wasn't until 1986 that I began writing to Pawel Petasz in Poland, prompted by an old friend who unbeknown to me had been working through the network for several years. He suggested that I exchange my artist's books for his in order to build-up my collection for teaching purposes. The correspondence with Petasz lead to my 'East/West Dialogue' with him about the perceived nature of freedom. From the content of his recycled letters I realized that he wrote to other people but still had not tumbled to the notion of a network. I was however entranced by the visual beauty of his letters and fascinated by the searching correspondence with an artist from the Eastern Block.

In 1988 I was sent a piece of mail-art by a lecturer in another institution who had been prompted by an ex-student of mine and it became evident to me that a network existed. Thanks to the generosity of Robin Crozier (q.v.) I received a long list of networkers and decided to give my 'Pass a parcel' idea another try but this time not trusting to fate and looking to the law of averages for success, I sent out 100 packages (envelopes made from photocopies, on blue cartridge paper, of a page of my passport). I changed the title of the project to 'Is freedom' reflecting both the correspondence with Pawel Petasz and the intended journeys of the packages. The deliberate omission of the question mark left the participants free to make a statement or pose a question. I asked the recipients to inform me when they had received the package and to tell me to whom they had sent it, and to add to or alter it in some way. It was intended that each package should travel for a year by which time it was to be returned to me. In practice this only happened to a small number of them but the project generated an enormous body of work, reaching 185 networkers in 38 countries. At the end of

the project the entire work was documented from a computer analysis of all the destinations. The ensuing two aroused considerable interest, not least to me, I was hooked.

Mail-art has many attraction and the nature of these must vary from person to person. However it must be that the appeal of receiving something in the post is universal, as John Held Jr said (lecture on mail-art on 28-11-92 at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London), "I am a mail-art junkie, I'm miserable if I don't get any mail". For me it awakens childhood memories of both stamp collecting and the pleasures of 'Post Office Set' with the attendant excitement of its paraphernalia. The pleasure of using a rubber-stamp must relate to some sort of playing at being in a position of authority that clearly remains in adulthood for some of us. Similarly, the tension surrounding the completion of sets of things is also an exciting element. The thrill of receiving anything from a foreign country was not abandoned with childhood, but then neither were the aforementioned pleasures of stamps - both rubber and postage. The complexities and delights of mail-art are manifold and need to be dealt with one at a time in some depth.

RAY JOHNSON

   1. Introduction.

   Whilst, arguably, mailart could not have begun before
the introduction of the postage stamp - which gave a
formal structure for distance communication - there are
clear and uncontested precedents for the use of the
postal system by artists expressly for artistic
purposes. In particular, writers on mailart have cited
the Futurists who, before the first World War, printed
postcards, envelopes and writing paper, in the manner of
commercial companies advertising their corporate
identity.1 Although part of a body of work produced by a
movement dedicated to subverting the establishment of
both art and society and with the clear intention of
communicating, it did not require networking and the
communication was solely within an elite and closed
circle. Other forerunners in terms of subject matter
have been cited, for example Rene Magritte,2 because he
used verbal puns, but this citing does not differentiate
between process (working through the postal system as a
medium) and subject matter, which is entirely open in
the case of mailart, and does not necessarily use verbal
(or visual) puns. Similarly, the love of play,
demonstrated by Dadaists has been a recurring theme in
mailart. Dadaists also used the postal system, although
usually for no more than to send works to each other.
However, the use of the postal system by artists to send
works to each other, whether related to the postal
system or not, does not in any way foretell or inform us
about mailart because the sendings were one way and not
part of an exchange.

It might seem to be possible to look further to Marcel
Duchamp as a forerunner of mailart in terms of the anti-
art and antiestablishment agenda that he demonstrated in
his subversive and abusive defacing of a postcard of the
Mona Lisa, 'L.H.O.O.Q.' 1919.3 Yet Duchamp and the
Dadaists readily exhibited in the established art
marketing system, thereby supporting the very
institutions that they purported to attack. Mailart
however has always eschewed art marketing, even if
mailartists have at times - or as parallel activity -

used the art marketing system for their non-mailart activity. Whilst many artists have used the postal system, there are no contenders for the position that Johnson holds as originator of the system of exchange that is mailart.

Mailart is both the creation of a product and a social act - the sending (exchanging) of that product. Although in mailart the product and social act are indivisible, an examination of the Fine Art culture in New York in the early 1950s and Johnson's education help in an understanding of the influences on Johnson's products and his decision to use the postal system as a way of working (a social act). I will deal with this argument in conjunction with discussion of Johnson's work.

1.2. Ray Edward Johnson.

In the absence of diary entries and/or definitive catalogues and collections the only evidence for the beginning of Ray Johnson's mailart is to be found in the media and it was in October 1955 that John Wilcock in the village VOICE wrote of Johnson's use of the postal service for artistic purposes.5

In the mid 1950s in New York there was a change of emphasis away from serious and often intense subject matter such as the angst ridden paintings of the Abstract Expressionists. This move indicated a recognition of play as being important to the well being of society.6 This more relaxed culture was also noticeable in the move from a primarily literary based media to a primarily visual one, brought about by picture magazines such as Life (1936 - 1972)and Look (1937 - 1971) which were well established and by the rapid rise in ownership of televisions.

In New York the emergence of Pop Art expressed optimism and playfulness with combines and collages. This was in the context of an interest in Dada in the USA at that time. Robert Motherwell's book The Dada Painters and Poets was published in 1951,7 other books which included Dada,8 had been published earlier in New York but none had covered Dada so thoroughly as Motherwell. The book included a number of reproductions of collages with, particularly relevant to Johnson's mailart work, pages

from Dada journals and catalogues exploring jokes, puns and the apparent random placing of both images and text in juxtaposition to each other as well as the use of a repeated popular image, for example the bicycle.9 Repeated popular images have been important to many Pop artists and mailartists alike as has the sense of fun, iconoclasm and play, in particular to mailart. Dada was also in evidence in New York galleries in the early 1950s10 and in 1953 MOMA acquired several Kurt Schwitters collages to add to their existing collection.11 In the same year, Marcel Duchamp organised the exhibition 'Dada 1916 - 1923' at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York. Rauschenberg began making 'combines' in 1953, a form of collage often involving everyday objects with painting and in 1954 made collages out of a mixture of comic strips and reproductions of European works of art. Rauschenberg's first solo show was in 1951 and Andy Warhol had his first in 1952, both in New York.12 It was as a close friend of Johns, Rauschenberg and Warhol, in this New York Fine Art environment in which Johnson was to produce his own collages, which Suzi Gablik cites as: " pioneer[ing] in the use of graphic techniques and images."13 It was in this environment that Johnson began the experiment of work that acted between art, play and life that was to occupy him for the rest of his life - mailart.

Johnson attended Black Mountain College (hereafter BMC),14 one of the most influential artistic communities in the USA, from 1945 to 1948, the mid period of its existence. Until the end of the 1940s, BMC was socially and educationally experimental, rather than artistic, with much debate amongst staff and students alike, leading in 1945 to factions, fears and fighting centred around the notion of community living and a belief in a liberal, inclusive education of self learning rather than the potentially narrowing experience that a Fine Art dedicated course could for example have provided.15 Unlike most education in the USA, BMC saw the arts as being central to their experience and made no differentiation between the importance of curricular and so called non-curricular activity. BMC was founded on a belief in the development of the individual according to his/her own interests, rather than imposing a set curriculum upon them. More importantly to the way in which Johnson was to work with mailart, John Rice - the founder of BMC - believed primarily in democracy and

that art should be a function of democracy. Duberman, following an interview with Rice argues that:

'In stressing art, Rice wanted to encourage the student..." to put the same faith in doing that he has been taught to have in absorbing" - but by "doing" Rice didn't mean some vulgar equation between art and "self-expression." He detested those whose "private stomach ache becomes the tragedy of the world," who professed literature or music or art as their life, for life, without the quotes, is a process, a way, a method. It is not an experiment. 'Many who called themselves "artists" had, in Rice's view, withdrawn from life, not embraced it. They were in love with themselves, and "loved only what they themselves did."'...'He was not chiefly interested in producing painters, musicians, poets, but in making democrats...'16

Whether or not BMC influenced Johnson can only be guessed at, particularly given the very private nature of the man, but what is clear is that both mailart and BMC is/was dedicated to equality rather than the pursuit of supremacy, and that both believe/d in the importance of life rather than a precious attitude to the arts.17 It seems likely that the nature of Johnson's mailart activity was sown at BMC. John L. Wallen in particular was concerned in his teaching at BMC to promote experiment, exchange of feelings and group interaction, fundamental mailart activity as is Wallen's belief in the importance of the group as a whole rather than the artwork of an individual.18

In 1947, Johnson designed the cover for the November issue of the magazine Interiors, indicating his considerable graphic skills as well as his self confidence in getting work whilst still a student. Johnson, as I discuss later, was always ambivalent about his own 'success' and the Interiors cover begs the question as to whether such commercial activity was supported by BMC or an example of Johnson bucking the system and going his own way regardless of the culture in which he lived.19 Of particular interest is the editorial comment on the contributors page of Interiors that indicates the paradox of Johnson's artistic outgoingness coupled with his extreme reticence about himself:

"Ray Johnson, the most modest of our cover artists, is, we guess, well under twenty. He refuses to give us any information about himself except that he is a student at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, mostly with Josef Albers." 20

From 1944 there began a policy at BMC of encouraging innovative artists from varying disciplines to visit, amongst these was, the then little known composer, John Cage. It seems highly likely that Cage was a strong influence on Johnson, with his use of Happenings which Johnson was to emulate and especially given Cage's interest in silence and Johnson's subsequent frequent reference to 'Nothings'.21 Cage made his first visit in 1947 as musical director of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, returning in the Spring of 1948, from April 3rd to 8th, for the Summer School at which he presented a Festival of Erik Satie. Although the nature of Cage's presentation was far from that of his later experiments (he had not begun his aleatory work) he nevertheless questioned established truths and rules. Cage's influence reached beyond artists because of his reluctance to differentiate between music, art and life and in this sense was an important influence on Johnson. In 1952 the first performance took place of Cage's silent composition, 4' 33'' in New York and he returned to BMC where he made a forty-five minute event that is held to be the first Happening, one of many collaborative works with Cunningham at the time when he was also making aleatory works with Rauschenberg.22 Whether or not Johnson came across Cage at BMC or kept in touch with BMC is not known but it seems highly likely that as an active member of the New York art world he would have been aware of Cage's works.

Johnson's comments on his work indicate a possible Cagean influence, for example his response to the question as to whether he considered mailart to be an art form:

"The contents is the contents; the stamp are the stamp; the address are the address. It is very clear your question 'Is this an art form' is the art form." 23

This answer is typical of Johnson, a non-answer to a question. The response can be read as being in the

manner of replies from his friend Warhol or as a Cagean silence. What makes it markedly different though is that unlike Warhol and Cage, Johnson did not achieve fame and fortune and at times actively discouraged it.

Examination of Johnson's attitudes - throughout his working life - to making a living by selling his work and achieving fame add further confusion to understanding Johnson's continual pursuit of mailart. In about 1979 he was selling portraits for $800 to $3,00024 and $400,000 was found in various bank accounts when he died. This would seem to be a considerable sum to have been amassed by a man for whom Richard Feigen, his dealer for many years, said, "...ambivalence about the commercial aspects of art made him nearly impossible to work with."25 Chuck Close who knew Johnson, describes him as having been very shy and afraid of rejection to such an extent that in response to Close expressing a wish that there were a Johnson portrait in MOMA, Johnson bombarded Clive Phillpot, the director of MOMA library, with works, knowing that Phillpot would archive the material and so guarantee Johnson's place in MOMA.26 Nam June Paik adds that:

"Twice in the early '60s Ray turned down one-man-show offers from a prominent gallery."27

This could be attention seeking, a way of gaining publicity, as with his announcing non-existent exhibitions of his in the village VOICE. Perhaps more revealingly Bourdon describes:

"In 1980, around the time of his 53rd birthday, he took an ad in the art section of the New York Times to announce: 'Ray Johnson / Nothing / No Gallery.'"28 further to the confusion surrounding any understanding of Johnson's feelings about exhibiting are evidenced by Clive Phillpot who states that in response to invitations to participate in group shows, Johnson would either announce a 'Ray Johnson Nothing' or if he participated, it was at times with as little as a Ray Johnson badge.29 Even the badge was minimal, being simply his abbreviated forename 'RAY' in sans serif upper case type. (Plate 1) If Johnson had sent a large number of these badges, it would seem to have been self advertisement, but a single badge, especially given that

he often sent nothing at all suggests, a very simple solution as to what to exhibit, dismissiveness of the exhibition or even depression and a negative attitude to life. It could be seen that he was mischievously playing with the galleries, almost flirting but at times in an infuriating way, as he was even known to remove his work from exhibitions before the end of the show.

Looking to information on Johnson's life for enlightenment about his attitude to his work is equally problematic, especially if given by himself as he enjoyed being unreliable, loving contradicting himself and confusing people. Although Johnson was often enormously generous with his time, he could equally well be unreasonable or angry and warm one day, cold the next. Perhaps his intention was to create an enigmatic persona for himself. Bourdon describes Johnson as having had a reputation as, "a mischievous court jester...ubiquitous buffoon..."30 and it is interesting to consider whether his actions were simply tomfoolery rather than a carefully constructed pose, intended to gain him fame. On his first visit to Johnson's house and his subsequent conclusions about the experience, Edward Plunkett shows that even visiting him was not necessarily enlightening, he describes:

"...sending things to Ray...' in 1959 and in 1962 met him in his apartment but was surprised to find rather than the expected Schwitters like muddle,'...a place empty of everything but a chair, a bed, a stove and refrigerator, and a few boxes containing collages. Nothing on the walls, nothing on the floor." 31

A year later, Plunkett discovered that Johnson did not live like that but that this was a trick that he often played on visitors, - another Johnson 'Nothing.'32 In a sense, it could be seen that the whole of Johnson's life was an artwork, perhaps it was a way of overcoming shyness, a distancing technique that game-playing creates in keeping relationships on a formal basis, like the potential of communication through the mail. Further evidence is suggested by reports that when Ray went on an outing, he would either have it meticulously planned or would be lead by coincidences, responding to serendipity, as with much of his mailart.33 When out with people, he would frequently, without warning, say goodbye and leave unexpectedly for no discernible

reason, presumably something would have triggered his disappearance although whether it was a sudden whim or perhaps a sudden boredom or feeling of discomfort in company, we shall never know. Johnson's death is similarly surrounded in mystery following what seems to be a bizarre kind of ritual which it appears he planned meticulously as his final artwork.34

The nature of Johnson's early mailings and gallery work is more clear than the confusion of Johnson's private life. It was in 1955 that he, then a little-known New York Pop Artist, is said to have observed that his paintings were three times the size of an envelope and was moved to cut some of them up and mail the pieces to friends. Earlier as a student, Johnson had incorporated his retrieved letters in collages, however this use of letters is in the manner of Schwitters collages and totally unrelated to mailart. There is no logical connection or development in the relationship of recognising the visual and contextual potential of a fragment of a letter for a collage, and that of deciding to use the post as a medium in itself. Johnson however, enjoys confusing those who would try and establish his first use of the mails, he claims:

"I had an exhibition of my letters at the Raleigh, North Carolina Museum, (1976) and there were letters included in that exhibition from 1945, when I was a student - long before I was 20 years old." 35

No doubt it is true but most artists could drag-up letters from their formative years and seek to make connections to imply a precedent, whether it was the decision of the curator or Johnson to include the letters in the exhibition, does not clarify whether Johnson thought the earlier letters to be artistically meaningful or not. In any event, the presence of letters in an exhibition exhibition does not in itself signal mailart.

Johnson had his first one man show at the One Wall Gallery, New York in 1948 and had been a purist abstract painter in the late forties and early 1950s, making complex, methodical, detailed, hard edge paintings.36 By 1955 he was producing Pop Art collages, for example with a close-up of Elvis Presley's face, 'Elvis Presley No1'

(15 1/2 " X 11 1/2"); 'Elvis Presley No2' (15 3/8" X 11 1/2") - both 1955. Johnson was to continue to produce collages of people until at least 1968.37 Critically, in 1955 he signalled dissatisfaction with the limitations of the conventional means of showing art by choosing to 'exhibit' his small collages outside the gallery situation in places such as in the street and in Grand Central Terminal. During the early sixties, he found another way to show his work: Bourdon describes it specifically:

"Ray didn't have gallery shows during the early 60s, so he staged private presentations in people's homes or offices. He would show up at the appointed time with 100 collages, all the same size (7 1/2 by 11 inches), wrapped in bundles of 25. He'd lay them out on tables, desks, beds, whatever,..."38

Bourdon in his use of 'so' implies that Johnson had been unable to get shows at this time, there is no evidence for this but it is further evidence of Johnson working outside the established art marketing system his wish for a more direct means of approaching people with his work. It is necessary at this point to reiterate that the visual appearance of Johnson's work is not important to an understanding of mailart, rather it is the nature of the transaction as I go on to discuss.

1.3. Moticos.

"I've got a big pile of things at home which will make moticos. They're really collages - paste-ups of pictures and pieces of paper, and so on - but that sounds too much like what they really are, so I call them moticos. It's a good word because it's both singular and plural and you can pronounce it how you like. However I'm going to get a new word soon."39

Wilcock's article in the village VOICE focuses on Johnson's Moticos and his invention of the word. Johnson cut out images from newspapers and magazines and added to them with ink and paint and cut up letters sent to him to use in Moticos. Johnson had no wish to give a definitive description of his Moticos and they could be said to be any artwork of his, that would probably include collage, which in turn might include material

received by him from other networkers through the post and specifically his mailart work, which ranged from text through collage to drawings and followed no discernible style. In this 'catchall' use of the word, it could be linked to Schwitters use of 'Merz' although Schwitters was focused as to what he meant by his word and was clear as to its origins. However, although Johnson seems never to have referred to the fact, it is highly likely that he chose the word 'Moticos' (particularly in the plural) because it is an anagram of 'Osmotic'. The word relates very well to the way in which Johnson absorbed images, words, ideas and life into his collages and to the way in which he disseminated his work through the mail.

Bourdon gives further insight into Johnson's work at this time, reiterating Johnson's standard size of image:

"...hundreds of collages, invariably 11" X 7 1/2" and in retrospect, dated 1959. Made of printed or painted paper which Johnson cut into narrow slices, then reassembled on a cardboard mount, sometimes with an additional overlay of calligraphy. A street map, for instance, might be shredded and then meticulously reconstructed, with paper strips deliberately misaligned to create an abstract pattern." 40

Johnson's work could be separated into two kinds; collages for exhibition purposes, (whatever form that might take) and mailart, however his collages were often used for mailart and mailart works were often the start of his collages. The standardisation of his image size made his work ideal for sending through the mail, albeit that the collages were folded, but it is precisely his preparedness to fold his images and place them in a standard envelope rather than perhaps in a large card-backed one which indicates Johnson's lack of preciousness towards his sendings and an indication of the transitory nature of what he sent. The role of the 'work' is to make contact and give information: this having been achieved, the 'work' has no further purpose. The intimate scale and almost ephemeral images prompted negative reviews at times, for example Hilton Kramer's 1970 article in which he dismisses Johnson's mailart as being only "...good for 10 seconds." 41 He writes that it does not belong in a "museum exhibition" and yet applies 'Gallery Art' criteria to his criticism. His use

of the word "inconsequential" indicates that he has given no thought to the importance of the ephemeral in life, the notion that a 10 second wry smile in response to a work in a gallery has its place and importance in the well being of people just as the feelings generated by the receipt of something through the mail.

A contemporary photograph (1955) of Moticos (Plate 3) spread-out on Johnson's studio floor, much as they were placed on the street and on tables in people's houses, shows his early use of popular images, particularly of film stars whose names were frequently to appear both in his meeting seating plans (discussed later in this chapter) and in his correspondence. A 1956 piece of mailart from Johnson, Untitled - 'Rimbaud' (Plate 4), incorporating a letter sent to him - just as he had incorporated letters in his collages as a student - demonstrates the similarity of subject matter in both his mailart and non-mailart collages (Plate 3), in terms of typography and facial images. Johnson interwove his work, cannibalising and reusing it over and again. Where Johnson's work differed markedly from other Pop artists is illustrated in a comparison with the work of his friend Andy Warhol who was interested, among other things, in process, evidenced by his fascination with silk screened, repeated images and the accidents that occur - changes to the image - when the screen is not cleaned, the same is applicable to Robert Rauschenburg's silk screens and in England, Peter Blake has been interested in physically painting his heroes. Johnson's interest was primarily in the iconography of the person and the possibility of making puns on their names or some part of the image, simply using found photographs of them without subjecting them to different media and processes.

Wilcock describes Johnson's 'Moticos mailing list', notes that it included 200 people, and quotes him, "I send lists either to people I think would be interested or to people I think won't be interested,".42 This is of critical importance because it clearly and unequivocally proves that by the date of the article (1955), Johnson was concerned with communicating with a large number of people through the mail rather than sending precious artworks to a select few, or at least claiming those to be the facts. It also signals that the people with whom he communicated were not composed solely of artists or

the cognoscenti, an egalitarian principle that has remained central to mailart. There is no evidence as to what Johnson received back from his recipients or the amount of interaction that took place between them that he was able to generate.

1.4. Mailart.

Among mailartists, it is commonly accepted that what situates Johnson as being the person who began mailart is his use of correspondence, as an artist, within a network, which he created. That is as opposed to earlier and concurrent use by artists of the post simply to transmit information, for example manifestos, or as a creative adjunct to their artistic activity (although often simply using the mail as a concept and not engaging others) rather than creative activity in itself. The nature of the mailart sent and received by Johnson is so diverse as to be of no stylistic importance in understanding mailart. It must also be remembered that Johnson is not a luminary in terms of his creative output, (there are no cited disciples of his work), rather it is his chosen vehicle of mailart and preparedness to produce work that has no potential to generate a financial income for him. Whilst his bank balance proved that he had sources of money, some of which would have come from sales of his work, his pursuit of mailart could not have been profitable in financial terms.

By the 1960s Johnson had established a mailing list of about 300 people.43 It is difficult to be sure with whom Johnson communicated before the involvement of Fluxus: to assume that he communicated with people on his lists of various 'clubs' would be totally unreliable, unless you are prepared to believe in the existence of Mickey Mouse, given that he drew-up lists of people for his own pleasure. Whilst the number was small it nevertheless significantly reinforces the importance of the networking element of the activity rather than communication between a small coterie of like-minded cognoscenti. Although five years later the number appears only to have grown by fifty percent since 1955, it can be safely assumed that there will have been those who dropped out as well as those who joined the network. The number further reflects communications in the late 1950s and the fact that, at the time, no major attempt

had been made to broadcast the existence of the network through the media. It should be noted that Wilcock's article gave no address or invitation to join the network and therefore no means for people other than those already contacted by Johnson to have participated.

One continuing theme can however be identified in Johnson's mailart, the Kilroyesque cartoon rabbit or 'bunny head' that could be called his trade mark. This can be seen as adopting a mailart persona, much as many mailartists today, particularly in the U.S.A. adopt an A.K.A., what they refer to as a combat name. These in some ways are similar to Tags as used by graffiti artists. Just as graffiti artists get pleasure in seeing their instantly recognisable tags in as many places as possible, so too it could be argued do mailartists get pleasure from seeing their combat names on as many pieces of mailart as possible. The choice of names ranges from those relating to mailart such as 'Ace Art' (Canada) to the apparently nonsensical 'Afungusboy' (U.S.A.). Some, such as 'Crackerjack Kid' (U.S.A.) also reveal their legal names (Chuck Welch) while others such as 'Pag Hat the Rat Girl' (U.S.A.) prefer to remain otherwise anonymous. Combat names are at times political, with references to art and gender, such as 'Woman Ray' (U.S.A.). Whilst Marcel Duchamp adopted A.K.A.s - for example R. Mutt for 'Fountain' 1917 - they were adopted for varying reasons, including a furthering of his penchant for puns as with Rrose S,lavy, - for example for 'Why not Sneeze Rrose S,lavy' 1921 - and not used consistently to hide his identity as is the case with mailartists.

The frequent accompaniment of Combat names with Post Office Box Numbers is an indication of a wish on the part of the user to separate the mundanities of their everyday life from their networking activities, keeping the reality of their name and address separate from the fantasy of their Combat name and P.O. Box Number. Whilst many mailartists imitate and simultaneously satirise corporations with imitation letterheadings and logos (as had the Futurists and Dadaists) the use of combat names serves both to ridicule the apparent seriousness of the formality of some networkers and at the same time, play on the notion of formality by 'sanctioning' everything that they send out by rubberstamping it with their Combat name logos.

For Johnson, however, the use of the 'bunny head' may well have just been for fun, he often used it to illustrate a group of people designated by him throughout his mailart activity. These images, which were always used as part of another image for seating plans or untitled mailart, varied enormously in appearance as indicated by Johnson himself:

"Well, it's derivative of Mickey Mouse or Mickey Rat, or it's a mouse or, at times, an elephant with a long proboscis. It's always expressive of who I feel I am at that moment I make that drawing."44 (see Plates 5; 6; 7; 8)

As this suggests, he did refer to the images as self portraits but they were often appropriated by others in homage to him and this confuses any attempt to define a chronology of a developing style of this image, particularly as others using it have both used photocopies of it and their own drawings and often not attributed the drawing. Attempts to show a logical development of these images (Plate 5) which can be followed through to 1993 (Plate 8) suggest consistency of chronological development however, this apparent consistency is not reliable, for example an image of 1978 (Plate 7) shows solid ears and the proboscis on the other side of the face as well as a similar stylisation to that found in the 1993 image. More obvious is the extreme stylisation found in the 1956 image (Plate 6), quite unlike the apparent development to be believed by later images (Plate 8). By contrast, Johnson's 'Venice Lockjaw' badge of 1990 (Plate 9) is reminiscent of his 1971 image (Plate 5). These examples stand as evidence that it is not possible to establish linear stylistic development in his work.

Having gained an idea of his work in terms of collages, Moticos and his trade mark, and identified the lack of a definable continuing style or technique it is essential to an understanding of mailart to have an idea of the nature of Johnson's interactions with his correspondents and his manipulation and control of the process, as this was to set the pattern for much subsequent networking activity. John Russell refers to Johnson's sendings as, "...often consist(ing) of several loose bits and pieces" and to his collages as being:

"intricate and discursive, a nest of associations and clues. They are to be read no less than his letters."45

This is evidence that Johnson was not simply sending one of his collages (motico) as a gift, but indulging in a complex series of pieces of puzzle that had the potential for the recipient to piece together and make some sense of, beyond any interpretation that may have been immediately apparent. Johnson did not use a formula for his mailart, he would respond to whatever occurred to him at the time, whatever was to hand, be it a reference to the recipient or to something topical, so making each sending unique. Accounts of his apartment suggest that the serendipity occurred in the very controlled environment of one who lived an ascetic life, a mind game almost, rather than working surrounded by visual stimuli. This is in some ways implied by Russell's comments about Johnson's inspirations:

"He draws on a blyth spectrum of Americana, gossip, and mass communications. His correspondence school spans the mailing lists of the art world and the exchanges of chatty friends."46

Johnson's use of stimuli is in marked contrast to an artists such as Francis Bacon who worked surrounded by visual stimuli in the form of colour supplements. Russell writes that it is not simply the content of the envelope that should be considered as Johnson's art:

"...'the art' is the completed process: the writing, the franking and directing, the walk to the mailbox, the loyalty of the unknown henchmen, the act of delivery, the opening, the perusal, the perceptions made and rejoiced at..." 47

Identification of the entire activity as 'art', although in inverted commas indicates that it is important for Russell to situate the activity clearly. Whilst the activity must be taken as a whole, it can be misleading to signal it as 'art' as this suggests that for example Johnson took as much trouble over his envelopes as the images that they contained. Unlike the work of many mailartists, this is not the case with Johnson although he would at times play with the spelling of part of the address (Plate 10). It is also interesting to note that

the images he sent were not always properly trimmed, for
example 'Lumber Party' (Plate 8) is roughly trimmed, top
and bottom, again indicating that he was not concerned
with producing a beautiful, finished, work of art. To
give mailart the nomenclature 'art' is also to relate it
to an activity involving galleries, sales and critical
writings that are inappropriate to mailart.

Johnson's sending could be typed, beautifully hand
printed, or a mixture of the two. The completed work
often had a message scribbled on top in heavy black felt
tip that would show through onto the image that he had
photocopied onto the reverse. Equally, he often wrote
very beautifully and carefully over a photocopied
magazine or newspaper article. It would seem that he
wanted to create order and perfection and then destroy
or deny it, a kind of schizophrenia or self destruction
that was common in everything he did. Both his mailart
and non-mailart was often built-up over a long period of
time but this was not reflected in his apparent
destruction of it.

The unpredictable nature of Johnson's work extended to
his choice of correspondents and frequency of sendings.
Some received 'letters' two or three times per week and
others never or very occasionally, regardless of their
attempts at communicating with him. Equally, a 'letter'
could arrive from him a long time after they had given-
up hope of getting a reply. Analysis of 100 mailartists'
correspondence with Johnson reveals no discernible
reasons for his decision as to who to send to or the
frequency of his sendings.48 It was clearly not because
the mailartists sent something to him.

In general it can be said that Johnson's sendings were
personal, even if he did not know the person to whom he
was sending, there would be some reference to them,
usually a pun, using deadpan humour. The 'letter' or
'work' would usually be collaged and then photocopied,
with a cutting about an exhibition of his or a
reproduction of a much earlier work of his from a
magazine article, perhaps comic strips, a careful
figurative line drawing, parts of his letters to other
people, names and addresses of other people, rubber
stamped names of his 'fan clubs', perhaps instructions
for how to draw a rabbit, or even how to write a word,

letter by letter - in other words there was considerable variation in the appearance and content of his sendings.

1.5. Punning.

Puns were very important to Johnson and Wilson refers to his going so far as to take a journey by taxi from Harbor Bar to Barbara Bar simply for the pleasure of the pun.49 A 1956 work, size unknown (Plate 6), shows his enjoyment of punning on a name, by writing numbers from one to one hundred as a counting response to the name Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin.

More important was the way in which he would pun on the name of a recipient of correspondence from him, making the sending totally personal and the sending therefore more special and meaningful to the recipient. Although this in no way affects either the monitory or universal value of the 'work', it clearly signifies where the importance of the activity is centred from Johnson's point of view, i.e. the personal sending. An example of this is the sudden and unexpected mailing that I received from him (Plate 8). This work with a photograph of boys having a pillow fight which I take to be described in American English as a Lumber Party, a pun on my surname, is a black and white photocopy (213 x 275mm) with the message to me written in blue biro. The envelope, which is, typically for Johnson, nondescript (Plate 10) contained nothing else. It is not possible to know whether Johnson made this image simply for me, because he had remembered my name and made the connection, or whether he liked the image and photocopied a number to send to various networkers. If he had made the work specifically for me, it would raise the question as to why he photocopied it, unless for his archive, in which case, if his interest in archiving is of mailart, rather than simply images that he produced, it would have made more sense for him to have photocopied it after writing the message to me, it is of course quite possible that he added the message as an after thought when he had returned from the Photocopy Shop. What is clear is that he had a prodigious memory with a store of names that he could connect with images or words that he came across.

At times, the puns could be complex, for example 'Send Slips to Lucy Lippard' (Plate 11). At first sight this is a simple request, but 'Slips' in this context is easily misread as 'Lips', encouraged by the image, prompting the reader to make a slip in the reading. The double meaning of the word slip gives the opportunity for sending either garments or errors. No significance should be attributed to Johnson selecting Lippard for this work, it was no doubt simply that he was aware of this important New York art critic who had mentioned him in her 1966 book Pop Art and sending this photocopied request was simply another way to get his correspondents to send unsolicited mail to a third party.50

1.6. Orchestrating.

The 'Lippard' work is an example of how Johnson often asked his recipients to send something to someone else, acting as an orchestrator of the correspondence of people other than himself and thereby introducing people to each other through the mail. In doing this, it is clear that Johnson saw his activity as not simply sending a work of art to someone but orchestrating a network of correspondents that constantly changed its participants, partly through Johnson including new people by encouraging others to send things to them.

Johnson sometimes prompted his correspondents to send things to destinations other than that of private individuals, for example to Time magazine which received a flood of strange valentines immediately prior to Valentines day in 1969. This highlights Johnson's activity as instigator, co-ordinator and conductor of other people's activity. This kind of activity is as important as the production of a work by any individual, for example Johnson's Moticos, because it draws people together in a common cause. Johnson also at times would send a 'letter' to the press, for example, noticing that the village VOICE asked for 'brief letters', he sent them a Marlborough advertisement with 'Brief Cancer' written on the cigarette.51

Johnson did not limit himself in his orchestration to using the post but also used the phone, often in much the same way as his mailed work in that he would draw the attention of the person he was calling to a pun,

with a pithy and brief comment. There is no apparent pattern in his phoning mailartists, phone calls were regular and frequent to sporadic or occasional and equally varied enormously in length.

Johnson's mailings frequently consisted of or included an 'Add-on', or 'Add-to and Pass-on', a typical example of this is 'BILL de KOONING'S BICYCLE SEAT' (no date, Plate 12). This simple, crudely drawn image is a vehicle for collaboration and networking, given that most participants include their name and address on the image, it also creates the possibility for increasing the number of contacts. This way of working, invariably consists of an A4 sheet of paper, usually portrait format, with an image created by the generator with his or her name and address (usually rubberstamped, as in the case of the Johnson example) and a request to 'Add-to, alter, copy, pass-on and eventually return to the generator.' The purpose of this way of working, is threefold: firstly the originators image is usually amusing and thus gives pleasure, and prompts a light hearted response; secondly it is a way of gaining new contacts; but perhaps most importantly, it is a collaborative way of working where no one person has control and there is no issue of authorship. Ownership is a separate matter and there is no guarantee that the image will ever return to the originator. Some mailartists request that the A4 sheet is photocopied and a copy sent to the originator so that s/he can enjoy the way in which the image changes as it is passed from networker to networker. Again, there is no guarantee that this request will be adhered to. Johnson took the idea of bringing together beyond the mail and organised meetings.

Johnson often listed names within his mailart collages (Plate 8) but typical of these lists there is a mixture of mailartists (e.g. Mark Fagagaga) with the famous (e.g. Woody Allen), about whom it is safe to surmise that they are not networkers: presumably the lists included personal friends. This then raises the question of the meaning of these lists for Johnson. He was known to have socialised with many famous people, not least through his friendship with Andy Warhol, and so may well have met them all and could have been remembering them fondly in his listing. Equally, they could refer to On Kawara's 'I met' postcards, recording the people that he

had met that day, or recently. More simply, and likely, is that they were people that he had been reading about, admired or simply names that came to mind in a kind of free association Surrealist manner. What this use of names was communicating may be unclear but it is very clear that Johnson wished to introduce people to each other ('Send Slips to Lucy Lippard'). Introducing people to each other is the essential nature of Johnson's mailart, but having established relationships between other people, those relationships can attain their own importance, independently of - and thereby denying - a potential movement leader. In order to cement these relationships, Johnson held New York Correspondance Club meetings with seating plans (Plate 13), another list of names. These meetings were often thematic with names such as 'The Buddha University Meeting'52 or were held as 'Nothings', Johnson's wry answer to the 'Happenings' that were very evident in New York throughout the early 1960s, and maybe a reference to John Cage's 'Lecture on Nothing'.53 In many ways, Johnson was aping the fan clubs of actors and musicians which drew people together in a common bond even to the extent of referring to them as 'Fan Clubs.'54 These meetings were planned by Johnson, much as a society hostess would bring people together. Typically, Johnson chose April Fools Day for his first meeting and between the first and last meeting (1977) he held thirty meetings, with a range of names and assumed purposes, with Johnson either presenting them as 'Nothings' or in the form of games, similar to the group encounter activities then prevalent in New York.

Whilst it could be seen that Johnson saw the importance of mailart meetings in the sense that the importance of mailart is the bringing together of people and so brought them together in person rather than simply through the mail, it is equally possible that he saw it as an opportunity to raise his profile within the New York art world.

'Nothings' occurs throughout Johnson's life (and death), "Ray Johnson, Nothing, No Gallery"; his notes "Ray Johnson Nothing" in reply to some of the group show invitations; his habit of emptying his house prior to visitors arriving; his frequent disappearance on outings and his 'non' answers to questions in a Warholian manner. Johnson also used the word 'nothing ' in mailart

(Plate 14) which when as in that case, also carried a reference to death, adds further negative and pessimistic feelings to his work. Some of these uses could signal a superiority, maybe suggested by his dealer referring to him as 'difficult' but more probably indicates an intensely sensitive and self absorbed man. There would seem to be many indications of a possible manic-depressiveness which would not be contradicted by Johnson's playful nature.

1.7. Naming the Activity.

Neither Johnson nor anyone else, named his activity, except to refer to his Moticos mailing list, but Plunkett, around 1962/3 named it the 'New York Correspondence School'.55 a send-up of 'The New York School'. Johnson played with the name, frequently calling it 'The New York Correspondance School',56 and making many other puns on it. Typically, Johnson was not consistent in his use of the term, for example his 'LUMBER PARTY' sheet to me of 1993 (Plate 8) is headed 'New York Abstract Expressionist Correspondence School.' (Note the conventional spelling of Correspondence.) There have been numerous variations, used by Johnson and other mailartists, some making interesting and / or amusing meanings, others just enjoying punning for its own sake.'The New York Corresponge Dance' could be said to refer to the way in which the network absorbs such vast quantities of work. On the other hand that interpretation could be a pretentious reading of what was nothing other than a pun. Clive Phillpot refers to the use of Corraspondance57 and other variations include Correspondense and Corresponddunce58 Jane Beckett has suggested a possible sexual connotation with 'Co-respondent.' In 1973, Johnson announced its demise and resurrection as the Buddha University - one of the many pseudonyms that he had used (see footnote 49), - in a letter to the New York Times. Valery Oisteanu wrote of Johnson killing-off the NYCS and refers to his destroying bags of mailart.59 Given that Johnson continued to practice mailart after proclaiming the demise of NYCS, this action suggests that it was another example of him amusing himself although contrary to what Oisteanu suggests, the letter to the New York Times, although sent, was not actually published. It could, however be that Johnson wanted to mark a change in emphasis that was occurring in networking at that time

from hand produced sendings to the use of the photocopier. There is no documentation of Johnson burning 'huge trashbags of mail art' but if true, it suggest that until that date he had seen fit to keep large amounts, or maybe everything that had been sent to him and presumably therefore had placed some value on it that by 1973 was no longer important to him.

1.8. Conclusion.

A number of well known artists in the 1950s and 60s explored the established ideas of what art is and some included the postal system in their artistic considerations. By the late 1950s and early 1960s the Nouveaux Realistes Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni in Europe were questioning and exploring the meanings of art and the significance of the art marketing system in their artworks. Manzoni worked with the notion of the cult of the artist in terms of the reverence that is shown to the creator, (e.g. 'The Artist's Breath' 1960) often seemingly superseding, or at any rate equalling, the interest shown in the object produced. Whilst there is no evidence of Manzoni exhibiting in or visiting U.S.A., Klein had his first one man show in New York[60] in 1959 and stayed there for two months: by then Klein had already made his own version of 'Nothings', 'Le Vide'[61] and also used the mail in his work.[62] Whilst there is no record proving that Johnson was aware of Manzoni or Klein, their work is further evidence of what was an international interest in questioning the established ideas about Fine Art. Two other members of the Nouveau Realiste movement, Arman and Daniel Spoerri worked with what was to become the mainstay of so much mailart, the rubber stamp that had been used in Fine Art works by Kurt Schwitters. (I have explored the use of rubber stamps in the following chapter.) Other artists were to explore unconventional media and further to the use by the Futurists of postcards, even some artists committed to paint, used postcards in the 1950s,[63] for example Ad Reinhardt, albeit that he was pushing the conceptual boundaries of painting.

Although many artists both preceding and concurrent with Johnson were exploring aspects of art and art marketing, Johnson was unique in working with the essential networking element that distinguishes mailart. Equally, none of them had the same ambivalent attitude to

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authorship and commodification of artwork that is so
clear from looking at Johnson's attitudes to exhibiting
and evidenced in his sustained dedication to mailart.
Johnson not only made networking central to his artistic
activity but continued it until his death. Whilst
Johnson is identified as the initiator of networking,
the very nature of the non-elitism and non-heroic
activity has ensured that the names of no other
practitioners should be singled out as being formative
in the development of mailart. This is not in any way to
suggest that Johnson is important and that no other
networker is, but that everyone participating in mailart
is of equal importance: Johnson is singled out solely
because it was he who began mailart networking. Although
Johnson maintained his considerable commitment to
mailart, he chose to ignore debate about the practice
and ignored all the congress meetings that took place,
even those in New York.

To summarise, it can be identified that Johnson began
mailart as an exchange system; orchestrated his
correspondents; began the use of 'Add-Tos' in mailart as
an ongoing activity, developed what could be described
as a mailart persona, in the form of his 'Bunny Head';
centred his mailart activity on the use of puns.

Johnson, however, chose to ignore the elements of
mailart in terms of artistamps, rubberstamps (frankings)
and postcards: it was Fluxus who began the practice of
mailartists exploring these aspects of networking.
Although he had been considered by Fluxus artists to be
'one of them', Johnson chose never to align himself with
Fluxus.

FLUXUS AND POSTAL EPHEMERA .

2.1. Introduction.

In USA, whilst Johnson continued to use the postal system to transport his orchestrations, Fluxus - a constantly changing, international loose group of geographically separated people,1 through Europe and North America - participated in mailart and began to widen the network of mailart through publishing and to explore the creative potential of the elements of the postal system with postcards, stamps and franking. This chapter examines the uses of these elements by Fluxus and mailartists.

Whilst much has been written on Fluxus, it has not been discussed in terms of its importance to the development of mailart. Writers on mailart on the other hand have acknowledged the importance of Fluxus to mailart. Significantly, Chuck Welch chooses to organise his book, Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology 2 with the first chapter, written by Fluxus man Ken Friedman, 'The Early Days of Mailart'3 including an account of Fluxus mailart work. It is not until the third chapter that Clive Phillpot's 'The Mailed Art of Ray Johnson' occurs, although Friedman does include writing about Johnson. (Chapter two is by John Held Jr., 'Networking: The Origin of Terminology.') Friedman perceives that it was through Fluxus that mailart:

"reached out to the public" ... "and began to make real, its potential for social change and for contributing new forms of communication to the world." 4

This is a view that I share, but note the importance of the word "began". Friedman also sees that it was Fluxus that encouraged people to find-out about each other through the mail, a means of broadening knowledge and understanding of other artists' work without having to travel and meet them.

Although Robert Atkins in his "guide" mentions mailart under Fluxus:

"Fluxus was not limited to live events. Mail (or correspondence) art - postcardlike collages or other small scale works that utilized the mail as a distribution system - were pioneered by Fluxus artists, especially Ray Johnson."5

the statement is misleading in that Johnson was never a "Fluxus artist" and given that, it was not Fluxus artists who pioneered mailart. Writing about Fluxus is frequently accompanied by reproductions of works that show Fluxus use of the mail but do not comment on them in terms of mailart, seeing them simply as Fluxus works6. John Hendrick's massive tome on Fluxus reproduces many works that used the mail, again without reference to mailart.7 In his introduction to this text, Robert Pincus-Witten describes Fluxus as an indictment of USA political and artistic (Abstract Expressionist) imperialism and a:

"campaign that subverted the inherited abstract value system - large, heroic, ambitious, and sexist - favouring an art that was intimate, ephemeral, and highly poetic."8

This is a view of Fluxus that is echoed by Hendricks in his foreword to the book and is not only applicable to Fluxus but also to my reading of mailart in the USA in the sixties and seventies.

2.2. The Conception of Fluxus.

Fluxus was conceived in 1961/1962 by George Maciunas (1931 - 1978), a Lithuanian architect and designer and part owner of the A/G gallery, 925 Madison Avenue.9 A/G got its name from the forenames of Maciunas and his partner Almus Salicus. The intention had been to exhibit abstract painting and sell ancient musical instruments but within the same year (1960) Maciunas met La Monte Young and others that were to be Fluxus artists and turned the gallery into a venue for their (including Johnson's) events that Maciunas sponsored. The gallery closed in 1961. Fluxus began outside Fine Art, with many of the people who joined Fluxus coming from non-art backgrounds working in the spaces between art forms and between art and life.10 In this way, they relate to mailartists with the participators not necessarily

coming from an arts background and not signalling the importance of 'art'.

The first Fluxus manifestation was Maciunas' publication 'Fluxus' (1961) that grew out of the musical events of the people centred around John Cage. Many of those who were to become the mainstays of Fluxus11 had attended Cage's course in Musical Composition at The New School For Social Research, New York in the summer of 1958.12 In 1960, Maciunas also attended Maxfield Parish's classes in electronic music, and met La Monte Young at the same venue. La Monte Young, Fluxus man and composer organised performances at Yoko Ono's New York studio, (11 Chambers Street) from Dec. 18, 1960 to June 30th 1961 and Maciunas arranged performances in his gallery from March 14th to June 30th 1961. It was on an invitation card to three concerts in March of that year "Musica Antiqua et Nova" - "A 3 dollar contribution will help to publish Fluxus magazine." that Maciunas first used the word Fluxus.13 Johnson was one of the participants in these concerts, and so was involved in Fluxus right from the very start. La Monte Young and Maciunas were not simply connected by their involvement in Happenings14 but also their interest in publishing. Young had taken over Beatitude East magazine15 which developed, with Maciunas doing the layout and Mac Low assisting, into An Anthology (October 1961). The journal included experimental music and event scores; poetry and essays and the work of Nam June Paik; Dieter Rot; and Emmett Williams and was intended by Maciunas to be a serial publication under the banner of Fluxus but was interrupted by his moving to Germany to take-up a job with the U.S.A.F. in Germany as a freelance designer / architect. Although the move to Germany affected the intended production of the publication, it strengthened the idea of internationalism that is so clear from the nationalities of the artists involved in the Cage workshop, Fluxus in general and later in mailart. Nam June Paik (b.1932) was also in Germany at that time and Maciunas - taking advantage of his geographical location - planned an ambitious 18 months long tour of concerts, to include Paik, from Berlin in June 1961 to Tokyo in January 1964 via Moscow - a big city per month to be supported by Fluxus magazine. The reality of the locations was somewhat different to the plan - being limited to Europe - but still impressively ambitious.16

Fluxus performance and therefore Fluxus, was clearly launched.

At the start of 1963 Maciunas published the Fluxus, 'Purge Manifesto' which declared war on:"The world of bourgeois sickness, "intellectual", professional, and commercialized culture."17 Maciunas saw Fluxus as being free of confines and able to work in any way that it wished, without concern for tradition or the need for recognition by established art critics. Whilst the publication of Fluxus works and the opening of a Fluxus shop can be read as being a critical comment on commerce - given that the goods on offer were neither functional nor falling within accepted notions of Fine Art - there is also a danger of falling into the trap of becoming part of the very establishment that is being criticised. Maciunas' criticism of 'professional(ism)' is also problematic, given the professional role that he played as the highly committed organiser of Fluxus.18

Rejection of the notion of 'Authorship' and therefore the 'Artist as Hero' was central to Maciunas' concept of Fluxus: participators were expected to sign their work - if at all - 'Fluxus.' Fluxus signalled participation, inclusivity rather than exclusivity, experimentation and creativity as being paramount and individual identity, career building and ego-feeding as being of no importance whatsoever. However, the reality was that the participators in Fluxus frequently did sign their work with their own names. Equally, mailartists usually sign their work as a principle because the spread of contacts is important to its activity. Although within mailart there is a tradition among some networkers of working anonymously by adopting pseudonyms, or 'combat names' as discussed in Chapter one, this is not the same issue as signing a work 'Fluxus' because these are individually held names and also because cynically it could be suggested that Maciunas' motive in encouraging this signing was giving Fluxus itself a higher profile than that of the individual participating artists. Whilst combat names, may well make the individual more memorable, they do not serve to promote mailart as a whole and mailart, unlike Fluxus has no intention of producing a saleable product.

Multiple Names relate to Combat Names in as much as that they do not reveal the legal name of the networker but

their origins lie in the Fluxus anti-elitist, anti-artist-as-hero stance. Whilst Duchamp used pseudonyms such as R.Mutt and Rrose Selavy, these were not used to suppress his career as an artist, arguably the opposite was the case. In 1920 however, Raoul Hausmann suggested that the Berlin Dadaists should all call themselves 'Jesus Christ'. This can be considered to be a typically provocative Dadaist idea rather than a serious proposition but nevertheless, it is a multiple name proposal. Maciunas had more success with suggesting to the Fluxus artists that they should simply sign their work 'Fluxus', in a move against the perception of art as elitist behaviour and careerism. The notion of an anonymous work of art has the effect of preventing the placing of value on a work of art because of its 'brand name.'

The issue of putting a name to a work of art was subsequently explored by mailartists and the first mailart Multiple Name was created in the mid 1970s by two British mailartists, Stefan Kukowski and Adam Czarnowski who tried to persuade other networkers to adopt the name 'Klaos Oldanburgh' (sic).[19] The ideology of this concept is called into question by their use of Roman Numerals after the name to differentiate the different Klaos Oldanburghs, thereby in effect drawing attention to their being different people, with identities. One year before Maciunas' death, in 1977, David Zack a Los Angeles, USA. networker proposed what he described as an "Open pop-star" name that could be used by mailartists wishing to assume the identity of a pop-star. The name, Monty Cantsin became associated specifically with Neoism and in particular with a Canadian networker, Istvan Kantor (I discuss Neoism in Chapter 4). In 1985, Stuart Home, an English networker, became interested in Multiple Names but felt, because of the specific association of Cantsin with Kantor, that a new association-free name was needed and chose that of Karen Eliot. Documentation of mailart projects occurred where all the participators' names were listed as Karen Eliot or Monty Cantisn.[20] Honouring the expectation of participants to receive the addresses of all participants in many respects defeated the principle of anonymity, the printing of the individuals' addresses making the identification of the participant possible.

2.3. Publications.

The importance to Fluxus of publishing was to be significant for mailart in that it was the start of mailartists extending their work beyond the impetus of Johnson's 'letters', to making editions and journal based work.

In 1965, the first mailart book (and what seems to be the first published accounts of mailart after Wilcock's article) was produced by Dick Higgins - a prominent member of Fluxus - with the publication of Johnson's book, The Paper Snake.21 This work consists entirely of mailart works by Johnson from 1960 to 1964 and almost entirely sent to Higgins. These are mostly text with, in many cases, some resemblance to the text works of Yoko Ono from the 1950s and 1960s, often with barbed references to specific individuals, many of them famous from all walks of life. Although Johnson's address does appear, there is neither invitation, nor indication of the possibility of participation. The work makes no attempt to reach out to the uninitiated and as such perhaps would be unapproachable to most people, but would undoubtedly have made Fluxus artists more aware of the way in which Johnson used the mail. There is a short introductory essay by the American art critic, William Wilson, sometimes described as Johnson's unofficial biographer, eulogising about the work but adding no information on Johnson or mailart (see the introduction to this thesis).

Of particular importance to the spread of mailart, Higgins also produced a newsletter in 1966, initially to present his essay on 'intermedia', it went on to disseminate mailart ideas and to be the inspiration for future network newsletters.22 Also in 1966, Ken Friedman of Fluxus West (San Diego) began to publish the annual compilations of Fluxus mailing lists which George Maciunas had produced since the early days of Fluxus as membership lists so that people could communicate directly with each other. These could seem to relate to Johnson's 'meeting' lists but differ in two important ways. Firstly, Fluxus lists were factual whereas Johnson's were, at least in part, fantasy. Secondly, Johnson did not reproduce lists of addresses with the names, to enable and encourage growing networks. Fluxus compilations grew until by 1972 the list was of more than 1400 names and addresses of people interested in communicating experimentally. The 1972 list was

published in co-operation with 'Image Bank', a Toronto, Canada artists' collective which sent out bi-monthly requests to other participants, a kind of brokerage firm, based on Johnson's example of putting people in touch with each other.23 The Image Bank list, in turn, became the core of the artist's directory of File (see below) which was released in hundreds of free copies, distributed to artists, arts organisations and publishers around the world. The artist's directory published network information, addresses and project invitations, providing the first possibility of information rather than simply written versions of Chinese Whispers.

Although mailing lists per se do not appear anymore in mailart, documentation of mailart projects (discussed in Chapter 3) by tacit agreement, consists of the names and addresses of all the participants, so acting as a mailing list. Since Fluxus, there have been many mailart magazines which include name and address lists, notably Lo Straniero, the production of Neopolitan Ignazio Corsaro who refers to his list as 'The Strangers Directory', printing about 1,000 names and addresses, covering approximately five letters of the alphabet each issue.24 This magazine is published in the uniquely (for mailart) large edition of 10,000 copies, is professionally printed in Black and White and produced twice a year since 1985, initially in Broad Sheet format.25 Corsaro's magazine is a forum for discussion through letters sent to him and his reply to them, through the magazine. Other means of increasing contacts occur in some quite different journals, in England the commercially produced Artists Newsletter includes a column, compiled by London mailartist Michael Leigh, listing current mailart projects.26 Mailart newsletters vary from the highly efficient, professionally produced but visually bland Global Mail produced by Ashley Parker Owens of the U.S.A., to the visually enjoyable but slimmer, photocopied and more random quality of husband and wife Serbian Lawyers, Rorica and Dobrica Kamperlic's Open World. Global Mail developed from an initial single fold in 1992, to issue no.15, December 1996, consisting of 32 pages, stapled, with the listings under eleven categories and 2500 copies produced.27 In choosing to concentrate on the content of her visually functional journal rather than creating a very recognisable appearance, Ashley Parker Owens highlights the

importance of simply being able to contact people and
expand the network, over the nature of the contact, she
remains impartial to how her information is used. Open
World, has been published since 1985 and continued
throughout the war in ex Yugoslavia, even though it was
published in Beograd. The magazine consists of paste-ups
of fliers for mailart projects and photographs of
mailartists, with typewriter generated text. Whilst this
makes it difficult to use as a reference work about
current projects, unlike Global Mail, it is a much more
visually seductive production, encouraging browsing and
with a sense of ownership in that although Ashley Parker
Owens prints entries sent, these are changed into the
text, style and format of the magazine, whereas the
Kamperlics simply photocopy whatever is sent. The
Kamperlics also encourage the spread of the magazine by
recipients photocopying it and sending copies to other
mailartists. Ashley Parker Owens also uses mailartists
to pass the magazine on, but by sending-on copies sent.
In both cases they are using the potential of the
network to distribute their magazines about the network
beyond their immediate contacts. Both have their place
in mailart and represent two extremes of mailart, Ashley
Parker Owens being highly 'professional' (although at
her own considerable expense28) and the Kamperlics
enjoying the immediacy of hastily produced magazines
that enabled them to produce and distribute 83 editions
in the first ten years of production.

Fluxus production of magazines,29 developing from
Maciunas' initial concept of a Fluxus magazine, was to
become one of the mainstays of mailart, with magazines
produced for a variety of reasons, from contacts and
advertisers of mailart projects to publishers of visual
and text based creative work. The word 'magazine' is
often shortened to 'Zine', Stephen Perkins defines them
as "self-produced, self-distributed, non-profit
publications focusing on topics that are often ignored
by the mainstream media." referring to self published,
cheaply produced products with no commercial ambitions
or outlets, he goes on to say that "the history of Zines
can be traced back to the 1930s when science fiction
fans started putting out their own slick science fiction
magazines ... When those fans circulated their
mimeographed writings amongst themselves, the zine was
born".30

Life magazine, with the punning potential of its title, inspired a number of mailart magazines that in some cases had large print runs, received grants and reached out beyond the confines of the network.31 These magazines evolved organically in the change of title and passing of production from mailartist to mailartist. The first of these, and perhaps the first magazine to be generated through the mailart network, was produced by General Idea who began File magazine in 1971 with a grant from the Canada Council. File was printed in editions of 3-5,000 and was sold at news-stands in major USA cities, but by 1974 it had ceased to address mailart, choosing to concentrate on the general activities of General Idea, in preference to what they perceived as being the 'Quikkopy crap' that they were seeing in mailart as a response to the new availability of photocopying and the broadening out from the hand-crafted works that epitomised the early years of mailart. File was conceived as an anagram of Life and the first issue, April 15th, was a convincing imitation of a 1948 issue of Life magazine. In 1974 Anna Banana adopted File, renaming it Vile. Banana was no newcomer to self publishing having produced ten issues of her Banana Rag since 1971. Her particular ambition was to imitate Life magazine to such an extent that it could be taken for it and by 1977 she published the fourth issue which came close to her ambition. At that point she dropped the notion of imitating Life, not least because the producers of File had lost their battle with Time / Life over the use of the similar logo.32 By then the publication was jointly produced with Bill Gaglione, in a different format and with different designs and they continued publishing it until 1981. Although mailart based, Banana and Gaglione chose to seek funding for the publication and the third issue that had included poetry and fiction was given a grant by the Co-ordinating Council of Literary Magazines making it possible to print 1000 copies. The sixth issue also received a grant from the CCLM and entitled 'Fe-Mail-Art' explored women mailartists. By complete contrast, the seventh issue was a much smaller edition and hand produced.33

A further evolution of the name of the journal was adopted by Stewart Home who in February 1984 published his first issue of Smile, 'The official organ of the Generation Positive.' This journal was to express Home's ideas on 'Positive Plagiarism' which are explored in

Chapter 4. Home also encouraged others to produce copies of Smile which several did though to Home's initial disappointment the first, continuing the established tradition of punning on the title, calling it Slime & Limes. Home had intended that all magazines should be called Smile and subsequent issues conformed to that request. Smile remains open as a possibility for any networker to use the title for a magazine and from time to time networkers do publish under that title, frequently with a political agenda. Jo Klaffki for example, a German mailartist who uses the name Joki Mail Art has published a number of editions of Smile sometimes with political undertones but always with a strong sense of humour.34

The concept of common ownership of journals was not Home's original idea, this can be traced back to Fluxus. Ken Friedman of Fluxus West published the first twelve issues of The New York Correspondence School Weekly Breeder, initially 81/2" X 11" single sheets, it was begun in 1971 and in 1972 began to be passed from networker to networker for subsequent issues, spawning the idea of magazines that were owned by the network as a whole and not the egotistical province of an individual or group, reflecting the belief in anti exclusivity of Fluxus. This publication became influential not only within the network but also in Bookarts. Since Fluxus, other people have worked with the concept of common ownership and in 1977, Polish mailartist, Pawel Petasz initiated the Commonpress periodical project which encouraged other networkers to publish editions, using his/her own theme and format, following the Fluxus lead. All contributors to any edition were expected to produce their own edition, in a print run of not less than 200.35 Petasz produced the first copy and a total of sixty were produced across thirteen countries between 1977 and 1981, all co-ordinated by Petasz. At that point the political climate in Poland made it inadvisable for him to continue and he handed over the co-ordination to a Canadian networker, Gerald Jupiter-Larsen.

The principle of magazines produced by individual participants sending their contributions as ready to print artwork, took the name 'assembling' from the title of a publication by New York writer and critic, Richard Kostelantz who, between 1970 and 1981, produced 11

editions of his magazine Assembling.36 This journal was unique amongst mailart magazines in being published in editions of 1000 copies, thanks to financial support from various sources. Kostelantz requested 8 1/2" X 11" artwork and sent each contributor three copies of the complete work.

Earlier, in 1968 Ken Friedman produced the one and only issue of Amazing Facts Magazine which established a cherished mailart principle of a journal produced from gathered material as an editorial principal.37 This was a collation assemblage of received mail which was dispatched to the participators. In Germany in the late 1960s, Thomas Niggl created Omnibus News which was the first accumulated magazine to be published in multiple editions.38 This notion was developed through the 1970s and is a very common aspect of networking today, founded on the general principle of a co-ordinator responsible for collating and distributing the finished product to the participants, the number of participants dictating the number of copies that each contributor is required to send to the co-ordinator. Typically, numbers have ranged from twelve, twenty, fifty and sometimes 100. Co-oridnator/originators also state the dimensions required although these have usually been given as a maximum so that the final assembled work is frequently a hotchpotch of work on different types of paper and other supports as well as varying in thickness and dimension this means that the visual appearance alone of assembling zines instantly separates them from commercial magazines. Central to this notion of publishing is the decision to exercise no editorial control, as in the practice of no juries for mailart shows. This inevitably has meant that the content and 'quality' in the critical sense have often been questionable because the importance of these zines lies in the inclusion of material, without editorial control, of work from a wide cultural and geographic background where the taking part is of supreme importance.

2.4. Postal Elements.

For Fluxus, unlike mailart, production of objects was for an intended sale. Central to the production of Fluxus material was the mail order warehouse and shop which Maciunas had opened, with the Flux-Hall for Performances, at 359 Canal Street, on his return to New

York after the Fluxus tour. The warehouse advertised many items, mostly made by Maciunas though few existed in advance of orders. Although Fluxus was keen to sell its products, 70% of them were given away rather than sold.

The recognition by Fluxus of the postal system as a means of keeping in touch with each other, and as a system for selling their work, led to Fluxus people seeing it as a medium and vehicle for their work. Paik operated through the mail, although not using his own stamps. 'The Monthly Review of the University for Avant-Garde Hinduism.'(Plate 16), taking Johnson's fascination for bizarre names, was a series of works that Paik mailed out in 1963.

"To the subscriber of the Monthly Review of the University for Avant-Garde Hinduism sometimes comes something by mail. once, or twice, or thrice, you will find a tiny 1 cent coin in a white envelope. or ..."39

It is not clear how many Paik sent although there may be some clues given in his deliberately unlikely suggestions as to what he would send, including "arm-pit hair of a chicagoan negro prostitute". There is little interest shown in the appearance of the envelope although the use of his own rubber stamp should be noted.

Although mailart was not of primary importance to Fluxus, it is interesting to note how central a part it made of the postal system in a parody of marketing systems. Fluxus, taking the postal system seriously as a medium, (that is to say seriously from an often humorous point of view as was their wont) went so far as to produce a:

" Fluxus Postal Kit, prepared in 1966 complete with a Fluxpost cancellation mark, permitting an entire, Fluxus-controlled postal exchange to take place."... " By the end of the 1960s, a number of Fluxus people had begun to view mail art as a medium offering unique potentials and challenges. They saw beyond the basic issue of art through the mail, and began to explore the reaches and media of correspondence and mail themselves." 40

'Flux-post kit 7', 1968 (Plate 17) shows the range of postal ephemera that Fluxus was involved in but it also shows - with its box container - how these objects were very much seen - at least by Maciunas - as commodities rather than explorations of the mail. For Maciunas there was little difference between Flux Tattoos, as an artwork / commodity and Flux Postal ephemera, in that both were produced to be sold and collected.

Although these objects were to add to the correspondence aspect of mailart that Johnson had begun, for mailartists, it is the interaction through the mail that is important. It is not insignificant in the consideration of mailart that every communication received, and sent, will have the marks of the postal system (postage stamps and franking) of, at least, its country of origin. These in themselves can lead to, both a better understanding between two countries and the simple though not to be devalued pleasure of an appreciation of the aesthetic qualities and charm of stamps and frankings of other countries. It is therefore apparent that irrespective of the networker's contribution and intervention, any mailart communication, in order to comply with the postal system, has intrinsic interest. For Fluxus and mailartists, there was also the possibility of adding their own faux-stamps and faux-frankings.Faux-stamps were to become known as Artistamps.41

Historically, the first recorded non official stamps are understood to have been made long before Fluxus, by Karl Schwesig.42 As with the history of most things however, earlier examples come to light and this is no less the case with artistamps. Artistamp News, in 1991 (1/2) published a brief article on rubberstamp produced stamps by Michael V. Hitrovo from 1914. A subsequent article in Artistamp News 2/1 1992 describes an even earlier example from the last century.43 More recently, an American, Donald Evans, looked to stamps as a format for artwork, though not a mailartist, he made one-off stamps. Evans began making stamps in 1957 when he was twelve years old and continued making them until his untimely death in a fire in 1977. Evans' water-colour stamps from imaginary kingdoms were exhibited in galleries and sold by him, thereby distancing him from the practice of networkers. None of these historical precedents relate to mailart in that they were not part

of an exchange within a network and serve only to
demonstrate that unofficial stamps had been produced
before networkers began to make them.

The earliest stamps made as part of mailart activity
were those of the prolific Fluxus member Robert Watts
who in 1962 printed 'Safe Post / K.U.K. Feldpost /
Jokpost.' (Plate 18) These stamps were subversive in
that whilst they imitated commercial stamps in their
borders, the central images were taken from photographs
of naked women. The 1963 'Yamflug/5 Post 5'44 (Plate 19)
also suggest commercial stamps with their traditional
borders but are confusing to the viewer because of their
evident non-commercial heads. Watts continued to make
artistamps, as part of his Fluxus activity, until his
death in 1988. In a further parody of the postal system
Watts in 1963 produced his own stamp dispenser, an
altered readymade, taking his own stamps. Fluxus stamps,
with the word 'Post', inclusion of numerical 'values'
and frequent use of heads as subject matter, very
clearly indicate a wish to produce something that
relates very strongly to officially produced stamps.
This is an imitation of a formal system which Watts,
with references to Fluxus on his stamps, clearly
situated in Fluxus production. It was an offshoot of the
considerable structure that Maciunas attempted to set-
up, in that with its own shop and publishing, stamps
were a logical development. Maciunas, as well as
producing finished artwork and producing many of the
multiples designed by other Fluxus people, also designed
his own stamps, for example, 'Fluxpost (Smiles)'
(Plate20). These stamps relate to his Flux Smile Machine
and as such situate them firmly within Fluxus products
rather than for mailart usage.

By 1974 artiststamps had become well established as a
mailart medium, with thirty-five networkers from nine
countries participating in the first "Artists' Stamp and
Stamp Images" exhibition, which was held in Canada.45 In
1984, Michael Bidner of Canada, held an exhibition in
Ontario, combining his passions of art and stamp
collecting.46 This show exhibited stamps by over 1000
networkers from almost 50 countries. Artistamps were
totally to dominate Bidner's life with his mission to
document the production of artistamps and to produce a
catalogue.47 The documentation and entire collection of
over 10,000 images was given to the 'Artpool' Archive of

Julia and Gyorgy Galantai in Hungary, after Bidner
anticipating his death, failed to persuade any Canadian
Museum to take them.

As James Felter, a Canadian mailartist, recognised in an
introductory essay to a Seattle Artistamp exhibition,48
that postage stamps give a universal message of
authority, functioning in a manner that is instantly
understood throughout the world.

"One symbol they (mailartists) have found is the postage
stamp, or rather the postage stamp format. This is one
of the few existing symbols of officialdom, of
authority, and of low economic value that is recognised
in every nook and cranny of the globe. It is a universal
symbol of a means of communication and a carrier of an
unlimited variety of 'authorized' messages in the form
of words, numbers, and images (or any combination
thereof). It is a symbol that is used everyday and
collected throughout the world. The artists of the
global village have adopted this symbol and named it
'Artistamp.'"The use of this old symbol as a carrier of
new symbols, new visual messages and new aesthetic
discoveries lends an aura of authenticity to the
creative efforts of the artists of the global village
and legitamizes their imagination with the international
society." 49

Stamps are also a very low cost item carrying an endless
variety of images and texts that can be seen as
miniature, multiple artworks. The imitation of postage
stamps by mailartists is a logical decision, giving
their enormous potential for the use of text and image
in miniature and relevance to the activity of postal
art. In spite of this, only a small number of
mailartists produce artistamps, presumably because they
perceive them to be too difficult and /or expensive to
produce. Some of those who do produce artistamps on the
other hand, go to great lengths to create postal systems
which at times even include fake countries, languages
and even Royalty. Robert Rudine, a USA. mailartist,
using the combat name, Dogfish or the King of Tui Tui
produces Philatelic Bulletins to accompany every new
issue of stamps for his 'country': these are accompanied
by a glossary for those not familiar with the language
of Tui Tui in which some of the text is written. Working
with artistamps and systems can become a fantasy life in

which the creator escapes to his/her land of his/her dreams that s/he can be in complete control of, a way of escaping from the mundanity of everyday life, which in a sense mailart is, every time the post deliverer arrives. Equally it ridicules the seriousness of officialdom, a comment on the artificiality of established systems, the ease with which they can be constructed and the shallowness that can be their underpinning.

There is an established precedent for non-postage stamp stamps, namely in what are called Cinderellas, that is to say the commercially produced stamps with no postal value, used as part of an advertising or promotional campaign.

"...the stamp format was widely used as an advertising medium throughout Europe and America from 1900 through 1940, as one of the only affordable means advertisers could use to circulate full colour reproductions of their products or facilities. After 1940 the medium died out quickly when technologies of colour and black and white printing were integrated, and colour advertising in the context of magazines, became available." 50

The design considerations for Cinderellas are the same as for most aspects of postage stamps and are also appropriate to artistamps. Whilst affordable to business, commercial printing is of course not affordable by the average networker and so whilst Cinderellas remain as a precedent, they do not indicate a standard method of production. Similarly, the production designing of postage stamps by artists is not related to mailart quite simply because postage stamps are the mark of authority. Whilst artistamps do not necessarily seek to subvert or mock the authority, they exist alongside it as a personal statement or mark.

In contrast to the hand produced works of Schwesig and Evans, the usual medium for artistamps has become the photocopier, hence the considerable increase in the production of artistamps since the widespread availability of photomechanical reproduction, especially the colour-copier. Other stamps are hand printed, silk screen for example and many are produced by rubber-stamping or designed and produced on computers. These images if hand produced may well be unique stamps and

the printed stamps may be produced in editions of any
number or unlimited.

Fluxus work whilst at times poking fun at and parodying
the establishment, tended to achieve their aim through
humour, some artistamp makers on the other hand have
taken risks by subverting the official postage due. The
simplest form is simply to send mail with no stamp, but
that runs the risk of the recipient having to pay, which
at least in the case of mailartists from countries where
incomes are relatively low, is not an acceptable risk.
Simply using an artistamp is another possibility.
Famously (although not part of mailart networking) Yves
Klein made his IKB stamps in 1958 to send out on the
envelopes of his invitations to the exhibition Le Vide.
Reputedly, these were the only stamps on the envelopes
and successfully reached their destinations without
surcharges being added.51 More provocatively, in 1970,
USA. mailartist, William Farley's USXX stamp of a rear
view of a head with a pony tail in an early US design,
imitating a Lincoln stamp was used by a friend of his in
place of an official stamp. The stamp was traced back to
Farley and resulted in him being forced to surrender all
the remaining stamps to the Secret Service. Totally
undetected however was the production and use by an
anonymous American artist of a facsimile of the '10c US.
Air Mail' stamp.52 Subversive activity has not been
limited to stamps but has included franking with the
production of fake franking and specifically fake
wartime "Utility" marks, producing a strange time-warp
for any handler of the envelope recognising the
franking.

The simplest form of artistamps is to work with the
official stamps, this can be for aesthetic, subversive
reasons or purely for fun. The more stamps that are
placed on the envelope, the more possibilities there are
of aesthetics, with choice of colour, placing and
relative positioning. An example of this is to use the
lowest denomination stamp and to totally cover the
envelope with the stamps, thereby making a minimal work
of art. This kind of 'game' is not unique to mailartists
at all, and is often played by friends who have never
heard of mailart. Subversively, inverting the Queen's
head demonstrates disrespect, if not a treasonable
offence and placing the stamp in an attempt to avoid
franking so that it can be reused by the recipient are

all strategies that mailartists use. Actually working on
the stamps and altering them is another possibility that
has been explored by an English mailartist who limits
his introductions to his combat name of Red Herring who
in 1988 over painted a stamp of Wellington, giving him a
Donald Duck bill. Whilst this work is humorous and
subversive, it is interesting to consider that it is so
subtle that it could easily be sent to a mailartist who
does not archive and so not noticing the altered stamp
could have thrown away the envelope without ever being
aware of Herring's labours. Requiring a similar amount
of detailed effort is the attempt to remove any franking
marks on the stamp, without damaging the original image
so that it can be reused, the amount of time involved
for what is a relatively small financial saving suggests
that the importance to the perpetrator is in subverting
the system rather than in saving money. In doing this as
with Herring's stamp, the motivation is one that is
primarily personal satisfaction and amusement at beating
the system.

Rubber Stamps, or Rubberstamps as they have come to be
known by mailartists, were invented by businessmen in
the mid to late nineteenth century and by the late 50s
and early 60s were widely used by both Fluxus and
Nouveau Realists as a medium for producing artworks.

The combination of the mundanity and power of
rubberstamps gives

"a symbol of power - their role is to validate or
invalidate something. There are many symbols of power
and we are frequently confronted by them. But none is as
common and petty as the rubber-stamp. Their lack of
sophistication and glamour seems to contradict the
enormous power conveyed by them."53

This is particularly evident in oppressed countries
where, as discussed later, received mail has usually
born the mark of the censor. Rubberstamps fall into
several categories, the official stamp is associated
with authority and validation of, for example, licenses,
certificates and passports: these actions and documents
acknowledge and approve us. The very medium or carrier
of mailart, the Royal Mail, validates our messages with
rubber-stamps and officialdom in general uses them to

number our documents. Fluxus used faux frankings, for
example Ken Friedman's 'Fluxpost West 1964 - 1974' and
many mailartists since have used their own versions of
frankings. Similarly, mailartists have often used date
stamps or numbering stamps, of for example their
envelopes, partly to broadcast their prowess at having
produced so much mailart but also to give spurious
authority to their sending, in a play on officialdom.
The reliving of childhood pleasures of 'playing Post
Offices' with Post Office Sets, should not be
underrated, the simple pleasure of using the
paraphernalia and the sense of importance that
accompanies the use of the stamp.

Domestically there is a formal but far less official use
as a convenient method of producing letter heads and
'sender' address stamps for the back of envelopes. These
were used by Fluxus and Johnson and are used by most
mailartists today, partly for convenience. Name stamps
have also been used for fake institutions, such as, as
already stated, Paik's 'University of Avant-garde
Hinduism' and often by Johnson for a wide variety of his
fake institutions although he did not always use
rubberstamps to validate them, often preferring to hand
write or type the names. Johnson also used rubberstamps
with text such as 'Ray Johnson Evaporations', 'Collage
by Ray Johnson', or even 'Collage by Joseph Cornell.54

The use of rubberstamps as cheap movable type has long
had an attraction for children with 'John Bull' printing
sets, allowing them to play at typesetting. It is this
element of play that many mailartists find attractive,
with the hand-crafted appearance of something that is
close to a commercial graphic process but with the
visual attraction of its imperfections, so much loved by
Warhol in his early 1960s photo silk-screen prints.
Although most type for Fluxus work was generated by
letterpress, (by Maciunas usually) Vautier for example
enjoyed the use of rubber stamp type.

In 1974 Herve Fischer, a French artist, published
rubber-stamp images55 and in 1978 the first Rubberstamp
Album was produced in America by Joni Miller and Lowry
Thompson who subsequently edited the massive bimonthly
journal Rubberstampmadness begun in 1979 and still
running commercially (currently 92 pages). The 1970s
also saw a proliferation of companies, particularly in

the USA., offering a wide range of ready made decorative rubberstamps and a bespoke service giving an enormous range of creative possibilities. This, coupled with mailartists beginning to carve their own rubberstamps led to a considerable increase in the use of rubberstamps in mailart.

The use of the rubberstamp by networkers varies considerably in intention and effect from networker to networker. For some, at times as humorous pastiche and at others to make critical comment: this impression can only be created with the blandness of commercially produced rubberstamps. Hand cut rubberstamps however, created usually with a scalpel from an eraser, inevitably present an entirely different image, lacking the authority of precision but with the visual attraction that goes with hand-crafted work. Equally, with Rubberstampmadness giving examples of how to create complete pictures in multi colours purely from rubberstamps, the creative possibilities are considerable. Whilst the latter suggests more of a craft-hobbyist approach, the experimental nature of mailartists has resulted in very imaginative rubberstamps and uses for them, whether commercially or hand produced. In an age in which for many networkers, making contact with people is more important than laboured hand produced creativity, the rubberstamp offers a very quick, accessible and immediate medium with considerable potential: expediency and pragmatism dominating ideology.

2.5. Postcards.

The beginnings of handmade and commercially produced picture postcards, in England, date from 1894: until that time postcards could only be made by the government. Hand decorated postcards are as old as postcards themselves and as an art form are not confined to the network, exhibitions of postcard art having been held since the late 1970s. For the networker, they provide a simple and direct medium with all the process (accumulated ephemera of postmarks etc.) of its transition, from sender to recipient, unavoidably evident. Whilst the importance of mailart lies in bringing people together, the postcard, having no protective packaging, is prey to the ravages of its journey through the post. The postcard, therefore, is

the most pure form of mailart. Ideologically, it truly functions as mailart by being open to be 'read' by all the postal workers who handle it and any casual passers-by who may see it on the door mat before it is received by the 'intended' recipient as I go on to discuss in Chapter 5.

Whilst the sending of Picture Postcards by mailartists to each other as mailart is probably usually because of a wish to share the image, because of its beauty, humour, personal relevance or any one of a number of reasons, it could be seen to indicate either a lack of concern for any attempt at considering the communication as art or on the contrary, possibly the consideration of the chosen postcard as a ready-made in the Duchampian sense. Fluxus members often sent messages to each other on postcards but it was Ben Vautier who used the postcard as a creative vehicle in itself. In 1965, he made what was probably the first pure conceptual mailart work - 'The Postman's Choice'[56] (Plate 21) in which he produced a double-sided postcard, inviting the postman to decide which side s/he wished to select to determine the recipient. Whilst being an admirable work in terms of conceptual process, Ben's[57] postcard lacks an interest in interchange and therefore remains outside mailart networking. Further, Maciunas' request, "can I reprint 1000 of them! and sell for 10 c each?"[58] indicates very clearly that for Maciunas at least they were perceived as a commodity to be sold and used by others rather than as a conceptual usage of the post by the artist.

Artist's Postcards became so popular as a medium for mailart exchange that by 1971, two Canadian networkers, Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov in Vancouver, Canada, were able to stage a show devoted solely to networkers' postcards.[59] This exhibition was documented with an album of postcards and greatly helped to promote the idea of working in this medium as well as furthering the concept of creating an exhibition from mailart material, discussed in the following chapter.

2.6. Conclusion.

Maciunas' need to control and organise Fluxus extended to thorough documentation of Fluxus activities and

archiving Fluxus material. Whilst the habit of documenting and archiving work is one that has been adopted by many mailartists, unilateral control is both alien to mailart and not possible, given the vast numbers and disparity of its adherents. Although Johnson was a figurehead of mailart, at least in the late fifties and early sixties, he was nevertheless, keen to encourage exchange that went beyond his control. Maciunas' willingness to devote himself to the cause of Fluxus and his generosity in giving work away are however, very much a fundamental part of mailart attitudes.

Fluxus was highly influential on mailart with its, philosophies, attitudes and internationalism. Of particular importance was its usage of postal elements; stamps and postcards and especially with the publishing of address lists which greatly enlarged the number of participants. This was partly responsible for mailart taking on a much broader geographical and cultural spread than it had been possible to achieve simply with the efforts of one man - Johnson. Mailart became a union of two elements, the orchestration and interchange through the mail as practised by Johnson and the playing with the elements of the postal system which - whilst not generally used as mailart - were demonstrated by Fluxus.

Where Fluxus failed was in its attempt to rid itself of authorship by the simple tactic of requiring the participants to sign themselves 'Fluxus', had this happened, it would have changed the way in which the work has been commodified, particularly given the illustrious careers that many of the Fluxus artists went on to have - without names, the historian looses interest. The anonymity of mailart is something that was to become central to its operation and it is with the theories of authorship and art that Fluxus man Joseph Beuys - building on Fluxus ideas - was to propound, that mailart was to develop its rationale, as I debate in the final chapter.

It was natural with the anti-establishment idealism and optimism of the late sixties and early seventies that mailart should grow beyond the life and parameters of Fluxus and Johnson. The burgeoning of mailart reflected the tremendous interest that grew at the time in the

seventies of exploring and setting-up new and alternative systems, which in mailart was to be centred on MAPs (Mail Art Projects), their exhibiting and documentation.

1 The seven original members, George Maciunas; Dick Higgins; Emmett Williams; Alison Knowles; Nam June Paik; Ben Patterson and Wolf Vostell were soon joined by George Brecht; Philip Corner; Toshi Ichijanagi; Ben Vautier; Jackson Mac Low; Yoko Ono; La Monte Young; Charlote Moorman; Daniel Spoerri; Josef Beuys and Robert Filliou, the last three being peripheral members.

CHAPTER 3. THE DEMOCRATISATION OF MAILART - MAP.

3.1.Introduction.

As I have established, by the 1970s, mailart had grown
from Johnson's relatively small network of the 1950s,
partly as result of Fluxus publications. It was however,
still largely confined to America and Western Europe and
participators who were in some way connected with Fine
Art, particularly the avant-garde. A major spread, both
in terms of the nature of the practitioners and
geographically speaking (importantly, including Eastern
Europe and Latin America) began in the 1970s. This was
partly due to exhibitions and their catalogues
broadcasting the concept, and particularly the result of
Thomas Albright's Rolling Stone articles. These articles
were important for publishing the addresses of a number
of networkers, thus enabling those interested to
participate, drawing on a far wider public than the
Fluxus address sheets had reached.

This chapter firstly looks at mailart exhibitions and
examines Mail Art Projects (MAPs) and the part that they
play in mailart practice and secondly explores the
effect that the countries new to mailart have had on the
network.

3.2.The Culture of the 1970s.

Mailart, for its practitioners, offered a focus and
creative medium for the 'post-1968' rebelliousness of
the 1970s, because it gave opportunities both to debate
any issues with a wide range of people and to produce
creative work outside the capitalist-materialist
dominance of existing establishment art marketing
systems. Artists, keen to breakaway from the constraints
of the finance and career-building dominated art
marketing system, saw in mailart, the open opportunity
for experimental freedom unsullied by commerce or
critical appraisal. Although artists were questioning
the gallery system, for example by making work in the
landscape or Robert Morris' 'Peripatetic Artists Guild'
refusing sales or fees, but asking for a wage, they were
still working within this meritocratic system.
Mailartists therefore, by ignoring the gallery system,

criticised both the avant-garde and the traditionalists. With the frequent proclamation, by many artists and critics alike, of the demise of painting and the irrelevance of other traditional art media in favour of conceptual ideas that in theory could not be commodified, it was no surprise that the network thrived and grew.

'The Last Whole Earth Catalogue', published in 1971, was a reference work to a network of groups and individuals who could be accessed for whatever talents, skills or experience they had to offer.1 It could be argued that this indicated that there was a vast body of knowledge and skill that could be tapped into without recourse to established commercial or state controlled organisations. Although there are substantial sections on art and on correspondence, there is no mention in it of mailart, but it situates mailart - as an alternative system - firmly in the culture of the time.

As an alternative system, mailart networking has a tremendous amount to offer and employs much of the ideology of the seventies. For those artists who either were already, or were to become internationally celebrated however, the use of mailart remained primarily one of exploring the postal system as a process and part of a career building strategy, rather than that of the very different concept of networking as an important system in itself, leading to a 'Global World.' Marshall McLuhan's much publicised 1967 message, 'The Medium is The Massage,'2 was further encouragement to practitioners of mailart for whom the medium (mail) was indeed the message that the artist was treating the postal system as an intrinsic part of the artwork in itself rather than simply using it to transport work. Writers on the history of mailart have tended to focus on artists with international reputations, thereby giving spurious importance to their writing.3 Gilbert and George for instance, in the late 1960s and early 1970s used postcards, for example 'A Souvenir of Gilbert & George's Hyde Park Walk July 21st 1969'4 but this, like their other postcards, was used neither interactively nor intended to be perceived as mailart. According to Cohen, "Gilbert & George used the mails to document and further explicate their work for both the amusement and edification of their audience."5 Similarly, the use of postcards by On Kawara to document

the minutiae of his everyday activity, for example the
'I Got Up At' series, begun in 1968, whilst relating to
mailart because of the use of the postal system, is
peripheral to mailart as it was only one way
communication. By comparison, an example of a work that
could be thought to belong more to the history of
mailart - than to be purely a conceptual work of Fine
Art, as I go on to discuss - was made by Jan Dibbets. In
this untitled 1969 work he sent a bulletin to about two
hundred people and following their reply, plotted their
homes on a map of the world to Amsterdam (Dibbets home).
This work could be seen to give mailart credibility and
status, because it was made in collaboration with an art
gallery and reproduced in Studio International.6
However, attaching such credibility would be entirely to
miss the essence of mailart, firstly as exchange - which
Dibbets work was not - and secondly as a network of
people rather than harnessing help from correspondents
to realise his own work. That is to say that mailart is
an ongoing activity, not simply the production of one
work, even if that work uses the network. Although
Chilean artist, Eugenio Dittborn had been a mailartist,
his interesting concept of exhibiting the packaging
together with his 1984 - 1992 'Airmail Paintings', does
not become mailart - through the evidence of the
journeys that the works have undergone - because there
is no interaction through the mail employed in his work.
The interaction takes place with the viewer once the
works have arrived through the post and been unwrapped
and exhibited by the gallery staff, with no opportunity
for the viewer (recipient) to respond directly to the
sender. Works for Dittborn's exhibitions are folded and
delivered to the gallery by airmail with full
documentation of their exhibiting history on the
purpose-made envelope - exhibited alongside its contents
- implying an importance of the mail journeys which are
in fact irrelevant to the finished works. These works do
not employ the fundamental aspect of mailart in that
there is no interaction or interchange with other
mailartists and they therefore remain works that explore
the postal system (or more accurately, simply
acknowledge the postal system) rather than mailart. The
works however are clearly not part of the artmarketing
system as yet and presumably for them to become so would
be to destroy their integrity.

3.3. Magazine Articles.

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the
1972 articles in Rolling Stone7 were the first to be
published in a non specialist commercially produced
magazine since the Village VOICE in 1955. This magazine
was widely available in North America and Britain and so
brought the attention of the general public to mailart,
as well as to the cognoscenti that the North American
publications already referred to had reached.
Importantly, Albright's articles were the first to give
names and addresses of mailartists and to encourage the
reader to participate. Albright writes of mailart,
(which he refers to as 'correspondence art') as being
'potentially revolutionary avant-garde cultural
"undergrounds".' He cites the Whole Earth Catalogue as
being a kind of "correspondence network" and describes
the nature of each mailartist's work and network. For
Albright, the interest in mailart is situated in the
then current interest in networks of information that
had been set-up independently form established
organisations and he refers to many participants
disowning the label 'artist'. This explains the
appearance of the article in a non 'art magazine' and
indicates an understanding of mailart as a network for
the exchange of ideas that could transcend barriers of
geography and culture, something, although intangible,
beyond the production and exchange of artwork: what he
describes as a 'cultural underground.' His apparent
enthusiasm for mailart is infectious although he
describes the participation as being artistic:

"And since almost anybody can play, we furnish herewith
the current addresses of various groups so that you too
can be an artist" 8

this is seemingly a contradiction as to how he perceives
mailart and continues through the article. Having
identified Johnson as being the 'oldest' mailart
'school', in part one, he writes in the second part of
the importance of Fluxus, and refers to the art
activities of both Johnson and Fluxus, locating the
origins of mailart firmly in Fine Art. In spite of two
lengthy and enthusiastic articles, he concludes with the
dismissive:

" One wonders, if success will spoil correspondence art
and, perhaps, if there is anything to be spoiled?" 9

The 'success' that he referred to is with reference to the Whitney 1970 show and references in books (the former probably prompting these articles) but his doubt about its value seems to belie his earlier enthusiasm and to misunderstand mailart, both in terms of where it was heading and where its value lay (see discussion below.)

Whilst clearly there has never been one defined and discrete network, Albright implied in his descriptions of the modus operandi of the netwokers that there are defined separate networks with figureheads, which is to create a false impression,10 notwithstanding Johnson's early beginnings when inevitably at one point he was the sole controller as, arguably, is each newcomer for a brief period. Although each networker, partly through accident and partly through design, has his/her own unique network, it is simply a tranche of the fluctuating total number of participants in mailart. For some networkers, this will be governed by finances in that they may correspond more with the countries that are cheaper for them to post to. Inevitably networkers will also be in touch with a larger proportion of mailartists from their own country than with networkers from other countries. In the early 1970s mailart was dominated by North America, and Albright only lists North American addresses. There were mailartists practising in Europe, Japan and South America11 before 1970 but the number was to be greatly increased due to the European exhibitions that publicised mailart to a wider audience than heretofore.

3.4. Exhibitions.

Mailart gained publicity in the early 1970s through exhibitions - of which the first was held in New York in 1970 - at the Whitney Museum of American Art.12 This small exhibition, curated by Johnson's friend Marcia Tucker - a curator at the museum - was organised by Johnson at the request of the museum. The exhibition featured 106 networkers (see Appendix C), who had replied in response to his request to 'Send letters, post cards, drawings and objects to Marcia Tucker, New York Correspondance School Exhibition.' (Plate 22). This

flier that Johnson sent out to his NYCS 'members' is typical of his economic design in terms of sans serif typeface (hand written) and simple layout that can be seen especially in Plate 11. It also shows that he did not add 'USA' to the address, suggesting that at least the majority of the participants were from USA if not New York. Johnson simply asked his correspondents to send their work direct to the Whitney and although the word 'exhibition' was included, he did not clarify that the sendings would be exhibited. Whilst the work could be conceived as being mailart by virtue of being sent through the post, being sent directly to the Museum, it lacked any interaction and as such, calls into question the validity of this exhibition as 'correspondance' art. Hilton Kramer, reviewing the show for The New York Times,13 identified the value of mailart as an amusing diversion from the normally dull post, (he had received from Johnson, "a sizable number of these 'communications' (myself) over the years.") But, as an exhibition he felt, "it didn't amount to much", because the work was "too slight - too perishable and inconsequential - to see the light of day." Interestingly and certainly misleadingly, the article is sub-headed, "Ray Johnson's Letters and Cards Go on Exhibition at the Whitney Museum." The implication is that it was Johnson's work that was on exhibition and Kramer makes no mention of any other contributor, neither does Martin Last in his review for The Critical People.14 Kramer highlights the dangers of exhibited mailart being judged with a set of criteria that are not applicable, as I go on to discuss.

Jean-Marc Poinsot's "Mail Art" exhibition - held in 1971 as part of the Seventh Biennale de Paris - was important as the first mailart exhibition outside the USA. Although Poinsot's exhibition represented mailart, it was curated by him (implying a 'jury' approach with selection) and included a large proportion of leading artists (Appendix D lists those represented in the book produced to accompany the show15) who were using the mail in their work at that time. The principle of the jury approach to mailart exhibitions is one that has been rejected by mailart since this date, meaning that the Poinsot show cannot be taken as an example of what mailart shows were to become. Although not demonstrating networking (which arguably is almost impossible in an exhibition, as I discuss below), this show provided the

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possibility for people to note names and addresses of mailartists and so participate themselves if they so wished. Significantly, Poinsot, named the work exhibited, 'Mail art', a title that has remained to this day and become the most commonly used term, with its attendant variations in spelling and language translation.16 The naming of the activity indicates a shift, in particular from Johnson's orchestrations of his correspondents through the mail (Correspondence art or - more geographically specific - the New York Correspondance School) to include the possibility of using the mail to create a work of art (mail art) and not necessarily requiring a recipient to be active in an exchange. Implications that mailart is art that is about (and explores) the postal system were true in the late 1960s and early 1970s for the many artists interested in conceptual art.17

The touring Fluxus exhibition, 'Fluxshoe' in Britain, curated in 1972 by David Mayor provided another opportunity to awaken a greater number of people to the possibility of participating in mailart.18 This exhibition, although not mailart, alerted its audience to the possibilities of working through the post because it was composed entirely of postal responses to requests for material. The showing of the exhibition in seven locations throughout the country further helped to disseminate the idea of mailart, specifically in England. However, as with the two previously mentioned exhibitions, the work was not part of networking and so not truly mailart.

The number of mailart shows throughout the world increased enormously through the 1970s. Held Jr., documents 1,335 mail art shows between 1970 and 1985, observing that there were probably many more, whilst he has identified a specific number, there may well have been any number of others that he has not traced.19 Until 1972, these exhibitions were of mailart rather than exhibitions of mailart projects. It could be argued that the initial shows were still in the spirit of traditional establishment exhibitions given that they consisted of work assembled in order to demonstrate what mailart was about and even giving prominence to particular artists, as opposed to the final realisation and continuation, through exhibiting, of a networking concept.

3.5.Mail Art Projects.

The regular generation of Mail Art Projects (MAPs)
brings the attention of other networkers to the
generator's name and so could be perceived as giving
him/her a certain status as a very active networker,
regardless of whether or not this is considered to be
desirable or in the spirit of mailart. Of no little
significance is that MAPs provide a focus for
networkers' mailart and an incentive and deadline to
work towards. An important aspect of MAPs is that they
increase the number of contacts that any one networker
has, enlarging their own network within the fluctuating
overall mailart network of the networks of individuals.
This might be seen to imply a simple valuing of quantity
of contacts, but this is not the case, not least because
the potential number would become unmanageable for any
one person. What is important is that mailartists,
through their own network, become a part of the network
of networks, the network as a whole,20 - rather than
working parochially or with a very small number of
chosen networkers - and that through this experience,
they begin to have a global understanding of humanity.

MAPs in the early 1970s are important because it is
through the dissemination of fliers, documentation and
public presentations, that the network was greatly
increased in both the number and geographical spread of
participants. It is Friedman's opinion that it was he
who in 1972 conceived the idea of projects that could
lead to exhibitions.21 Having been given a one-man show,
Friedman decided to devote the exhibition to the work of
others and spent a year in which he invited people to
send work to the Oakland Museum gallery, using his
Mailing Lists to contact people.22 This would seem
little different to Johnson's 1970 'New York
Correspondance School Exhibition', particularly with the
work being sent directly to the gallery. In Spring 1973
however Friedman held a mailart show in Omaha, for which
the invitation to participate was announced in the media
rather than just contacting everyone on the Lists.23
This show is important because it established the norms
for all mailart projects, i.e. that the received work
would be un-juried and that all received works would be
exhibited. As I go on to discuss, this concept is
central to the mailart belief in not judging work
received, but treating it all as equal and exhibiting it

all with intended equal prominence. However Friedman clearly misjudged the expected number of replies - which exceeded 20,000 items - and due to space restrictions he initially exhibited only one third of the work, until pressure of complaints resulted in his exhibiting the rest in whatever way he could, including in cardboard boxes on the floor.

Whilst the usual definition of a MAP includes the culmination of a project in an exhibition, there are other forms of MAPs involving networkers in sending material towards a common end or theme. Publication of a mailart journal can be seen as a MAP in that it is produced through the accumulation of material, solicited through the network, as previously discussed. Other forms of MAP include ongoing projects of one form or another that are open to all networkers and are disseminated through the network. Two contrasting MAPs indicate different approaches to ongoing MAPs. Japanese networker, Ryosuke Cohen has, since June 1985, chosen to limit most of his networking output to the production of his "Brain Cell." Producing and distributing a phenomenal 312 editions to date, Cohen rarely reveals anything about himself, devoting his energy to printing and mailing 150 copies of rubberstamp images sent to him by about 60 networkers during a period of 8 to 10 days.24 The composite image, printed in full colour at A3 landscape or portrait format includes stickers, or seals where a networker has sent 150 copies. Most sheets have a range of mailart imagery, subject matter and style (Plate 23). The production of these sheets by Cohen is an example of the unhierarchical presentation of networkers images, with an apparently random placing of the images on the paper and all images receiving the same treatment. These sheets are examples of the feeling of freedom that mailartists have, to reproduce the work of networkers in any way that they should choose, in that Cohen produces his sheets in full colour by the use of a Goccho printer.25 Cohen adheres to the standard practice of listing and sending the names and addresses of the participants on a typed A4 sheet.

"Brain Cell" begs a number of questions, not least about the funding of the postage of 150 letters world-wide every 8 to 10 days, however, the fact is that Cohen is able to do this. What is not clear is the motivation for the restraint Cohen uses in not printing his own work

(or at least not distributing it through the network) and the satisfaction that he apparently gains from the repetitive process. Initially Cohen signed and numbered each print as though it were an edition of his own work, although he dropped this practice after a few years, accentuating his lack of personal creative input. This may well have coincided with his handing the task of printing to his students. Although Brain Cell is fascinating to look at given its range of images and random use of bright colour, subsequent copies are unlikely to carry the same level of interest, given the identical technique and format, leaving the only potential interest a minimal and again potentially obsessive one. This begs further questions as to why Cohen chooses not to develop his networking relationships. "Brain Cell", with its lack of individual creative input on the part of Cohen and repetition over a long period of time, is in the Minimal / Conceptual tradition of his compatriot On Kawara with his 'self documentation' project and particularly the long running "Date Painting" series. (On Kawara's use of mailed postcards for self historification involved no response from the correspondent at all, placing these works outside mailart as networking.) The obsessiveness in Cohen's work may only be an exaggeration of the inherent practice of many networkers. This obsessiveness has the considerable attendant comfort that is derived from any positive obsession, but more importantly the self restraint is an example of how the importance of mailart is in participation within the network rather than egotism. Whilst Cohen has chosen to reproduce the work of other networkers instead of his own, the printed sheets are instantly recognisable as being his and therefore could be argued to be egotistical, however the sheets are important as work for and of the network. Cohen made clear his feelings about the importance of what he is doing in a rare statement that he distributed in 1985, which is worth quoting at length:

"It isn't everything that exchange (sic) a work from one to another in mail art network. It is the most important to join much more people of other countries. Sending to B from A, to C from B, to D or E from C, E sends back to A or D sends back to B or C. This is the way how to spread the network. Once people believe that art is the product of the privileged classes called artists, so they put up the framed pictures or priced them

unreasonably as sales contracts. In there (sic) reasons they think art is material. I think art is information ...There is no need for us to stress our own originality. It is change of 180 degrees from the past. Mail art network is the most wonderful movement that can solve the various problems of present art and artists;- authority, exchange of information, too notional art, mistaken holiness and so on. ..."Well, I'll title my work 'Brain Cell', because the structure of a brain through a mierscope (sic) looks like the diagram of mail art network. Thousands of neurones clung and piled up together are just like mail art network, I think."26

From this it is clear that Cohen sees his role as being that of communicating information to as wide a network as possible and equally for that information to come from as wide a network as possible. He particularly stressed that for him originality is not important. Undoubtedly, Cohen has done as much as any, and probably more than any other, mailartist to spread the names and addresses of networkers through the network.

English networker, Robin Crozier, by contrast, participates in many projects and yet also consistently maintains the mailing of his 'Malaise / History / memory'; 'MEMO(RANDOM) / MEMO(RY)' (Plate 24). This project consists of a standard A4 sheet requesting the participant to respond to their memory of a given date on that sheet and to return the sheet to Crozier in return for which they receive the memory reply of another networker. The project differs considerably from Cohen's in that, visually, each memory varies enormously in content, style and technique, although on the same proforma. Both projects introduce networkers to each other but whereas Cohen's deals in a large number of virtually anonymous names (especially as they are not placed alongside the relevant images), 'MEMO' is specific to an individual. The replies vary considerably in appearance and content. Typically mailartists choose whether to reply literally, that is to say attempting to record an honest memory, or to ignore the request and simply make an unrelated visual and / or verbal statement, thereby denying any importance of the title at all. The first 'Memory' is for December 4th 1981 but the bulk of them date from 1983.27 Crozier keeps a meticulous record of the contents of each return in two notebooks. One copy is housed in the Getty Foundation,

and the other is kept by Crozier, the original being sent to another, carefully selected networker.28 Crozier thereby makes one to one introductions recalling the orchestrations of Ray Johnson,29 attempting to match people with similar interests on the basis of his knowledge of them from past correspondence. Also like much of Johnson's work, Crozier prefers the informal hand written form to type, thereby signalling the personal nature of the work, rather than the intention to put the replies on public display. Documentation and formalisation of the process is important to Crozier, an aspect of mailart that for some networkers becomes an element of ritual providing a much needed stability in what, for some, is an otherwise turbulent life. The 'Memo' date requested of the networker is not chosen at random but is taken from the postmark of the despatchee's letter:

"If the postmark is obscure or absent I usually pick the day on which I am sending the request out."30

The formalisation of his response is taken further, and invariably, Crozier sends his 'Memos' back in the envelope sent to him, recycling and thereby removing the need for him to spend any money on envelopes for his mailart, unless the initial contact is by postcard. It is significant that the 'memo books' are now held by the Getty Foundation in their History and Culture archive as 'a human document'.31 Mailart might be expected to be kept, if at all, in an Art Museum such as MOMA. The placing of 'MEMO' under History and Culture emphasises where the interest in the work lies, that is in the record of the memories rather than the way in which they have been represented. This suggests that the importance of mailart is sociological rather than art historical, the stress being on the word 'human' rather than art. This is to say that the visual appearance of any one 'MEMO' is subordinate to the content, the interest is in what respondents choose to recall, and this record stands outside an art historical context. Whilst Johnson's mailart had grown out of his Fine Art practice as was the postal related work of Fluxus, mailart began to develop into something that was primarily moving away from an art context and towards a sociological framework.

Although the usual understanding of a MAP is one that requests networkers to send work, there are mailartists who maintain a consistent theme in all their communication, which in turn provokes a certain kind of response, prompting this to be considered to be a MAP. One of the most all consuming MAPs of this kind was that of the Italian art collector, grocery chain owner and networker, Guglielmo Achille Cavellini (1914-1990) who from 1971 until his death, worked on his 'Self Historification' project. This project reached further than his networking activities with performances, books and exhibitions, although always on the same theme. Self Historification was addressed earlier by another Italian, Piero Manzoni who in the early 1960s made the hero-worshipping of stars, whether artists or not, into a series of critical satirical works, based on his own body.32 Cavellini took the idea further by producing his 'fantasy' autobiography which he extended to cover the last two thousand years. Proof of his existence throughout that time was documented by him in the (fantasy) correspondence that he had with artists and writers from that period of time. These sycophantic letters were produced on canvas and published in book form as was his series of famous crucifixion paintings reproduced by him with his face replacing that of Christ. Cavellini also had a suit and hat made which was covered with his hand-written autobiography. The basis for much of his work was his self portraits which appeared in paintings, collages and stamps which were frequently used in his mailart, central to which was his sticker, 'Cavellini 1914-2014' (Plate 25). This sticker, predicting his first centenary, was originally produced for his Venice manifestation.33 Using the colours of the Italian flag, and the shape and size of boxed cheese, it could be argued that it recalls his profession. This level of commitment, both in terms of time and finance, is unusual in mailart, not least because few networkers have had access to the funds that were available to Cavellini. Other networkers have been moved to create their own works on the theme of Cavellini's Historification, suggesting sycophancy and promoting the idea of there being some mailartists who are more important than others, an idea that ostensibly mailart is against. However, the charitable approach is to consider that with such hype as Belgian networker Guy Bleus' proposal that Cavellini should stand as 'first president of the United States of Europe' as a clear

indication of Bleus' 'European Cavellini Festival 1984'
being in the satirical spirit of Cavellini's own Self
Historification Project.34 It is also in the nature of
mailartists to enjoy joining-in a game, a sense of
belonging to the theme of the moment.

It is undeniable that Cavellini used the network for his
own ends, for self publicity, but the ludicrousness of
his methods, with letters, for example to Homer,
thanking him for dedicating "The Odessy of Cavellini" to
him can only be taken as a critical comment on fame.35
Cavellini's intention was to reach as many people as
possible and so remain working within the network rather
than to use it as a spring board for a mainstream career
in art. Although he devoted his mailart activities to
the creation of his autobiography at the same time he
participated very fully in reciprocal mailart and so
remained very much a networker.

Apart from Assembling Zines, there have been other
examples of MAPs that require participants to send a
fixed number of identical images. Darla, (Darla Bayer of
USA.) realised the MAP 'Valentine' in 1989, asking
contributors to send 150 postcards on the theme. This
number being her estimate of the number of expected
participants, each of whom received a copy of each of
the other 150 participants' valentines. In 'Valentine',
Darla organised an exchange on a given theme. Tangibly
she gained no more than any other participant but
incurred considerable expense in sending out 150 sets of
150 postcards round the world, a wonderful Valentine
gift for each participant, which also includes the
standard practice of including the names and addresses
of all participants.

Some institutions generate MAPs, and although adhering
to the conventions, it could be argued that they are not
mailart, in that they are not generated by mailartists,
nor is there any interchange - save that of the sending
of the documentation - before, during or after the
MAP.36 At times mailartists work in collaboration with
institutions, in order to acquire funding for the
postage, exhibition space and production of
catalogues.37 MAPs are also sometimes generated by
teachers for their pupils for educational purposes, in
these cases, the teachers are invariably networkers
themselves, although the same questions must arise, as

with institutions, as to whether it is strictly speaking mailart. Similarly, teachers have prompted or perhaps instructed their pupils to participate in MAPs, giving the generator quite a surprise, especially when faced with the participation of an entire class, with an entreaty from the teacher to send something to each individual pupil in return, (as well as the documentation).38 In the case of institutions, such as a Post Office Museum, generating a MAP, address lists are usually obtained from mailartists living in the same town and fliers are mailed direct to each and every networker on the lists. Institutions generating MAPs highlights the problems and tensions between mailart as a networking strategy and the creation of mailart exhibitions, as discussed below.

MAPs are the most prominent collaborative method used by mailartists – at least from the point of view of the general public – as the formalised face of mailart that is presented to those unfamiliar with the practice. Although mailart is an anarchic network, there are some universally understood and accepted conventions. Primarily these are with regard to MAPs and their exhibition, as developed from Friedman's Omaha show, standard practice dictating; 'No judges, no rejects, no fees, no returns. All entries displayed, documentation to all.' Convention dictates that as a minimum, documentation will consist of a list of the names and addresses of all participants, therefore increasing the contacts that networkers have. It is also understood that nothing will be for sale and therefore no financial value will be placed on the body of work or individual works. This convention firmly places mailart outside the existing art marketing and career building structure, by removing the potential for criticism of individual contributors or even the decisions of selectors.

Standard practice for announcing a new MAP through the network is to produce a flier of some description, though normally this is photocopied in black and at A6 size or smaller. This size, because it is lightweight allows the generator to send several copies in each of his/her mailart sendings and will inevitably request the receiver to pass the spares on. Some of the fliers also ask the receiver to make photocopies and pass these on: this request may or may not be responded to by the recipient. The text depends on the nature of the MAP but

will clearly indicate the name and address to which the work should be sent and deadline date if the MAP is time sensitive. In some instances, there are regular deadline dates, particularly for example with Journals. Most fliers include the text of the 'standard practice' and many include some kind of visual as well as the title of the MAP in order to provoke certain responses. Restrictions are often made in terms of size and/or media, usually dictated by practical considerations with regard to exhibiting and/or dissemination, and these are usually adhered to. It is expected that networkers will respect specific requests with regard to the number of copies that must be sent where the MAP is for example, an Assembling Zine.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are also journals which carry MAP information: these may be approached directly or the information may be sent by another networker who has received the flier. By using these journals in conjunction with multiple sendings of fliers, a generator of a MAP can expect to reach a large number of networkers, certainly several hundred, spread throughout Europe, North and South America and Japan.

3.6.Exhibiting MAPs.

Whilst most MAP exhibitions are mounted in art galleries, others have explored different possibilities. Finding a suitable location for exhibiting MAPs in itself raises questions not only of suitability but also of the problems in finding a gallery prepared to take an exhibition that has no commercial potential at all, save for the possibility of the novelty value of a mailart show as a carrot to get people in to purchase from a companion exhibition. The simplest solution, where possible is to find a gallery that is run by a networker and there have been a few, from time to time, run by networkers, for example Carlo Pittore's Galleria Del'Occhio in New York and Jurgen Olbrich's Kunstraum in Kassel,Germany.39 Both these galleries have shown MAPs and also invited networkers to exhibit individually in the spaces. Galleries run by mailartists may or may not be run specifically as mailart galleries but are likely to be prepared to exhibit MAPs. Non commercial galleries can be used as well co-opting public spaces, the most applicable public space perhaps being a post office. The use of public spaces can raise political questions as

they do for the exhibiting of any work that highlights a socio-political engagement. The choice of location and manner of display of the work will affect the way in which the work is viewed with expectations and agendas dictating the reaction of the viewer, relating to the work that is normally seen at that venue. A more unusual solution to the problem of where to exhibit a MAP was found by Indianapolis networker Michael Northam who exhibited his "Mailart in the Streets" in the form of posters displayed all over the city depicting the work sent.40 Johnson's exhibition of his Moticos in the streets of New York, whilst not being mailart, is a precedent for mailartists exhibiting work in the street.

Exhibiting MAPs in art galleries raises questions about using the same structure for showing work that is used by artists whose practice is the fundamental antithesis of the principles of mailart. Mailart appropriates galleries for its own use and by demonstrating the lack of juries, rejections or sales, highlights its own code as well as introducing more people to the possibility of networking. Mailart, being primarily about communication between people through the postal systems cannot be demonstrated by exhibiting a number of pieces on a wall, however coherently. Although it is perfectly possible to exhibit work that was despatched to its recipient as mailart, the transference to the wall - even if the envelope and any other contents, not related to the MAP in question but sent at the same time, are also displayed in double sided frames - there are some fundamental differences between the experience of mailart as a networker and that of the viewer at a MAP exhibition. A piece of mailart does not stand alone as a 'finished product', mailart is interchange and this is not possible to represent in an exhibition, not least because it is not possible to gain the experience of mailart second hand. Coherence in a mailart exhibition can only be expected in the commonality of the theme of the MAP. The 'work' exhibited is usually from a large number of people covering a large geographical area, and a large range of backgrounds and intentions (not all artistic). Whilst an exhibition such as this could have some interest, it can give no impression of mailart.41

Further problems exist in that art galleries or museums inevitably trigger various expectations and attitudes towards the ways of looking at, assessing and

appreciating the exhibits. Mailart is not intended to be judged by the same set of criteria as other visual work exhibited in an art gallery. In some ways, the exhibiting of mailart could be said to relate to the display of African tribal shields in an art museum which plays down or even ignores (and therefore denies) that the object has/had function. The temptation in the case of mailart shows is to compare the work with other works (past or present) in the museum, or gallery, rather than understanding that in a sense they are only relics of an interaction of communication. There is a strong argument for not exhibiting mailart at all, but the wish to attempt to share the experience is too much to be resisted by many mailartists. Strategies have occasionally been used to try and overcome all problems.

There is no established principle of methods for exhibiting mailart and the nature of display is frequently dictated by budget. English networker, O. Jason (Jason Skeet) has used the interesting strategy of retaining all the works unopened until the aptly named 'opening' of the show at which he invited the public to open the contributions.42 The involvement of the public turns the 'exhibition' into an 'event' and can be seen as being in the spirit of mailart. Although involving the public in opening the 'work' addresses some of the problems surrounding exhibiting MAPs, the very nature of the falseness of the situation of the public opening the mail, as opposed to Skeet sitting at home opening each contribution as it arrived prevents the participators experiencing the thrill of expectation each morning and the exciting thud on the door mat. It is important to note though that in this project, Skeet announced in his fliers that all contributions would be retained unopened until the preview.43 This would in itself have affected the nature of the contents, but does nothing to alter the fact that the viewer still misses-out on the reciprocal aspect of mailart, although in this instance they could have chosen to note down the addresses of the senders of the envelopes that they opened and to reply to them.

A simpler solution would be to generate a MAP where all contributions must be on postcards (not sent in envelopes) and this strategy is regularly used, but again would ideally need also to stipulate that the work should be single sided, in order to avoid problems of

exhibiting. Problems created by exhibiting MAPs may raise questions as to why networkers continue to create them. There are several reasons that have been outlined in this section but it must be understood that not all MAPs are intended to result in an exhibition and many that are, do not result in one for a variety of reasons such as the inability on the part of the generator of the MAP to find a suitable location.

Motivation and beliefs of networkers are of a wide compass and there will be many who see no dichotomy in the debate surrounding exhibiting, even for some who do, compromise is perhaps an inevitable part of life and the pros and cons of exhibiting have to be weighed. The motivation for generating a MAP lies in terms of the thrill of contacting new networkers and receiving a considerable body of work on a subject that is important to the generator. The problems surrounding exhibiting the work can well detract from the pleasure of receiving it, but there is a further thrill to be gained from mounting an exhibition and pleasure to be had from sharing with others the 'good news' of mailart. There can be problems surrounding the reactions of visitors to the exhibition, not least in that it is usually a confusing experience for those who were not previously aware of mailart. It could well be that this is because mailart is intended to be received through the post, not exhibited.

The procedure for MAPs - as I have described - is well established and understood, departure from this code of practice is extremely rare and very much ostracised by the network. A notable variation was the 1989 'International Invitational Artistamp Exhibition' for which James Felter invited certain networkers to send signed and numbered editions for sale.44 This contravened the code of practice in two ways, by selling and also by making the contributors exclusive. Issues surrounding the problems of selectivity, money and mailart are explored below.

It is tacitly understood - by mailartists - that not all projects will result in exhibitions, whether planned or not, and so there is no guarantee that work sent to a project will be exhibited. This inevitably includes the exhibiting of work sent in response to a project request that either deliberately ignores the specificity of the

request or one that does so from misunderstanding,
possibly because of language difficulties.45 The idea of
sending work to MAPs because it will guarantee a long
and international Curriculum Vitae is no doubt one that
enters the minds of some - presumably new - networkers,
but it is not only an unreliable method as I have
explained but it also can only ever be a record of
participation in mailart shows, with no credibility
elsewhere. This attitude also suggests that the
participator sees mailart as one-to-one communication,
waiting patiently for a reply. Whilst one-to-one
communication does take place, a great deal, the
strength of mailart lies in the network and
understanding the concept of sendings, although to
specific individuals (at least initially), as being
communication through the network. That is to say that a
tally is not kept of reciprocal sendings but of
reciprocal energy output and return, regardless of who
from.

3.7. Documentation.

A MAP does not end for the generator with the exhibition
but with the dissemination of the documentation of the
participants. The visual appearance of the supporting
MAP work is related to the inclination and finances of
the generator. It is expected, however, that some form
of documentation will be distributed eventually,
according to the resources of the generator of the
project. Exhibitions of MAPs generated by institutions
invariably have a far bigger budget, resulting in
expensive full colour printing of invitations to
official openings, and full colour catalogues with
documentation sent to all participants. Whilst the
receipt of a well produced, expensive catalogue can be
satisfying, the anonymity of an institutional production
means that there is no possibility of a continuing
interaction. As I have stated, with no possible mailart
exchange, institutional MAPs - whatever the quality of
the catalogue, and whatever the nature of the
institution - must lie outside mailart as a networking
activity.

Although there may be a sense of achievement to be
gained from organising a MAP exhibition, this has to be
offset by the time and expense involved in the
production and distribution of the documentation. Whilst

most mailartists cannot, or would not wish to, produce documentation of the same quality as some institutions are capable of, they are not morally obliged to do any more than simply send a list of names and addresses of all participants to all participants.46 This in itself can be expensive in terms of stamps, photocopying and envelopes and does deter or prevent some networkers from generating projects. Expense problems can delay distribution of documentation but, even if it is prompt, the participant has usually forgotten about their participation in the specific MAP by the time that the documentation is received. There are two reasons for this, firstly the flier requesting the work initially is often one year in advance of the deadline and secondly, networkers tend to respond to so many MAPs that they do not remember them all, without referring to the meticulous records that so many of them keep - archiving and record keeping are discussed below.

An examination of some of the ways in which MAPs have been documented will give further understanding of what the rewards are for participants and how documentation can be extended to influence other work of both the generator and the network. Thoroughness in documentation was demonstrated in 1993 by English networker, Sal Wood's MAP 'Under My Skin' . Wood's documentation was unusually informative, consisting of a plain brown envelope that was bound with the hospital name tag which carried the name of the recipient, that had been an installation as part of the exhibition (Plate 26). In this way, Wood was able to combine a relic of her installation (the name tags) with the documentation, tying (literally, as the tags were wrapped round the envelopes) the installation with mailart. There are many networkers who maintain parallel artwork, whether income generating or not, as is frequently the case for performance artists or installation artists. In this instance, Wood was able to combine successfully, the two activities, even to the extent of the documentation. The envelope also carried an 'Under My Skin' artistamp and a colour photograph of the exhibits. The contents consisted of what she appositely (given the medical associations) described as a list of 'Donors ' photocopied on to A4 white paper and folded into three vertically. This also included a photocopy of a photograph of the name tag installation; a second colour photograph of the exhibits; another A4 sheet on pink

paper describing the exhibition with a third (overall) photograph of the exhibiting six-fold double sided screen which was covered in pink bubble wrap. The reverse of this documentation sheet was a full size photocopy of the bubble wrap and the envelope contained a single cell of the bubble wrap. The thoroughness of this documentation is not usual but it does permit the participants who were not able to visit the exhibition to have a very good idea of what it was like. Largely for geographical and financial reasons, few contributors ever see the exhibitions of the exhibition of the MAPs in which they have participated.

Another English networker, Keith Bates went one stage further with his 1993 MAP, 'The English Suppressionists'. In some ways, the presentation of this documentation drew on the conceptual uses of the postal system that had been explored in the late 1960s. Bates enriched his documentation by dispatching it to coincide with the first day of issue of a stamp with an architypically male English theme, that of Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty, so that the envelopes were franked 'First Day Cover'. This gave the opportunity also to consider the relationship of the introverted (and therefore arguably English reserved) hobby of stamp collecting. Each participant also received a numbered membership card of the English Suppressionist Group. The project is in the mainstream of Bates work about the condition of the repressed Englishman and would tend to produce replies from those with some understanding of the subject, networkers who would therefore derive considerable pleasure from Bates developing the idea through to the envelope that contained the documentation.

For some networkers it is important that the documentation does more than simply record: for them it is important that it is a creative continuation of the MAP itself. Craig Wilson, an English networker, documenting his 1991 Map, 'Planet Football', sent each participant a football badge; a small black and white football slogan sticker; an A4 photocopied list of contributors on blue paper, and an A6 photocopied booklet, on white paper with an orange cover, reproducing 28 of the works sent, in a simple plain white envelope with a commercial football sticker on the back. The use of a selection of images for reproducing

in the documentation is against the spirit of mailart, unless they are seen to be samples to give an idea of the work, given financial constraints forbidding the reproduction of all the images. Many generators of MAPs do reproduce all the contributions, but in this case Wilson was at pains to state that he wanted to reproduce them all but was unable to because some were not suitable for photocopying. With this documentation Wilson was also able to include three fliers for his subsequent MAP, all within the minimum postage rate. In doing this, Wilson signals that the interchange has not finished with the end of the MAP, that networking is an ongoing activity, even if there are MAPs with specific deadlines.

The 1980 MAP, 'Spaceship Earth Approaching The Third Millennium,' borrowing Buckminster Fuller's title in an attempt by its creator, Ed Varney, a Vancouver networker to a conception of the inter relatedness of 'Spaceship Earth', extended the notion of egalitarian exhibitions by recycling the mailart that had been sent to him and despatching it to the contributors, attempting at the same time to send something to each contributor from a different country to their own. Each participant and each visitor also received a sheet of 10 identical monochrome blue, on white paper, Spaceship Earth stamps and a world shaped 'Membership Card' encouraging co-operation. This redistribution of the material, encouraged networkers to think further about the subject of the MAP, beyond just the original sending of work, to see the subject as being more than just a MAP, and to see the potential of mailart to make a significant contribution to 'Spaceship Earth Approaching The Third Millennium,' through networking bringing about a closer understanding between peoples whilst maintaining and promulgating certain ecological considerations.

3.8. The Geographical Spread of Mailart.

I have established that MAPs enabled new mailartists to enlarge their number of contacts very rapidly. This was to influence the spread of mailart through Eastern Europe and Latin America as well as the countries that were already involved through Johnson and Fluxus. In the early 1970s, news of the existence of a mailart network began to spread through Eastern Europe. East Europeans were particularly keen to become involved because it

allowed them to be in contact with the West in a direct
way and through them to become aware of what was
happening in the arts beyond the Iron Curtain. Polish
artists - Critic Andrzej Kostolowski and conceptual
artist Jaroslaw Kozlowski - had in 1971 begun their own
network 'NET' which began as a reference to independent,
artist run, art spaces in Poland, enabling artists to
circumvent the restrictions of the authorities,
resulting in what was in effect mailart within Poland.
This network grew to include about 200 addresses from 15
countries, tying-in with other networks such as
'International Artist Co-operation' (IAC), West German
Klaus Groh's Xeroxed newsletters, which contained
addresses, articles and project information. This
publication continued until 1978 and was much imitated
in a general desire on the part of networkers to
disseminate information to more and more existing and
potential networkers. This East / West link, was of
considerable importance to the optimism of the artists
of the Eastern Block countries because it gave them a
cultural link with the West. Reciprocally networkers in
the West were to gain immeasurably from observing the
considerable creativity and ingenuity demonstrated by
their fellow networkers that had not then been jaded by
the capitalist materialism of the West. For East
Europeans, it was difficult, both financially and
because of censorship, to send any work abroad that was
bigger than a letter, although even a letter was not
immune from the ravages of Eastern European censorship.

It was not only content that was dictated by censorship
but also media. Pawel Petasz, a Polish mailartist,
produced complex text and image books made with lino and
potato cuts (Plate 27). These are an ingenious solution
to the presumption on the part of the state that
printing presses could only be for subversive political
activity, and the resultant danger involved in the
ownership of a domestic press. Before the collapse of
the iron curtain, all printing and photocopying was
officially controlled, indeed as Polish networker,
Tomasz Schultz found to his cost when his printing press
was confiscated by the Special Police, it was in fact
illegal to own a printing press in Poland. This
oppressive environment created a dilemma for the
correspondent in that any communication, whether overt
or covert that could be construed by the censors as
being unacceptable was liable to be confiscated or even

worse could result in trouble for the recipient.
Equally, photocopiers were not only rare but only
available to the public under state control. In spite of
these restrictions, or, because of them, these
networkers produced work that was often both stunning
and stimulating and a reminder to the Western networkers
that although it is relatively easy to produce
impressive looking work with high technology, low
technology should not be forgotten, for both aesthetic
and ecological reasons (Plate 28). Arguably, this was a
salutary reminder to western networkers that techniques
(such as Potato printing) that they had left behind,
perhaps at their primary schools, have an aesthetic
quality that perhaps has more power to attract attention
than the easily come-by high tech productions with which
we had all become so familiar. It also, from a western
perspective, questions the ideological justification for
using the tools of the 'establishment' in a network that
is fundamentally opposed to, and seeking to subvert,
that establishment. This way of thinking is
diametrically opposed to that of the eastern networker
who bemoans the lack of availability of the tools of
what they might consider to be 'power.' There is also
the possibility that eastern networkers enjoyed the
craft of 'mirrored' lino cut lettering, whether this is
true or not in any case, Petasz abandoned this technique
in favour of computer generated images as soon as he was
able.

For both the East European and the Western networker,
decisions had to be made about the content of any
mailart sending. In both cases, the risk was of the work
being censored or confiscated, and in both cases though
the risk was to the Eastern networker in terms of being
in trouble with the authorities. For both parties,
decisions had to be made as to whether to play safe and
send bland mail or whether to take the risk of sending
work that could be construed as being contentious
because it raised issues about the status quo. It was common
in countries such as Romania for the secret police to
confiscate anything that they didn't understand and this
lead to East European networkers finding ways to ensure
that the work would be received by sending it on devious
routes, taking the risk of asking travellers to smuggle
it through the customs or at the very least informing
the network that they would always reply to any mailart
that they received so that the sender would know that

the lack of a reply meant that their sending had not been received or the return had been confiscated.47

Although there are no documented cases of East European mailartists actually being imprisoned for their mailart activities, there were, nevertheless, incidents of networkers having their mailart specifically curtailed as in the case of Hungarian networkers Gyorgy and Julia Galantai, the creators of the Budapest 'Artpool' archive (discussed below), who were prevented from publishing a catalogue for six years. Galantai wrote in December 1989 to Held Jr.:

"..due to political circumstances (the exhibition was banned, I was under police 'control', all my collaborators were frightened) only some copies could be printed with xerox technique."

In the USSR., censorship of the mail meant that there were few networkers before 1989. Rea Nikonova and her husband, Serge Segay, began mailart in 1985 after sending work to an exhibition in Budapest48 to which they had accidentally received invitations. This exhibition published the addresses of all the participants which enabled Nikonova and Segay to begin networking. Nikonova wrote in 1987 of the problems in her country,

"The KGB took great interest in mail art and began opening every one of our international letters. An unsophisticated looking stamp, 'Forwarded Damaged' was placed onto each of our torn and opened letters. Our letters took 3-4 months to arrive, disappeared by the dozens, or were returned without reason, Serge and I knew for some time that we were taking great risks." 49

It might be assumed that mail has ceased to be censored since the removal of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the USSR. This not the case as is evidenced by Nikonova's 1991 letter published in Artists Newsletter in which she describes only receiving half of the mail that is sent to her.50 It is Nikonova's belief that the KGB is opposed to contacts with foreigners as it gives Russians what she refers to as a chance of survival and that therefore, networking is a problem for the KGB.

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In 1975, when the situation was not as oppressive in Poland as in the USSR. Petasz began mailart. However, although the receiving of letters from abroad had not been illegal in Poland since the early 1950s, it was still necessary in the 1970s to explain why, if you received more than a small number of letters from abroad. In the late 1970s Petasz' studio was visited several times by the intelligence agents, both when he was there and when he wasn't. During President Jaruzelski's Martial Law (1981-1983) all mail had to remain unsealed and was stamped either 'censored', or 'not censored'. At this time it was also forbidden to recycle envelopes that were to go abroad, on the grounds that it would suggest that Poland had a poor economy.51 Petasz' mail, both outgoing and incoming, was usually tampered with before the suspension of Martial Law, when he took the opportunity to recycle and to seal his mail by sewing it up with a sewing machine. This raises two points, firstly that recycling for East Europeans is a completely different issue to that in the West where it is a politically aware ecological concern for the enlightened. In the East it was and still is a necessity in order to survive and overcome shortages, which frequently extended to stationery. For the East European, what is an everyday appearance and aesthetic has enormous charm for the Westerner. This extends to aesthetic appreciation of cheaply made rough and badly bleached writing paper, the norm in East Europe but unusual and expensively hand produced in the West. It becomes clear that what the East produced out of necessity was admired, enjoyed and sometimes envied (from an aesthetic point of view) by the West and what the West produced, from the point of view of information and technology, the East was hungry for. The fact that East European mailartists were prepared to face the frustrations of mailart not being delivered and to risk possible problems with the authorities, is a testament to how important networking was to them.

Although it is widely held that most Eastern European networkers did not begin mailart until the 1970s at the earliest, Valery Oisteanu asserts,52 the extreme case, that his own 'escape' in the late 1960s from Bucharest, Rumania to Rome was entirely due to the efforts of mailartists after years of planning. He also states that mailart to the East in the 1960s was used to smuggle fake passports, page by page, false official stamps and

illegal visa stamps. Whilst this may be true, there is no documented evidence of it, but if it is true, it adds to the document of the liberating power of the network and the caring of mailartists.

Mailart also spread rapidly to Latin America in the early 1970s,53 with Uruguayan Clemente Padin organising the first Latin American mailart show in 1974.54 The attraction of mailart for Latin Americans was quite different to that of the East Europeans, for many it was the opportunity to use it as a form of protest against oppressive regimes. Latin America has shared, with Eastern Europe, problems in obtaining art materials and problems of censorship. Free expression is still not advisable today in a number of Latin American countries and networkers have suffered much worse consequences as result of their mailart activities than have East Europeans. A number have been imprisoned and or exiled from several Latin American countries for their mailart work, because Latin American mailartists have not been reticent in openly criticising their regimes and have seen networking as an important means both of dissent and of broadcasting their situation. Latin American mailartists faced problems of whether to play safe or to use the network as a means of protest and solidarity with fellow networkers abroad and face the consequences. Many took the risk and faced dire consequences.

In Brazil, networker Paolo Bruscky was imprisoned for three days, just hours after the opening of his second mailart exhibition.55 The exhibition was closed and one month later the work was returned in various states of disrepair. Guillermo Deisler was exiled from Chile, moving to Bulgaria and then Germany where he continued to practice mailart, publishing collections of networkers' concrete poetry until his death in 1995. Another Chilean, Eduardo Andres Diaz Espinoza was imprisoned without trial on suspicion of 'Contravening public security of the state 1967-1978.' Despite being subsequently released, without being charged, he was stripped of Chilean citizenship, forbidden to vote, work in Chile or publish or express political opinions on Chile. Not only Latin American mailartists but also members of their families have been punished for their activities. and although Espinoza's son was living 3000 kilometres from his father, his civil rights were also suspended. Worse was to happen to Abel Luis Vigo, the

son of Argentinean mailartist Edgardo-Antonio Vigo, who was kidnapped on 30th July 1976 and has not been seen since. In Salvador, mailartist Jesus Romeo Galdamez Escobar was persecuted and then incarcerated but fortunately escaped to Mexico.

The most celebrated oppression of Latin American mailartists, because of the involvement of the mailart network was through the non-compliance with the restrictions of the state, through the use of mailart, resulting in Uraguyan networkers Clemete Padin and Jorge Caraballo disappearing in August 1977. After one year, news came of the two networkers that they had been imprisoned and Caraballo was released on bail. Both were accused of 'attacking the morale and reputation of the army.' Padin had satirised the military, denouncing the dictatorial regime for its brutal suppression of human rights, and was charged under military code.56An anti-American work by Padin was exhibited at the trial as evidence and he received two years imprisonment and torture for his pains. Of particular significance for mailart is the fact that, news of Padin and Caraballo's imprisonment having reached the network (although not until February 1978), a USA. networker, Geoffrey Cook, organised the network to make appeals to the Uruguayan Government, parent governments and embassies, which resulted in parole for Caraballo and release of Padin in November 1979, specifically as result of pressure from the USA. and French governments on the Uruguayan military. Parole forbade creative actions or self expression, however, since 1983 Padin has resumed working in a very political way again, through mailart and performances, always seeking to draw attention to injustices. It would seem to be less dangerous for Padin to hide his work in envelopes, but he favours the more open medium of the postcard, using collage and photocopying, he has addressed Nicaragua, USA. and war in general seemingly fearless of the possible consequences, or perhaps more accurately, wishing to draw attention to the situations by deliberately sending them unwrapped (in the form of postcards) through the mail. This action, it could be argued is fully exploiting the potential audience of mailart in that he is not just addressing the recipient but all those who handle his work along the way, in particular the authorities. It may be that having won his release from prison through the international network, he is now

relatively immune to oppression. Again, mailart has created the situation. Padin has also generated political MAPs for other countries, for example in 1992, 'Stop US Blockade to Cuba' drawing the attention of networkers to the situation in an oppressed country.57

The importance of mailart as a political tool in Latin America is demonstrated by Antonio Larda who in 1987 marched in a parade with a sandwich board on the anniversary of the establishment of Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship, making known his concerns for the Peruvian people. This action whilst on the face of it clearly not mailart, was taken in a project supported by the Uruguayan Mail Art Association. For Padin, political comment is essential but he states that through mailart in Latin American countries there have been,"hundreds and hundreds of situations of oppression and arbitrariness."58

3.9. Conclusion.

Mailart had developed from the 1950s network of correspondents, enjoying playing games through the post, orchestrated by Ray Johnson; the 1960s explorations of the elements of the postal system, such as stamps and franking by Fluxus; to the almost world wide network that it had become in the 1970s with particular importance with regard to the inclusion of East Europeans and Latin American participants and an established tradition of organising international MAPs. This situation, rich in creative and sociological potential, was in many respects and to many networkers, a zenith that needed a new impetus in order to maintain interest in mailart for all but newcomers. Further, some networkers were concerned that the exponential increase in mailart was lowering what they perceived to be quality of mailart. Also, the considerable rise in the number of mailart shows and the commitment on the part of networkers to documentation, both of the material that they had received and in terms of writing about the network, prompted the prediction that the degree of documentation would result in mailart becoming part of the establishment. This suggestion was made at a time of optimism of a change of society to one that would be less materialistic and more interested in creativity with, understandably, no prediction of the extreme conservatism that was to follow. In any event, the

prediction was not to become reality but did produce
serious debate within the network that was to mark the
subsequent phase of mailart.

1 T. Belanger, editor, The Last Whole Earth Catalogue,
Harmondsworth, 1971.

CHAPTER 4 RECONSIDERING MAILART - CONGRESSES.

4.1.Introduction..

By 1980, mailart had been in existence for 25 years and
most of the well known participants in Johnson's
original NYCS had dropped-out of the network. Maciunas
had died in 1978 and with him the energy of Fluxus as a
movement faded. Photocopying had become widely available
in the West and mailart had extended to most corners of
the globe. This chapter looks at mailartists
reconsidering their objectives in the 1980s and early
1990s in the light of the availability of cheap methods
of reproducing artwork; the implications of the
exponential rise in the number of participants and the
shift from mailart to 'networking' as a concept with the
resultant need to make decisions as to how to respond to
the increased amount of mailart received.

4.2.The Effect of Photocopying on Mailart.

Johnson's reported decision to 'kill-off' the NYCS
coincided with the considerable rise in the number of
people practising mailart and could therefore imply that
he felt that mailart had grown beyond his control and
direct influence and that he might have preferred the
idea of an elitist clique of cultural luminaries rather
than a policy of networking being open to all-comers.1
This is a complex issue, particularly given Johnson's
enjoyment of contradiction. Although Johnson's
networking usually contained a personal reference to the
recipient, he used photocopies to disseminate his
orchestrations through the network from the 1970s and
had previously used Offset Printing to reproduce his
work before the availability of photocopying. Whilst
Johnson 1used photocopying without compromising his
networking activities, this method of producing work
raised serious issues for a number of other mailartists,
and was even held to be responsible for some mailartists
ceasing to network.

"By the middle seventies, most of the big names in the
artworld who had participated in Johnson's New York

Correspondance School became dropouts due to the
slapdash nature of the medium." 2

This asserts that all those who dropped-out, did so for
the same reason which seems highly unlikely. Whilst it
is true that there was a shift in the nature of mailings
from the hand produced images in the late 1950s and
1960s to the use of the photocopier, and sometimes
resultant impersonal communications that some of them
had begun to become by the mid 1970s, there are however
other factors to take into consideration. Firstly, some
of these "big names" - Held Jr. means those who had
achieved a high profile in galleries and journals - were
not big at the time and it is likely that the pressures
of them becoming 'successful' artists led to them
neglecting and abandoning the network in favour of
income generating work. It is also conceivable that they
had perhaps used mailart as a means of networking with
others and having achieved their aims, no longer felt
that they had a use for mailart. Secondly, mailartists
as a whole have and always have had a complete spectrum
of ways of working which would have enabled those people
to continue to work with selected individuals, dropping
those networkers whom they perceived to be simply
producing photocopied work rather than something that
was personal and hand produced. The insistence on hand
produced material reflected what was perhaps a ludite
attitude to the considerable potential of the emerging
new technology of the 1970s and 1980s. Thirdly, there is
probably a mean average time that most networkers
maintain a commitment to the network and that for many
of the people who had participated since the 1950s and
1960s, "by the middle seventies", they had tired of
mailart. Significantly, most of the early mailartists
were tending to use mailart to explore concepts of the
postal system rather than networking and their parting
with the network, to the extent that they had
participated in it, coincided with the shift away from
conceptual art and their moving-on to other ways of
expressing themselves that was more relevant to their
individual development and to their developing
relationship with the art world. However, a small number
of artists with high international profiles continue to
work in mailart, notably Christo.3 For most, though,
there is a dichotomy between the time consuming and

financially non-productive pursuit of mailart and the commitment to the income generating systems that mailart rejects. Time spent on mailart will not only produce no income but might also be seen by the art establishment as an indication of not being a serious artist/business person. To do both requires the ability to serve two masters simultaneously, on the one hand capitalist materialist commodification and on the other hand interchange for its own sake with no end-product. For most people, having embraced the former, the latter seems to have no relevance.

Although the assertion of Held Jr., (above) is open to criticism, he goes on to say that the exeunt of well known artists from the network was the beginning of the fusing of artists and non-artists in the network, indeed as he so rightly points out, an ambition long held among the avant-garde but only achieved in mailart and, to a lesser extent, by Fluxus. Whilst Johnson had included non-artists in the NYCS, they had been orchestrated by him and as I have demonstrated, critical writing of the NYCS tended only to comment on Johnson, seeing him as the controller. Mailart in the 1980s heralded a shift from the production by artists of artworks, to the concept of networking that I go on to discuss.

Many mailartists expressed the concern that the use of photocopiers devalued what they saw as being important about mailart, namely the unique hand-produced, personal work made for a specific individual. In 1984, a USA. mailartist, Carlo Pittore wrote an article entitled, 'The N-Tity' in which he warns that, as he sees it, machines can only destroy us of our N-Tity:

'All of us are being sucked into a whirlpool of continued technological advance which is inevitably robbing us of individuality, will and humanity.' 4

Concern expressed at the danger to individuality fails to take into account debates surrounding issues of individuality discussed by critics such as Rosalind Krauss and argued through the work of Sherrie Levine.5 Levine, arguing that the notion of originality is false, states "A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture."6 More important to mailart however is the democratic affect of the rapid

development of technology in bringing photocopying, colour copying and computer technology to all. The latter has been most important in allowing even cheaper and more readily available production of a very high quality of fliers with sophisticated graphics. This is an essential element in the democratisation of mailart in that it became possible for anybody to reproduce artwork, enabling a much wider range of networkers to participate with dignity and confidence in what could have previously been perceived as a means of communication reserved for those privileged to have received an education in art and design. Now that computers have thrust professional looking documents at us from all quarters, there is no longer an issue at stake of the distinctions between Graphic and Fine Art because both practices use each other's techniques. High quality graphics have taken over for many networkers, allowing the relatively easy production of artiststamps and printed ephemera by anyone with access to Desktop Publishing. Computer art as an end in itself, has of course also been adopted by some networkers and many computer art projects have been generated.

Pittore warns that mailartists,'...package everything in a standardised manner, for storage and retrieval, and this certainly must rob us of our breath.'7 in writing of storage and retrieval, he alludes to documentation and archiving which have become very much a part of networking for a number of mailartists. Pittore is suggesting that networkers tend to produce work that is dictated by photocopying - for example work on A4 sheets of paper - rather than the wealth of three dimensional work that was often produced in the 1960s. The reference to standardisation however is not appropriate to mailart, not only because of the diverse ways in which networkers still work, but also because of the predominance of MAPs that always have the opportunity to stipulate size and / or medium to prevent precisely that which worries Pittore. It is interesting to note that Pittore is still practising mailart in spite of his expressed concerns.

Although mailart became known to a greatly increased number of people in the early 1970s, its continuation and survival was - paradoxically given the pessimism expressed by some networkers - largely due to photocopying. The improvements in photomechanical

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reproduction presented a ready, cheap and easy to use technique, ideally suited to the dissemination of information that had become so important with the start in 1972 of MAPs with their fliers and documentation as discussed in the previous chapter.

In the late 1990s, travel and communication has become faster and cheaper than ever before, with vast data banks of cultural history, accessible in libraries; interlibrary loans; off-air television and radio; video; CD Rom and now the Internet. The inevitable result of this availability has been eclecticism and no longer the insistence and reliance on the highly personal and hand-crafted objects that epitomised the early phase of mailart. By the 1980s, the urge to test the parameters of systems had been lost with the social and political conservative backlash. Although there is little evidence of faith in the possibility of overturning establishment systems now, this could be said to have been replaced by the need for more global personal contact. Mailart since the beginning of the 1980s has centred on the accent changing from that placed in the 1960s and 1970s on the importance of conceptual mailartworks, to the 1980s importance of communicating with others, on a global scale. However, the shift away from the accent on art was for many networkers a crisis which needed addressing.

4.3. Congresses.

Although some networkers had met each other from the very beginnings of mailart, both informally and through Johnson's 'Meetings', there was no central organisation of meetings until 1985. Johnson's 'Meetings' had been very much New York based and had no agenda of furthering mailart, rather they were an adjunct to the rest of his creative work, almost in the form of performances.

By 1985, two Swiss networkers, Hans Rudi Fricker and G nther Ruch had come to the conclusion that there was a need for mailartists to take stock and consider the future direction of mailart. They decided that rather than simply conducting debates through the mail, it would be much better for participants to meet-up in order to discuss mailart. Their idea of a congress was to encourage networkers to increase the level of their

communication and furtherance of mailart by meeting each other and holding conferences to discuss aspects of networking. Fricker and Ruch's initial ambition for world-wide meetings of mailartists, had been a meeting in Switzerland for a 'Centralised correspon-dance' (referring to Johnson's 'Correspondance') but comments from networkers suggested the impracticability of this proposal, not least because of the impecunious situation of many networkers and it was agreed that a congress would be deemed to be held "wherever two or more mail artists meet to discuss networking concerns."8 An International Mailart Congress was born which overcame problems of distance and finance. Localised congresses, with a common agenda, disseminating their findings through the network being a much more practical solution than one centralised conference. The first Congress took place between 1st June and 1st October 1986 and involved 25 countries, 80 meetings and more than 500 participants.9 Whilst the diversity of participants meant that no conclusions could be drawn from the debates, the number of people involved indicates a considerable success in terms of the willingness of mailartists to meet in order to debate mailart. The Congress was, however, greeted by some as being against the spirit of mailart, which is by definition, 'A distance Concept.' Although Congress is a move beyond the activity of postal exchange, it does rely totally on the initial postal network contacts and the ready-made vehicle in the form of the network for dissemination of the planned meeting dates and locations. Congresses were urged to report the conclusions of their discussions to the two Swiss organisers and these reports were written-up by Ruch and subsequently printed and disseminated through the network.10

By 1992, Fricker and Peter Kaufmann, another Swiss mailartist, felt that there was a need for a further Congress, not simply to re-evaluate mailart but particularly to stress the importance of mailartists, whenever possible, consolidating their network relationships by meeting each other, in order to produce further understanding between peoples. Encouragement was given to delegates to debate International Network Culture and its future. Specifically, the change in the nature of mailart and the change in emphasis was debated, with particular reference to a broader approach to both networkers and the nature of the communication.

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This move was clearly signalling a) that mailart didn't have to be art based and b) that the communication didn't have to be by mail. The terms 'network' and 'networker' thus became more appropriate than mailart and mailartist.11 It is clear that there is not and cannot be a definitive network as such and the terms are used in the knowledge that - except by coincidence - no two mailartists will be in contact with precisely the same people so the word refers to the notion of all the participants in mailart at any one given time - this being impossible to document.

The 1992 Congress, entitled 'The Decentralised World-Wide Networker Congress' consisted of 180 meetings in over 24 countries through, USA.; Uruguay; Japan; Australia; Africa and Europe.12 As with the 1986 Congress, Fricker and Kaufmann co-ordinated and publicised the Congresses through the network and published the received reports of the meetings. As might be expected from mailartists, (one might even suggest, hoped) just as with the 1986 Congress, there was no consensus of opinion at all, with no conclusions to be drawn except the reaffirming of the health, importance and value of networking and the fact that so many networkers had met-up in so many places, enriching the lives of the participants, thus furthering the ideals of mailart of bringing about a greater understanding between peoples.

Whilst not all networkers have been in a position to become involved in Congress, there have been those also who have not wanted to, those for whom the great attraction of networking was communication at whatever level of intimacy at a safe distance.13

4.4. Tourism.

Fricker not only believed that mailartists should meet-up specifically for the Congress but also that they should look upon meeting each other as being important, independent of Congress. Fricker coined the word 'Tourism' in 1985, to describe his notion of developing mailart - beyond simply postal communication - to include networkers visiting each other.14 Networking had become more important than mailart: an acknowledged shift to the exchange being of primary importance. This

was a time when people had begun to travel further afield for both their holidays and business and by the end of the decade was to include visiting Eastern Europe.

Articles published in mailart Zines and self published papers by networkers gave considerable encouragement to networkers to meet-up face-to-face instead of just through the mail. This was perceived by some as a pressure - as Bates had expressed - with the implication that it is easy to indulge in distant relationships and that the important and valuable thing to do was to cement those relationships through meeting. There was an implication that not visiting networkers was laziness. A number of mailartists began to tour and visit networkers in other countries on a regular basis, notably networkers from the wealthy countries, Japan and the USA. In some cases, that of Held Jr., for example, combining visits with giving lectures on mailart has been a method of funding their travelling.15 Whilst certain mailartists from the West have been able to spend a considerable amount of time travelling to meet their fellow networkers all over the world, financial and other constraints make this a privilege of the lucky few. For many people, even postal networking is not financially possible. The removal of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent ending of the control of the USSR over Eastern Europe, did not automatically mean that East Europeans were able to sustain participation in mailart, given the exorbitant rises in postal costs in some countries. Estonia is a case in point where one time prolific mailartist Made Balbat was obliged in 1992 to choose between food and stamps.16 The simple fact of inequality in financial circumstances will always prevent mailart becoming a letter of introduction to people to stay with for any but a minority of networkers. Whilst it is not essential that mailartists further their relationships with each other by meeting, it can only be perceived as a positive move in developing and strengthening relationships between people of different cultures, although the possibility of meeting resulting in a severing of even the postal relationship must be accepted.

In some instances the travelling has had specific purposes, and three projects are important in their demonstration of the potential of mailart networking to

reach beyond the mail and to take-up concerns of world importance. The first was The International Shadow Project which was begun in 1982 by P.A.N.D. (Performers and Artists for Nuclear Disarmament) of USA. to remember the 40th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and to bring the consequences of nuclear war to the attention of the public at large. Mailart is an ideal vehicle for political protest and action, given the fact that it has a ready-made international network in place that can be harnessed for any purpose. The mailart network was used to disseminate the proposed project and resulted in the work simultaneously occurring in many North American and European cities.17 The action, which is now an annual event, takes place in the early morning of August the 6th (Hiroshima day) and consists of shadows being drawn in numerous public places (Plate 29). The lack of any text - simply shadows - reproducing the images that were all that remained of the people who were close to the epicentre of the bomb in Hiroshima, have provoked extensive media coverage and debate, both in art journals and newspapers.18 This common cause has brought together people from countries as far apart as USA (Held Jr.,) Italy (Ruggero Maggi) - both of whom have travelled to Japan for the action - and Japanese networkers. In this work, the efficiency of the network to organise action on an international scale without dictatorial demands is clearly evident.

Furthermore , the issues effecting peoples native to their country, for example Aborigines in Australia and Native Americans in USA have been addressed through mailart. In 1990, Dennis Banks, a Native American peace activist who had played a leading role in the 1973 battle of Wounded Knee on the Rosebud Indian Reserve in South Dakota, furthered the concept of networking through his project the 'Net Run'. This run was organised in conjunction with Japanese mailartists Shozo Shimamoto, Mayumi Handa and Ryosuke Cohen who collaborated with networkers in the different countries on the journey on performances and mailart shows. The 'Sacred Run' (Net Run) was a combination of performance, Tourism and politics, specifically a run for peace and health. Some of the participants travelled the entire distance, in relay, partly running and partly in the accompanying van, while others joined for part of the way. Banks 'ran' from London to Helsinki with Cohen, Shimamoto and Handa. Cohen and Shimamoto are

particularly energetic tourists, Shimamoto being a
sometime active member of the 1950s Gutai movement who
having shaved his head uses it as a canvas for
networker's creativity whether live in his Tourism or in
networked photocopy 'add-ons'.19 The Run was accompanied
by the work, of the seventy networkers that they met
along the way, through the decorating of both
Shimamoto's head and the van in which the Japanese
travelled. The 8,000 km journey began symbolically on
August the 6th (Hiroshima Day) and ended on September
5th., having begun in London and travelled through Paris
August 8th; Kortrijk August 14th; Brussels August 15th;
Cologne August 17th; Frankfurt August 18th; Kleinassen
August 19th; Minden August 20th; Berlin August 21st;
Wroclaw August 25th; Warsaw August 27th; Leningrad
August 30th; Helsinki August 31st; Forsa September 2nd;
Lapland September 3rd; Helsinki September 5th; finishing
in Osaka September 6th. 1990. Net Run allowed networkers
to meet each other directly, but more importantly, to
draw the attention of the public to the message of peace
and love. Banks explained the purpose of the run at
every stopping point and mailartists met each other as
well as the general public. This then is another example
of how mailart has the ability to harness people across
geographical divides, in a common purpose that is beyond
that of networking mailart itself.

Thirdly and the most extraordinary example of Tourism,
because of the time taken and distance travelled, was no
more than visiting networkers in other countries, but in
so doing was a demonstration of two people acting as a
conduit between individuals.20 German networkers Peter
K stermann and Angela P„hler, beginning in 1990,
travelled 100,000 kilometers dressed as nineteenth
century Postal Deliverers, visiting networkers and hand
delivering 200 kilos of mailart between 350 mailartists.
K stermann and P„hler documented each of the 4000 single
pieces of mail that they delivered with a registration
system using postage stamps (artistamps) and rubberstamp
frankings which were designed and made with other
networkers visited on the tour in an imitation of postal
service validation of deliveries (Plate 30). This
process was formalised under the banner, 'Net Mail' with
P„hler and K stermann even changing their names to Peter
and Angela Netmail.

Net Mail coincided with The Decentralised World-Wide
Networker Congress in 1992, allowing K stermann and
P„hler to join congresses with networkers at 170
meetings, having crossed 50 country borders. The Net
Mail project took place over two years, beginning in
Switzerland and travelling through Europe, Asia,
Australia and North America. As well as meeting other
networkers, K stermann and P„hler held exhibitions; gave
slide shows on the history of mailart; performances;
rubberstamp workshops and media interviews.

As an extension of mailart, these tours must be seen to
be a very direct way of effecting others with artwork,
as opposed to the traditional formal exhibition, even if
they largely only met other networkers, nevertheless,
travelling and meeting people face to face must bring
about an even greater understanding between peoples than
can be achieved by traditional mailart. Of particular
importance was the brave visit by K stermann and P„hler
to Serbia and Croatia during the Yugoslavian war, where
they were able, simply by their presence, to demonstrate
to ex-Yugoslavian networkers that they cared about what
was happening to them. Yugoslavian mailartists had been
critical of networkers unwillingness to respond to
invitations to join them in their congresses.

These examples of Tourism, demonstrate the breadth of
the nature of the changes that had undergone mailart and
the reasons for the adoption of the word 'networking' in
preference to 'mailart.'

4.5. Politics and Mailart.

Mailart has not concerned itself with politics per se
but because of the varied interests of its participants,
has been used by networkers to propound theories. These
issues therefore, although not issues of mailart must be
explored in order to give an overview of mailart's post
Fluxus networking practice that opened-up beyond an
interest in the process of the mail.

Mailart not only stretches across boundaries of
geography and culture but also of class. Whilst 'Class
War' is not a mailart issue, it is flown as a banner,
most notably by some British, Finnish and Italian
networkers. In Finland and to a large extent in Italy,

this comes mainly from young disaffected males producing
Fanzines and often playing in Neo-Punk bands. To a
degree there has become an overlap of the mailart
network with a similar one related to music - both
exchanging of tapes and publishing fanzines - these are
frequently associated with 'Anarchy' and 'Class War'.
These overlaps have largely come about due to mailart
chain letters being passed to participants in music
networks. Mailart however, is separate from other
networks in that it does not subscribe to a defined
political ideal or age range, nor to an interest in a
defined style of music. Where the networks of mailart
and music have overlapped, some people working with
music have worked in mailart, but rarely the other way
round. Stewart Home, an English networker, has been the
main proponent, in mailart, of 'Class War' as well as
other politically motivated concepts, that I go on to
discuss;- Neoism, Plagiarism, and The Art Strike (of
these, Neoism has been most visible in mailart). Home's
activity stretches across Punk (my term) novel writing,
music, art and critical writing but they are all
connected by his belief in a radical schism with
everything that he considers to be the establishment,
including Punk, which he sees as being the product of
bored art school trained middle classes.21 As with
British networker Stefan Szczelkun, with whom he has
worked, Home's credo is positively in favour of what he
refers to as a 'working class' art, demonstrated in his
slogan, "Demolish Serious Culture" which he acknowledges
that he plagiarised from the Fluxus artist Henry Flynt
and saw as being both the creation and the preserve of
the middle classes. Home sees art as being essentially a
product of and for the Bourgeoisie:

"...rather than having universal validity, art is a
process that occurs within bourgeois society and which
leads to an 'irrational reverence for activities which
suit bourgeois needs'. This process posits 'the
objective superiority of those things singled out as
art, and, thereby, the superiority of the form of life
which celebrates them, and the social group which is
implicated.'"22

'Class War' therefore existed as a desire on the part of
its proponents to position themselves, and their work,
as distinct from what they describe as the Bourgeoisie.
The slogan, 'Class War' was used, among other things for

badges, made by London mailartist, Mark Pawson. Whilst 'Class War' as I have said does not stand alone in mailart, it has underpinned the work of Home in fronting and adopting certain networking movements.

Mailartists themselves have vigorously and vociferously resisted the use of 'Isms' so prevalent in modernist art history. 'Isms' has been the subject of much comment through the network including Ryosuke Cohen's stickers 'NO ISM' (Plate 31). The dislike of 'Isms' on the part of networkers has not prevented the establishment of 'Isms' which have operated through the network: chief amongst these being Neoism and its offshoot, Plagiarism. Both these highly politicised 'movements' were launched and promoted through the network, using it to gather adherents and publicise the beliefs internationally. This usage of the mailart network can be seen to be non-networking (and therefore not mailart per se) as the non-interactive conceptual use of the mail system by artists already discussed. Whilst it is undeniable that these movements could be said to have been set-up for reasons of self-promotion, Neoism and Plagiarism both played the network through MAPs and the general eliciting of responses to and development of the idea, therefore citing themselves clearly within mailart practise.

Neoism, a deliberately nonsensical title is an open movement with deliberately contradictory multi-theories. It is anti-elitist and gives the participator complete artistic freedom to do whatevers/he wishes, with the one proviso that s\he must adopt the name Monty Cantsin or Karen Elliott23 and refer to him or herself as a Neoist. This then stands not for an artistic style, medium or subject matter, but requires the participant to forsake the egotism of authorship and therefore ownership. Neoism could be said to be a fusing of the principles of Fluxus and mailart but Neoists are also free to add to the mythical history and tradition of the movement as well as literally adding to it by their production of artwork - something that Maciunas would never have countenanced, let alone encouraged. The term Neoism, a pastiche of art movements, implies a looking back to an 'Ism' without any specifics. Neoism defied any possible interpretation as to what it stood for and as such belongs to the debate that took place around a redefining of art history.

An identified early proponent of Neoism was Istvan Kantor (b.1949) a Hungarian networker from Budapest who moved to Montreal, Canada in 1977 and in 1979 adopted the name Monty Cantsin, having met David Zack a Los Angeles networker who had proposed the idea of Neoism. The Neoist work of Kantor / Cantsin extends beyond mailart, including art and anti-art activities; graffiti; video installations; rituals and musical performances as well as the publication of the journal The Neo. For Kantor / Cantsin, the need to shock and outrage is central to his creativity and to that end his most extreme action, which took place in August 1988, consisted of his throwing six phials of his own blood onto a wall space between two paintings in the Museum of Modern Art in New York and reading out a prepared statement protesting against gentrification of New York's Lower East Side.24 Since 1979, Kantor / Cantsin had been selling his blood as an art object in an attempt to finance his Neoist works.25This anarchic work takes on an extra significance since the identification of AIDS and the dangers surrounding human blood. Building on the idea of the New York loft artists who in the sixties and seventies held loft exhibitions, the Neoists, in 1980, adopted the idea, calling them Apartment Festivals. The first 'International Neoist Apartment Festival' (APT) took place in Montreal in 1980, and at least sixty four APTs have taken place since that date in North America and Europe.26 Neoism had an anarchic appeal to networkers and the banner was taken up and used by many mailartists for a period of time in the late 1980s, continuing into the 1990s.27

Home established the name 'Karen Eliot' as an open context in the summer of 1985, developing it initially into what he called the Neoist Alliance of which Plagiarism was an offshoot. The first Plagiarist manifestation was in January 1988 in London with a 'Festival of Plagiarism' devised and organised by Home in order to focus on what he referred to as the redundancy of serious culture, acknowledging and wishing to consolidate the work begun by Fluxus. Home claimed that Plagiarism (and multiple names) challenge western notions of identity and therefore property and ownership, an anti-capitalist revolutionary tool, considering it to be a positive creative technique. Home proposed an end to originality (for him, the false individualism of consumer society) as an important

aspect of creativity and his theories centred on an
encouragement to photocopy the work of other artists as
a statement against capitalism, private property and the
commodification of Fine Art.28 This was extended to
music with a National Home Taping Day. Although there is
a strong tradition of artists paying tribute to others
by reworking existing artworks, it is quite different to
the notion of copying as an appropriation and as an end
in itself. Nevertheless, in reality because of
imperfections of photocopying, images are almost always
different to that that is being plagiarised: even if the
photocopy were perfect, each new presentation of the
work brings new meaning, given that it is presented in a
new context. This concept is equally applicable to
visual art and to zines where the reorganisation of
texts into new relationships with others permits and
prompts re-evaluation.

The Situationists had questioned plagiarism with the use
of 'detournment', the integration of past artistic
production in their work.29 More clearly, the
appropriation work of artists in the 1980s such as
Sherrie Levine particularly questions originality by
highlighting the unacknowledged debt that contemporary
artwork owes to the past. Plagiarism has taken the form
of exhibitions; performances; films; videos; slide
presentations; workshops; discussions and walks.
Festivals since the first one in London, have taken
place in San Francisco; Madison; Wisconsin and
Glasgow.30 Although mailart shares a disapproval of
elitism with Plagiarism, it is important to mailart only
as a vehicle for Home to disseminate his ideas and
publicise his activities and so a debate on the festival
does not belong in this thesis. What remains in question
is whether mailart, sharing the disapproval of elitism
with Plagiarism, requires the theorising of Home, or
whether, in spite of his beliefs, Home requires his
theorising in order to construct his persona. Home
claims ideology in terms of his hopes of changing the
elitism of art, but it is highly questionable as to
whether he is doing this, especially in comparison with
the truly egalitarian mailart that he no longer indulges
in to any great extent.

The work of Home that has received most publicity to
date, was the declaration of 1990-1993 to be "The Years
Without Art." Devising the 'Art Strike', was a natural

follow-on from the Plagiarism festivals. 'The Art
Strike' opened with a farewell speech at the I.C.A. in
London in December 1989 and closed with a lecture at the
Victoria and Albert Museum in 1993. In choosing these
high profile and contrasting locations, Home can be
argued to have appropriated the bastions of the
establishment for subversive purposes. Home saw the Art
Strike as a way to get people to consider why they
produced art and for whom. Theoretically if nobody
produces art for three years, the marketing system is
severely affected, altering the status of art as
commodity. The concept was first conceived by Home, in
1985, deliberately plagiarising the London based German
artist, Gustav Metzger.31 Other precedents of art
strikes exist, with the 1970 New York strike against war
and the Polish strike against martial law.32 Home
outlined his principals of the strike in his publication
'Art Strike Handbook', which was widely distributed
through the network.33 This was a vital concept if he
were to make his strike known to others, given the
required artistic inactivity. Home called for a total
withdrawal of all cultural activity but unlike Gustav
Metzger in 1974, the strike for Home was centred around
his interest in the need of the artist to produce work,

"What interests me is not the prospect of the artworld
collapsing, but the challenge the cessation would make
to my own - and any other artist's - identity". 34

Ironically however, during the Art Strike there was a
coincidental sixty per cent drop in art sales and one in
four of the West End galleries closed, no connection at
all of course but a whimsical fact.

There was much debate about the 'Art Strike' in the
network and it led to 'Art Strike' action committees
being set up across the world, in particular in USA.35
In San Francisco there was a week long public discussion
series with propaganda workshops and performances in
early 1989, exploring the issues of the 'Art Strike',
culminating in an orgy of art making. As well as forming
committees, the Network appropriated the 'Art Strike' in
many and diverse ways, for example, Mark Pawson's
production of stickers and badges proclaiming 'The Years
Without Art', naturally a self defeating activity given
that the products could be argued to be art in
themselves. Sometimes a contrary reaction was prompted

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as in Michael Leigh's 'Pretentious Drivel Strike' rubber stamps, stickers and badges, the latter also made by Pawson! Allegations were made by some in the network that the strike was largely Home's ego mania and lacked a convincing philosophical basis. In support of the Strike on the other hand, many publications, papers and works were produced world wide as well as debated in mailart zines and in the case of Chuck Welch an 'Art Strike Mantra, 1990-1993' audio cassette compilation of networkers' responses to the theme.

The 'Art Strike' also drew attention to the fact that not everyone is privileged enough to be able to consider themselves an artist or at the very least to be in a position in which their cessation of artwork would be noticed by anyone. This is not only an issue for individuals but also applicable to certain countries where there is no art market to be effected. This, by implication, raises questions about universality and the mailart network which I have addressed in the final chapter. Clearly there are major differences of socio-political experiences across the globe but this can be perceived as a strength of the network, in enabling a greater understanding of different situations with a perspective to acknowledge that many issues that may be perceived as being universal, are in fact parochial when seen from a global perspective. This is highlighted by reactions to the Art Strike, from networkers in other countries. For example, the response of Andrej Tisma, an (ex) Yugoslavian networker emphasises the difference between different cultures and its affect on perception of concepts.

"...but in Yugoslavia, the country where I am living and making art, an Art Strike would have no sense because:

1. There is no art market here yet.

2. Prices of artworks are so low that you don't sell at all. You make art for pleasure, philosophical and creative reasons.

3. We have only a few art critics and curators, and they have no power or influence upon artists.

4. You don't have to pay the galleries for having your own exhibition, but galleries pay you for that. Shows are not commercial at all, as alternative artists can exhibit in official gallery spaces.

5. The serious culture hardly exists here. It is repressed by the primitive peasant culture, so our aim is to develop and support culture here."36

What the debate of such issues in the network can do, is to alert artists in countries that have not yet acquired the trappings of art marketing in the West, to the problems that such apparently democratic systems can bring in terms of commodification of art.

Even if the Art Strike was a failure in ideological terms, it was nevertheless a networking success in that it generated considerable debate amongst mailartists.37 It also demonstrated the power of mailart to disseminate and discuss ideas world wide. A great deal of this debate took place at many of the 1992 mailart Congresses. The timing of the 1992 mailart Congress during the Art Strike, provided a ready subject for debate at many of the meetings. Whilst these issues have had enormous prominence in the network and have used the network to broadcast the beliefs, they are in no way central to the importance of mailart, but have been subject matter for mailart exchange and debate - by some networkers - for the duration of the interest that they engendered.

4.6.Conclusion.

Since 1986, mailartists have entered into dialogue with each other as to their perception of what the practise should be, and although no conclusions have been drawn, the physical bringing together of mailartists, heralded a new era in mailart. For some networkers, mailart lost its appeal when photocopiers began to be used at the end of the 1970s and at the same time, large numbers of people began participating in mailart, signalling a shift from a potential defined group of people with similar interests, to a network of thousands of mailartists at any one time, selecting with whom they wish to exchange on the basis of mutual interests. The decision to hold Congresses, whilst not producing any

decisions, strengthened the bonds between networkers, renewed enthusiasm for mailart and introduced the possibility of networkers travelling to meet each other rather than just communicating through the post. Whilst some mailartists have ceased to practice, there is a continuous and increasing flow of new networkers.

Congresses sowed the seeds of mailartists travelling to meet each other and enabled a broadening-out of mailart activities with, for example, USA and Italian networkers being able to travel to Hiroshima to join Japanese mailartists in the 'Shadow Project'. For some networkers, chiefly Stewart Home, the opening-up of the possible uses of mailart, enabled them to use it as a platform for the expression and dissemination of their political ideas. Whilst these political concepts have been widely publicised in the network, they have not, in any noticeable way, changed the face of mailart, rather mailart has been used as a vehicle for these ideas. This is not a problem for mailart as since the late 1970s, it has existed to be used as individuals choose. Mailart in the 1980s shifted from the largely conceptual influenced work of the 1960s and 1970s to an understanding of a much more open and fluid network of networks of people with varied interests.

The challenge for mailart at the end of the millennium is to survive as snail mail in spite of the exponential speed of the development of electronic mail and communications. It is also becoming increasingly important for mailart to define itself within an ever increasing number of networks and to reach out beyond the geographical areas so far reached. These issues are addressed, with an evaluation of mailart, in the final chapter.

1 V. Oisteanu, 'Illegal Mail Art (a poetic essay)', Franklin Furnace Flue, 4(3/4): 8, (Winter 1984)

CHAPTER 5 AN EVALUATION OF MAILART IN THE SECOND HALF OF
THE 1990s.

5.1. Introduction.

In this final chapter, I identify mailart as it exists
in the second half of the 1990s and consider its
critical position in relationship to other networks and
manifestations of art. Having established the importance
of mailart - as a practice - I have considered its
future, particularly in the light of the potential of
the various forms of electronic mail that already exist
as another form of exchange within mailart networking.

5.2. Identifying Mailart in the Second Half of the
1990s.

As a strategy for redefining mailart, I examine the
situations in which it could not exist and consider what
is fundamental to its continuation. It is impossible to
practice mailart alone unlike painting for example,
albeit that it can be argued that paintings are
incomplete without an audience. Whilst it could be
assumed that mailart could be produced pending the
possibility of it being posted, mailart is not the
production of work to send, but the interaction between
two people within the mailart network.1 Mailart
therefore requires a specifically targeted recipient or
the network as a whole.2 This understanding needs
clarification. I have argued that mailart exists as a
system of exchange and will now identify how that system
operates. A reasonable expectation on the part of a new
mailart networker is that having sent something to
someone s/he will receive a reply from that person.
Often more specifically they expect that having sent a
response to a MAP they will receive a reply and
documentation. The likelihood is that they will receive
both, but not in the way in which letter writing to
friends, relatives or business letter writing is
conducted, that is to say on a one-to-one reciprocal
process, whereby the initiator waits for a response
before taking further action. Whilst inevitably there is
expectation, mailart is primarily a network that is
'played' by the participants and in this respect it has

not changed since Johnson's early orchestrations.
Mailart does not operate in a process of reciprocity,
rather mailart is putting energy into sending mailart to
people who operate within the network and receiving
mailart in return, though not necessarily from the same
people on a reciprocal basis. The important
understanding here is that what constitutes a mailartist
has changed: whereas in the late 1950s, it was being
part of the NYCS that defined a mailartist and in the
late 1960s and 1970s, exploring the postal system
identified a mailartist, in the late 1990s it is the
deliberate and knowing participation within the mailart
network, regardless of what that sending is, that
constitutes mailart. This is in no way to decry or deny
the value of one-to-one mailart, but to identify that
one-to-one relationships are a function of the network,
not the fundamental principle. Therefore to identify and
discuss an individual item of mailart has no validity in
terms of understanding mailart, because mailart is the
totality of exchanges through the network. Although the
whole is made-up of elements, they are precisely that,
analogous to individual pixels being considered to be
artworks rather than, or as well as, the entire picture.
The individual elements have no value or meaning in
themselves, they only acquire meaning and therefore
value, when viewed as part of the whole (network).

A tranche of mailart could for example be: A in England,
sending an envelope to B in Japan, that had been
recycled, having been received from W in Belgium, with
the addition of rubberstamps by A and an artistamp
received from X in France. This envelope might contain
an Add-to and Pass-on that had been received from Y in
Canada and worked on by Z in Brazil as well as A, having
been originally generated by B. A, might also include
his/her own Add-to and Pass-on booklet with a request to
send it on to C in Australia and the inclusion of a
flier for a MAP generated by D in Estonia. This
hypothetical sending, consists of; an A4 envelope
containing one A4 sheet of paper (the Add-to and Pass-on
sheet), one A6 six page booklet (the Add-to and Pass-on
booklet) and one A6 sheet of paper (the flier). This
tranche would involve eight people from eight different
countries for the minimum postal rate. In terms of
networking, this exchange would have to be deemed a
success in terms of the number of people involved but
would be subject to the way in which B responded to it

as to whether it was entirely successful. If B is inspired by the flier and sends something to D and having worked on the Add-to and Pass-on booklet, sends it on to C, and sends something to Y and Z to thank them for their contribution to the Add-to and Pass-on sheet, as well as replying to A, and maybe recycling the envelope, the transaction could be said to have had maximum effect at that stage. Although my hypothetical illustration is of an exchange through the mail, it is no longer essential to use the mail to interact through the network (practice mailart), this can be (and is) carried-out through all other communications mediums for example, electronic mail (which I discuss below).

The nomenclature Mailart, firmly situates the activity within an art practice framework and differs from the other postal based networks that I have given as examples in that it neither limits itself to any one agenda nor relates to fashion (as for example with Post-Punk Zine and music networks which are both limiting - by their own definitions - and strongly related to fashion). Mailart does not preclude the participation of people from other networks, so that, for example, someone working in a music network may stumble on mailart unknowingly and may find that they have a place in it, perhaps passing-on the more visually based things received. A participant in mailart would probably contribute to MAPs, zines and assembling zines, Add-tos and Pass-ons, in other words work collaboratively as well as producing his or her own work. Although much of the work may be visual, it is more likely to be produced by collage and/or rubberstamps rather than the traditional skills of drawing and painting and need not be visual at all, with a text based response being totally acceptable. The use of text in mailart however may simply be a letter or hand written message, with no acknowledgement of either Concrete Poetry or Fine Art Image & Text work and therefore not in any sense perceived by the generator as Fine Art.

Mailart in the late 1990's, therefore, is exchange within the mailart network that has historically grown-out of 'mailart.' The network is tangibly indefinable and cannot be seen as a series of defined, overlapping networks that individuals are working within. Whilst each networker will have his/her own address list, this is not the extent of their individual networking

activity because of the tendency of recipients to pass-on anything received and so constantly increase the number of participants in the individual's network. The notion of discreet networks could only hold good for any one frozen moment and serve no meaningful purpose, it is more accurate to consider that there is one total, constantly changing network of participants, within which each individual is operating.

Having identified mailart, it is important to evaluate it. As I have argued, mailart can only be considered in terms of the network as a whole - rather than considering individual mailart works - and this can only be accomplished by considering the concept.

5.3. A Comparison of Art and Mailart in the Second Half of the 1990s.

In order to evaluate mailart, it is necessary to make a comparison with art as it exists outside the mailart network in terms of expectations, intentions and destinations.

The artist can usually be said to be working towards a destination for his/her work, that is to say that if it is not a commission, there will be hopes of a sale, whether private or to a gallery. The situation changes slightly if the artist does not produce work that is easy to display in a domestic situation. If an installation or performance is produced, the work will usually be available for any member of the public to view. In the case of an installation the viewing is followed by the work being dismantled and then destroyed or retained by the creator, except in the unusual situation of it being purchased by a museum or collector with large storage and or exhibition space. The work may have been the subject of a grant or commission for production of the work and will be documented, either to provide evidence of past work in applications for future commissions and/or as saleable by-products. By comparison the producer of mailart knows that his/her work has no potential to generate financial income and may be destroyed or recycled by the initial or subsequent recipient. In other words, the artist produces work for commodification of the tangible product whereas the mailartist produces it in the hope

of making some kind of connection with another individually targeted person or the 'entire' network. However, although there is no direct identifiable financial gain for the producer of mailart, there are other benefits to be considered, not least of which is the 'five finger exercise' aspect of mailart practice. The transitory nature and sheer quantity of mailart - that the average networker receives - prompts an immediate rather than ponderous response - but nevertheless an appropriate one - and therefore becomes a mental exercise, sharpening-up the aesthetic responses that can feed other practice, whether of art or otherwise. In the case of both the artist and the mailartist, there is the same potential for rewards in terms of the personal firsthand experience of creativity, and also the hope of communicating that creativity to another person.

Whilst any individual item or element of the received mailart 'work' may be appreciated by the recipient in the same way as a work of art, that situation is incidental to the more important one of the benefits to be gained by a continuing and developing mailart exchange. With the sale of a painting for example, it is safe to assume that the owner will put it on his/her wall or give it as a present to a third party who will put it on his/her wall. In some cases, the work will be stored in a bank vault for safe keeping. These situations are clear statements of approval, signalled by the financial reward of the sale and the conspicuous display or precious bank vault storing. The reasons for the transaction taking place however are complex and may well not signify approval of the artistic merit but simply a recognition of the anticipated investment value and/or status conferred upon the purchaser by the conspicuous ownership of the work of a particular artist who is valued in a certain way at a certain time. From the point of view of the purchaser, durability of materials, appeal and above all of financial value is important in order that the investment is protected, with the hope that the work will pay dividends as both a financial and a cultural status investment - rather than begin to decay in any sense of the word. The work also confers status on the owner (and even the viewer) in terms of their perceived intellect and status in understanding the work, their financial status to be able to afford to own the work and/or the social savoir

faire to visit an exhibition or a museum. In contrast, the individual mailart work is intrinsically transient in that to isolate it from the network is to destroy it. The recipient - being also a mailartist - must recycle the work or by archiving it, confine it to the status of a relic that is out of context. There is neither financial investment nor cultural status to be gained from mailart, the value of mailart is in the total experience of networking rather than the charms or financial value of any individual piece of work that may be removed from its context of the exchange.3 For many artists, the intention, the purpose of making work is to share their ideas with their viewers, however, unlike with mailart, this is not essential and unless it is work for a commission, is not directed at a specific individual and involves no equality of response (if any). Even if the artist receives feedback, for instance at a Private View, the exchange of ideas will usually take place with the work as the reason for the debate, rather than being the carrier of the debate itself. This is to say that the purpose of mailart is to convey a sense of a position in the world, related to other fellow human beings, unlike an artist's one person show, which will be viewed in the context of the artist's oeuvre. The presence of the artist also creates unequal status between him/her and the viewer who will engage the artist in debate centred around his/her work, as opposed to the equal status of sender and receiver in mailart, in that both are equal practitioners, playing equal roles: there is no hierarchical artist and viewer situation. The reciprocal mailart relationship - with one to one feedback - also gives the mailartist a clearer understanding of how his/her work is received, than is possible for the artist for whom evaluation is frequently confused with marketability. Feedback in networking is not a prerequisite - not least because evaluation is not part of networking - but is - if in no other way - evident from the quality of the response. In other words, if a recipient does not relate to what they have received, they will be unlikely to send anything in return that is of any great interest or importance to them. Mailart places value on the quality of the relationship between networkers and the greater understanding of human nature (mediated by the mailart), rather than placing value on the material object/s that is/are exchanged.

There is no intermediary between the mailart that the networker sends and its receipt by the fellow networker, save that of the evident vagaries of the postal system. The envelope and recipient's desk become equivalents of the art gallery and literally the physical support for the work. The method of approaching the work is not mediated, directed or controlled in any way by a third party. It is important to establish that, with no gallery presentation, - I have argued that the exhibiting of MAPs is not mailart - there is neither imagined, received or directed social status, nor barrier, to the viewing of the work. The artist produces work for a known, or at least predicted, coterie of cogniscenti, or even simply for him/herself. The networker knows precisely to whom s/he is sending the work (unless it is deliberately to an unknown person, in which case s/he sends in the knowledge that it is to a fellow networker - I examine this possibility below). The sender expects that the sending will remain with the recipient, unless destroyed, or the recipient will forward it in the belief that the new recipient will appreciate it.

For the mailartist, the postal system can be seen to be analogous to the canvas and stretcher of the painter. This is to say that neither have any meaning or message in themselves, but both are essential to the production of the work. The envelope and its contents can be seen as an equivalent of an installation, both having several elements that make-up the total work and both being a kind of assemblage as I have described in my hypothetical sending at the start of this chapter. It should also be observed that the 'gallery' for mailart is not just the recipient's desk and or subsequent MAP exhibition/s but the journey that the sending takes from sender to receiver and therefore all the handlers between: that is the postal worker emptying the post box; the postal sorter at the dispatch end; the postal sorter at the receiving end and the deliverer (who may be the same person). In the case of the artist's postcard, all these postal workers have the opportunity to view the entire work and in the case of the work contained within an envelope or package, they will view any information, messages and decoration on the envelope and the deliverer will have a sense of the quantity and geographical spread of the individual recipient's mail. The exception to this is the HM Customs and Excise

officer who so often experiences the entire (mailart) contents of packages entering Britain - particularly from Holland - in execution of his/her job, gaining a gratuitous experience of receiving, opening and possibly enjoying a mailart sending. The mailart sender, however, has no guarantee that the work will even arrive, (be seen by anyone in the network, as opposed to postal workers). Whilst it is to be expected, at least in the West, that the mailartwork will arrive at its intended destination, the only way of knowing that it has arrived is by the recipient sending notification of its arrival to the sender. In this event, the sender cannot be certain that it has arrived in the intended state (without damage or accidental markings) but unlike the installation maker, the mailartist cannot, and has no wish to, maintain control over the appearance and viewing of his/her work. Nevertheless, it is only in exceptional cases that the mailartist consciously works with the potential vagaries of the postal journey and process,4 the usual situation is to work with an acceptance of the outcome. This highlights that in relinquishing control over his/her work, the mailartist signals the importance of participation over all other considerations.

In a constantly expanding network, the sender often despatches mailart to a name and address that is new to him/her, so that s/he has little or no knowledge as to whether the sending will be appreciated at all, except as I have said that s/he believes that the recipient is a mailartist and therefore can be presumed to be operating within that known context. Similarly the recipient has little control over what s/he receives. By comparison, it is self evident that the purchaser (or recipient) of a painting will have acquired it because they value it in some way, and therefore wish to preserve it. The recipient of the mailart sending does not approach the tangible 'work' in the same way and has choices as to what to do with the received mailart. Occasionally, a part of the received work may be framed and hung on the wall, aping the traditional response to a work of art, but this is to ignore the fact that it is not a work of art, but a fragment of mailart and as such, usually not intended to be hung. In any event, the mailart sending exists in its entirety, that is to say that it is not intended that just as I have argued that individuals items should not be discussed, similarly it

is not intended that the contents of the sending will be separated from each other or from their status as mail-transmitted art. This would be akin to exhibiting a single stone from a Richard Long stone circle installation, although in both cases it could be said to be giving it the elevated status of a relic, in the case of the Long, it would have the added status of being 'A Richard Long', whereas in mailart the name of the sender has no status. The possible exception to this is Ray Johnson, but it is not possible to be certain whether on the one hand this is because Johnson has some status as result of his 1950s proto Pop Art work and creation of the NYCS or on the other hand would be worthless because it is 'only a piece of Johnson's mailart'. In the latter case, it would bring into question whether this was a question of uniqueness (in that Johnson produced a considerable quantity of mailart over his forty years networking - quantity resulting in devaluing -) or whether it was simply a comment on the perceived worthlessness of mailart, regardless of who generated it. Although the sender assumes that the received work will not be framed, but will be appreciated as an element in the total concept of the mailart network, s/he sends in the knowledge that even if the work is received, it might well be thrown away (deliberately or accidentally) by the recipient who does not appreciate it at all and perhaps considers it to be unsolicited or even believes that destruction of the work emphasises the importance of the communication over the tangible evidence (record) of that communication. The mailartist produces and sends his/her work in the knowledge of this possibility, and in the realisation of the possibility of the work being recycled. With the awareness of these possibilities, it follows that the mailartist operates from a basis of different motives to those of the artist who can safely predict that his/her work will be preserved.

What is common to both artist and mailartist is the wish to produce something. Beyond that point, it is not safe to make assumptions of similarities. In the case of the mailartist, as I have stated, the work might not even be visual beyond its physical presence, that is to say that it might be a written message and in any case is not necessarily perceived by either the producer or the receiver as art and this is the important shift that I have identified, from mailart of the 1970s to networking

in the 1990s. In both cases the need to produce, results
in an end product, but for the mailartist that product
is only an element in the artwork (that is the network)
and is used to mediate in a relationship within the
network, rather than to stand alone as a piece of
artwork. Mailart produced by the networker has only this
purpose: the mailart product is the relationship, not an
envelope and/or its contents. While, for the artist, the
production of the work may in itself satisfy all his/her
needs and there may not be a need to share the work with
others, by definition, the mailartist needs to
communicate: it might be argued that this should also be
the aim of the artist but there is no compunction on
him/her to do so.

The intentions and results of the activities of the
artist and mailartist are therefore radically different,
with the two operating from different motives and with
different end products. I have argued that in mailart
there is no tangible end product and that it is the
participation that is important (and therefore the
participation that is the artwork). It follows that to
most artists, mailart cannot be considered to be art,
not least because there is no tangible end product,
nevertheless there is a debate as to the definition of
art.

5.4. Is Mailart Art?

"Fortunately, everything is still not wholly categorized
in terms of buying and selling... We posses more than a
tradesman morality... One likes to assert that they [art
objects] are the product of the collective mind as much
as of individual mind."5

Although mailart may not be perceived as art by many
artists, there are theorists - for instance Marcel
Mauss, quoted above - from whose writings it can be seen
that they would categorise mailart as art. Mailart,
having no end product and being a network, fits in with
Marcel Mauss' description of art as the product of
society. Although both would acknowledge mailart as art,
Mauss' perception of art is somewhat different from the
theories of Joseph Beuys who saw art and society as
being synonymous.

Although Beuys did not write specifically about mailart, he was a prominent participant in Fluxus and also at one time practised mailart, but more important - to understanding mailart in terms of art - are the theories that he propounded in the 1970s and 1980s. Whilst in the late 1990s, Beuys theories are an inherited set of concepts, they remain applicable in the recognition that art is something more than a tangible product, as I will argue. For Beuys, art - specifically he used the word 'sculpture'- is a metaphor for society and vice versa: "He / she is the creator of the SOCIAL SCULPTURE, and it is on human scale."6 - in effect focusing on inherent creativity and the value laden comparisons of for example, business (perceived as not being creative) and art (perceived as being creative). Beuys claimed that each person is "a creative being."

"Every man is a plastic artist ... A total work of art is only possible in the context of the whole society ... The isolated concept of art [education] must be done away with, and the artistic element must be embodied in every subject, ..."7

Caroline Tisdall sees Beuys intention as a widening of the concept of art in which "The whole process of living itself is the creative act ... thinking, talking, performing, teaching - and above all living, which all of us do - can be seen as a process of moulding or sculpting: Social Sculpture."8 Beuys theory - by dismissing the privileging of certain individuals being artists - fits well with mailart networking, as does the denial of art as the only creative activity. This sits unhappily within the art history canon because it denies the necessity for something visible, the situation that mailart has reached of the artwork being the network, instead of a visible product. Mailart networking therefore, as a whole - whilst having little in common with art - following Beuys, can clearly be categorised as art, although Beuys - by including everything as art - denies any meaning to the word in that it ceases to describe a category separate from any other. Mauss by comparison, retains the category 'art' as distinct from other activities but broadens its meaning and the base on which it is produced, permitting mailart to be included.

There is very little critical writing on whether mailart can be categorised as art or not, although, Jean-Marc Poinsot's introductory essay in the 1971 Paris mailart show catalogue addresses the issue.9 It is important however to realise that this was written at a time when mailart was still exploring the postal system, rather than the networking of the late 1990s, and so the text has only certain relevance. Poinsot makes reference to Mauss, having identified mailart as "... a system of exchange ... outside of or parallel to traditional art circles ..."10 He poses the question: "whether our subject [mailart] is of artistic value" and answers it with "Mauss's definition of art as whatever a given group recognises as such."11 Poinsot is not addressing the question as to whether mailart is art or not - presumably this is taken as read - but looking at the quality of the work. In any event, the text is related to mailart of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and claims mailart as art because, "...it does not appear to us that the subject is open to controversy, for despite the multiplicity of ideologies and terminology, the social and cultural status of the artist is inherent in each of the various artists under consideration."12 This text was written when - as I have established - there was a considerable number of established artists who were exploring mailart, many of the participants in the Paris exhibition falling into this category. Poinsot's text therefore, whilst firmly placing mailart as art, was written at a time when mailart had a different agenda to the networking of the late 1990s and could gain credibility on the strength of the reputations of the participants. Mailart fits into the category 'art' as argued by Mauss, Poinsot and Beuys but it is to the theories of Beuys that mailart belongs, albeit that categorisation of mailart is of purely academic interest and of no importance to the continuation of the mailart network.

The title of this thesis, 'Democratic Art as Social Sculpture' is clearly taken from Beuys' belief in art being a democratic activity, which mailart unquestionably is as I demonstrate and because of the broad geographical and cultural base on which it operates, mailart is also undoubtedly a social activity. Beuys' use of the word 'sculpture' fits very well with the 'art' in mailart being the network as opposed to a given mailart product. Mailart is not a static work of

art and could be seen to be a forty-plus year old
'event', but this word, being situated firmly in the
1960s is not applicable. 'Sculpture' gives a solidity to
the concept of networking, hence a Social Sculpture.

5.5. The Need for a Mailart Network.

The continuance of mailart for more than forty years
proves a need in the participants, but as I have argued
this need is in the context of different motives to
those of the artist. Establishing what the need is will
lead to a better understanding of mailart as a whole and
thus to an evaluation of networking in the late 1990s.

From a negative point of view, the mailart network has
established attitudes to art that draw the participants
together in their wish to distance themselves from what
is perceived to be commodification and false (financial)
valuing of art. Inevitably, some artists will have
turned to mailart because they have not been able to
achieve the success that they had hoped for in terms of
exhibitions. For these artists, mailart provides a
vehicle for their creativity and the potential to feel
aligned to a network of people in opposition to the
system (gallery) that they see as having failed them.
There are however, also networkers who pursue both art
and mailart - generally managing to prevent either
corrupting the other - demonstrating that it is possible
to embrace both ideologies.

From a positive point of view, the pursuit of mailart,
implies a recognition of the value of networking as a
reason for and method of producing and distributing -
and therefore sharing - work without providing any
financial income. The motivation may be ideologically
perceived as eschewing the placing of financial value on
artistic production in conjunction with fashion and fame
and concern at art targeting an audience of middle class
art lovers to the exclusion of others. Whilst I have
stated that mailart does not produce work to be sold, it
is not so easy to prove that mailart is not the sole
preserve of middle class art lovers, even with the aid
of a survey. My Archive of Mail Artists survey (Appendix
E) looks at the age range of networkers but although it
shows that there are networkers under the age of 16,
this is not evidence as to whether they are young art

lovers, or the children of art lovers and therefore atypical. Similarly the fact that of 291 replies to the question on income source, under the age of retirement, 34 were unemployed and 22 had unskilled jobs (nearly 20% in total) gives no indication as to whether these respondents are either artists on Income Benefit or artists funding their work by doing a menial job. However, the overlap with other networks that I have discussed, notably the Post-Punk and Anarchy networks in conjunction with the presence of 'Classwar' within mailart, strongly suggests that the participants are not all middle class, gallery going, art lovers. Evidence in the form of widely differing approaches to responses suggests that there is a broad cultural range of networkers as well as the proven broad age range and broad geographical spread, providing a catholic experience for the participants (see Appendix E).

I have argued the importance of mailart to East European Networkers, pre 1989 and whilst it may be expected that the radical geopolitical changes since the late 1980s, particularly in Eastern Europe - resulting in easier travel between countries especially from East to West - would lessen the need on the part of the East Europeans for mailart, this is not the case. As I have identified, one of the most important aspects of mailart for East Europeans before 1989 was the possibility of finding-out from an individual in the West - rather than censored East European media information - what was happening in the West. This is no longer the problems that it was - particularly with satellite television - but with the borders being open and censorship not so stringent, there is now the real possibility for East Europeans to be a part of the West - rather than simply observers - thus giving East to West communication a very different emphasis. Learning about the West is no longer cause for envy and longing but can now be a prelude to firsthand experience. For an East European, practising mailart has lost its frisson of danger from the censors, but retains its importance as information exchange. For the Westerner, the situation is quite different, initially there was novelty value (because of unfamiliarity) in being able to communicate with someone from Eastern Europe, now it is possible to travel in Eastern Europe without much difficulty, creating further reason for wishing to understand East Europeans better. Historically there has been a contrast between the

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isolation of the individual in the Capitalist-Materialist West and the working together of the individuals in the East against the perceived common 'enemy' of Communism. This polarity is changing fast as Eastern Europe moves rapidly towards Capitalist-Materialism and isolationism spreads.13 As the East and the West become so similar that it becomes difficult to tell them apart - highlighted by the influx in Eastern Europe of satellite television and U.S.A. fast food outlets - there will be a new purpose for mailart between them. The mailartist - who, by devoting time, energy and money to (non-profit making) mailart demonstrates that s/he considers that there are things other than materialism that are important to him/her - will need to spread his/her net farther afield to find like-minded spirits.

As I have stated, the existence of mailart is proof of the need for it. This need can be summed-up as the wish to share experiences and understanding with sympathetic people beyond their immediate environment.

5.6. The Importance of Mailart.

The first task in evaluating something must be to establish with regard to what and in what way it is to be assessed. I have established that mailart is not important in the context of Fine Art in the sense of exhibitable end products, and it is highly unlikely that the postal services would consider mailart to be important to them. The task, therefore, is to locate where the importance lies and to whom. I have stated that with mailart, both sender and receiver are the same person (in that they both are both senders and receivers) and therefore have equal importance and so it follows that mailart only directly affects the participants. Importantly, it can be argued that any effect on any one individual will in turn be passed-on by that individual to others, indirectly, beyond the immediate area of effect. This argument is the sociological defence of art in that, for example, Mark Rothko's work is perceived as being unapproachable by the majority of the public - it is only a small minority who enter galleries - and therefore only preaching to the converted. However, it is to be hoped that the cognoscenti will be moved by the experience of Rothko's work to do 'good works' for the disadvantaged members of

the public. Thus, Rothko (indirectly) helps the disadvantaged.

Mailart - being the communication of identity through a low cost medium - provides the opportunity to feel, and be, a part of the world and helps transcend the feelings of isolation and alienation. It gives the knowledge - discovered and established - that you are not alone in your thoughts and beliefs and that despite cultural differences, similar emotional feelings are experienced all over the world. While the world is rapidly being shrunk by giant conglomerates giving an impression of corporate universality, mailart gives first hand accounts of other countries and cultures rather than the simulacrum that is readily available through electronics and the media. With such an enormous network, the chance of not finding like minds is extremely remote indeed. The practice of mailart being a creative act also satisfies inner impulses without significant compromise: it does not have to be time consuming or costly and the practitioner is free to create (and send) whatever s/he wishes. Mailart is a network of equality - provided that participants can afford a postage stamp - enabling participators to exchange work with people from all over the world with no fear of rejection (unlike with a juried exhibition) and no intermediary. Mailart by being open to anyone removes art from a position of privilege.

Although I have argued that exhibitions of mailart are not what they purport to be (no longer mailart), it is important to examine this method by which so many people experience mailart, and the value that it nevertheless has for the viewer. Although the visitor may not necessarily consider that what they are looking at is art (in the understanding of art that they are familiar with) and probably will not have been aware of mailart, the variety of media and approaches presented, creates an interest that the average art exhibition may well not provide for many people. In mailart, the range of work - on a given theme - in terms of variety of responses, media, technique, languages of text and especially the international breadth, instantly gives an opportunity for the viewer to escape from parochialism. A mailart exhibition could incidentally open-up the potential on the part of the viewer for a new understanding of art as a forum for debate rather than simply as decoration for the wall. Whilst the work (exhibition) has ceased to be

mailart, it nevertheless signals the richness of response that can be elicited from the network and may encourage the viewer to consider the importance, and relevance to them of communicating with others in this way.

To the viewer who is unfamiliar with mailart - because it is frequently mundane in its form and media - the network could easily be seen to be elitist and self indulgently revelling in an extreme area of self expression. However, although inevitably that criticism could be levelled at some networkers, every pursuit includes time-wasters and producers of indifferent work. The difference with mailart is that there is no selection process before it is received. Most of all - the network not being owned or controlled by anyone - permits the networker dictates his/her own terms. Whilst it is undeniable that finance is always a governing factor, the networker is free from all other constraints except those of the postal system, however ingenuity often transcends the natural constraints of systems both financial and postal. With so many networkers at any one time and the temptation to try and reach as many as possible, it could well be imagined that the quality of the 'work' produced (albeit that this is a secondary product) and/or the quality of the communication would decline but as the quality of the response usually relates to the quality of the sending, there is a natural tendency for an escalation of quality rather than the opposite.

The method of producing mailart is another way in which mailart is an equaliser and therefore a further example of its importance. Mailart lends itself to a desktop or kitchen table activity using compartmentalised time and minimal resources of any sort. This relates both to debates about gender and the privilege of wealth as well as to Beuys' argument that everyone is an artist. The traditional problems of archetypal housewives/mothers trying to find time and space in which to work as artists at the same time as looking after children are no longer confined to women now that traditional roles - mother at home, father at work - are no longer the norm. Mailart provides a solution to the difficulty of being an artist at the same time as looking after a family as British artists Kate Walker and Sally Gollop recognised in 1975 by sending each other artworks through the post

when Gollop was living in the Isle of Wight and Walker in London, both involved in domestic tasks. This exchange was soon extended to include other friends and the group became known as Feministo. As with mailart in general, the group-generated projects were ultimately exhibited.14 Although Feministo belongs to the 1970s, it nevertheless is helpful to understanding many of the strengths of mailart in the late 1990s. The idea of Feministo was based on being able to work in small fragments of time, often in a restricted space, perhaps on a kitchen table and maybe even with interruptions. Roziska Parker describes Feministo as being '...a life line for trapped women.'15 Whilst Feministo - operating through the post in 1975 - was not an original idea, what is of particular interest is the writing about it at that time because of the rationalisation of the significance of the 'Postal Event.' Significantly, there is no mention of mailart in the writing, possibly because of the date that it was written, when mailart was still associated with the male led NYCS (Johnson) and male led Fluxus (Maciunas). This is not to suggest a total rejection of men on the part of the group and its documentors but that these men - Johnson and Maciunas - very much perceived their work as being art and therefore situated in the problematic traditions of male dominated practice.16 Whilst this thesis is not about gender issues, the gender based praxis of Feministo clearly highlights the shift of mailart to networking, that I argue is the essential importance of mailart in the late 1990s. Parker argues that the 'Postal Event' "undermines ... the idea of the isolated genius ... by revealing the collective basis of inspiration ... art practice becomes a living process - more of a dialogue."17 This follows Mauss's assertion that art is "...the product of a collective mind..." Phil Goodall, describing the process of working that Feministo used, accurately describes the manner of working as a mailartist in the late 1990s:

"each person replies to the art-work she has received by making either an image / object that reflects something of her perspective on life, or that responds directly to the image she has received ... the strain of being creative is removed from the individual and begins to become a bit more collective."18

Goodall also refers to the 'postal event' "consciousness raising"19 through the method of working, highlighting the shift away from belief in the supremacy of the individual. Monica Ross writes "False standards, ethics and competition, combine to isolate all artists and to inhibit the development of meaningful communication"20 thus summarising the ideology of mailart practice in opposition to art in the late 1990s. Goodall comments in a similar way, "immediacy is important to many of us, making things to do with what is happening now"21 adding the view, relevant to mailart, that immediacy of response has its own importance and that communication and art is not only about deliberation, but at the same time, that is not to say that it cannot be a lifeline for spiritual needs. In the same writing Goodall goes on to question "is the postal event art? ... it seems irrelevant ... it's visual communication" This is precisely my view: to reiterate, whilst the NYCS and Fluxus mailart was art and subsequent conceptual mailart works were also art, the importance of mailart has always lain elsewhere and this is the essence of networking in the late 1990s, as discussed by the writers on Feministo. If mailart networking is important and Feministo was considered to be so important to the participating artists, it raises the question as to why Feministo has not continued. The answer must lie partly in the shifting domestic situation and career aspirations of the participants, particularly in the changing society in the 1980s but possibly more interestingly in that networking is a vehicle for confidence boosting, and that having achieved its aim, can be dispensed with by some people.

The usual size of mailart work (A4 or smaller) is critical to understanding the way in which it is received/viewed by the receiver. The size of mailart relates it to reproductions of art because it can be argued that art is most often experienced in the home, library or book shop, rather than in a gallery, thus making it an armchair experience, as is mailart. Although still an armchair experience, the method of receiving information is rapidly changing with Virtual Reality galleries on CD Rom, Internet and the promise of VR itself in the future (I have addressed this issue in the subsequent section of this chapter). John Berger emphasises the confusion of reality and reproduction and the problems of uniqueness.22 Whilst most people in

Western Europe have heard of the Mona Lisa and most of them know what the painting looks like, for the vast majority of them this awareness is from a photograph which may even have been cropped to fit a postcard. Their experience, view (literally) of art is at postcard or VDU size, format and resolution. This knowledge leaves the artist with two choices, either to continue working in whatever way s/he wishes - but in the knowledge that if s/he becomes well known, the work will mostly be seen in reproduction, or to work with reproductions as the medium, e.g. postcards or the Internet, the media of mailart.

An examination of the exchange that is mailart will throw further light on the value of mailart. Although the practice of mailart can be seen in terms of a complex system of gift exchanges, this is one that differs fundamentally from Marcel Mauss's view of gift exchange as 'Potlach' or institutionalised gift exchange whereby there is an accrued debt that gives social solidarity and can be paid-off, thereby terminating a relationship.23 Although the mailart network can be seen as the 'owner', the public distributor of the goods (the mailartwork) - in that whatever is sent is prey to the whim of the recipient to do whatever s/he likes with it including releasing it into the network once more - there is no perceived debt, unlike in 'Potlach,' not least because the mailartist is invisible, is simply an address, and therefore if s/he wishes to be so, anonymous. Similarly the 'Potlach' termination of a relationship because of paying-off a debt is not applicable, not just because there need be no perceived debt, but also because the relationship continues if there is sufficient incentive: in gift exchange terms, another transaction begins. it is important also to note that the nature of the gift, is not one that can easily be assessed, in that the value is measured in terms of the quality of the relationship itself, rather than the value of an object received. In mailart, there is no hierarchy of objects except in personal preference, given that it is not appropriate to evaluate the tangible product that is sent and received in mailart - because there is none that is to be valued - it is helpful to examine the way in which the informal system of exchange operates within the mailart network. The importance of the exchange is not the tangible and apparent gift, but something much more meaningful, if

intangible. Exchange suggests that you value the gift
that you will receive more than the one that you are
giving, or that the gifts in themselves are unimportant
and that it is the exchange itself which is valued. In
gift exchange, there is a giver and receiver but in
mailart the networker often sends to an unknown
recipient in the belief that s/he exists, is still
living at the given address and will receive and thus
appreciate the gift. This principle can be extended to
the more abstract notion of despatching something to an
initial recipient with a request for her/him to send it
on to persons unspecified (and therefore possibly
unknown to the generator). This implies a belief in the
importance of networking per se as opposed to being
concerned about the importance of specific senders and
receivers. Nevertheless, the sender must still dispatch
something that is an indication of the kind of exchange
relationship that s/he would like in return if s/he is
to expect a suitable response. For the mailartist, the
risk of working under false assumptions is an accepted
gamble and sending to an unknown destination could be
said to add a certain frisson to the sending. The
sending will intrude into the life of the recipient, the
mailart will be an uninvited guest, invading the privacy
of the recipient. The decision then of the recipient to
accept the gift (rather than return or destroy it) is
essential if the exchange is to take place, and it is
essential that the motivation for the acceptance is not
based on perceived quality. This exchange of gifts
therefore is a spiritual exchange, not one of financial
or aesthetic equivalence. The old adage 'It's the
thought that counts' being particularly applicable to
mailart, although the degree of sensitivity of the
thought will inevitably have an impact, in that some
consideration of the perceived wishes, preferences,
likes and dislikes of the recipient will be bound to
impact on the degree to which the thought is
appreciated. A key difference between the gallery
exhibiting artist and the mailartist is that the
mailartist, operating on the principle of exchanging
gifts, sends (produces work) in roughly equal
proportions to the amount that s/he receives. The artist
by contrast has a one-way production, although the
reciprocal for him/her is, hopefully, financial.

Sending an unsolicited gift could imply a philanthropic
gesture but the mailartist will be trying to tempt the

recipient to reply, by the suggestion of attractive
rewards to come. S/he will only send in the hope of
receiving in return. This might be perceived to be an
arrogant gesture in that the sender assumes that the
recipient will want to receive something from that
sender. For the receiver, there is a tension between the
pleasure of receiving and the feeling of unworthiness
with an attendant concern about the ability to respond
in a suitable way. Whilst the concept of world-wide
dissemination of an individual's work and ideas through
the network can also be seen to be the arrogance of self
advertisement (taken to extremes by Cavellini) it must
be balanced by the timidity of the preference for
distance communication and a rejection of the career
building system of art marketing. In the unlikely event
of the receiver being critical of the sender, the sender
is able to console him/herself with the knowledge that
the criticism comes from a 'distant', 'never met'
person. If, on the other hand, positive response is
received, the sender can bask in the glory of the
knowledge that it comes from an international
perspective. In this way, the mailartist can work in the
confident knowledge that s/he cannot loose. The
mailartist - by addressing a single individual -
formalises the relationship, even though the recipient
is not known to the sender. This relationship is quite
different to a face to face one, even if photographs of
the sender and receiver have been exchanged, the
relationship is mediated by distance and imagination
filling-in the missing bits of information about the
sender; accent, intonation, warmth, timbre, pitch and
even at times in the absence of photographs - given
unfamiliarity with foreign names - gender. An avoidance
of formalising a relationship can be achieved by
employing Derrida's "pancarte", that is to say that by
sending out something that will be seen by everybody,
rather than an individual.24 Whilst the notion of a
postcard with no destination - one sent into the ether -
seems an impossibility, there is the precedent of
Marcello Diotallevi's 'Lettre al mittente' in which
envelopes were mailed with nonsensical, typographically
imaginative addresses: unsurprisingly, having explored
the ether (postal system) for a time, they were returned
to Diotallevi, the sender (Plate 32). More likely though
is the habit of sending many copies of an artwork to one
person in the knowledge (expectation) that s/he will
pass them on to persons unspecified (the ether). In this

case though, the rewards are limited to the sense of belonging to the amorphous network as a whole rather than through a series of one to one relationships, although the opportunity will occur for these to follow if desired.

As mailart is without any formal contract or rules, any sense of obligation - in terms of reply - is taken as the decision of the recipient (and the recipient of the recipient's reply, ad infinitum). There is nothing to prevent a recipient totally ignoring a sending, particularly as such action would most likely be met with silence rather than accusatory indignation and given that all exchanges take place through the postal system, the sender will not know whether or not the work was received. As in any gift system, before responding, it is essential that the recipient-sender considers whether s/he will be escalating the expectations of the recipient to an extent that s/he is unable or unwilling to meet, whether from restrictions of inclination, time to produce the work or funds to dispatch it, as well as the ability to retain or dispose of the accumulating receipts.

Mailart at times also operates in formal ways, for the gathering or dissemination of information and as a pressure group on any subject and for any purpose. Whilst it is perfectly possible to research a subject without an established network, mailart does nevertheless give access to some thousands of people who understand the needs of artists and are ready and willing to supply others with material to help in their research. Most notably as a pressure group, following the "torture and incarceration for many years of the Uruguayan mail artists Jorge Caraballo and Clemente Padin;"25 Geoffrey Cook, a U.S.A. mailartist, initiated a project to get mailartists to,"write letters to their governments and the Uruguayan government to influence the decision makers, and ... to win the support of individuals, organisations, and governments to intercede on behalf of the artists."26 Plate 34 indicates the involvement of the United States Senate and the success of the campaign.

Mailartist is also harnessed as a support network for people in times of trouble, not least war and oppression, and those in such situations write of the

importance to them of keeping in contact with people
from outside the area of trouble. Mailart communications
give them a sense of the caring of others beyond the
situation and an opportunity to give first hand accounts
of their experience which may be at variance with that
promoted by the media. In this sense, they can feel that
their voice is heard, that firsthand experience can be
communicated to people beyond their own geographical
situation.

By complete contrast, mailart can also operate at the
apparently superficial level of 'play'. That is to say
not necessarily on a deeply intellectual level, but
simply in the sense of giving pleasure. This can be seen
as therapy in the sense of 'executive toys' to calm the
mind. The apparent division between serious work and
play is not clear, chess for example being a game would
be referred to as 'playing' but would not imply a lack
of seriousness or intellect. In art, a number of Fluxus
works were deliberately 'play' and anti-serious - some
even using the word 'play' or 'game' in the title - as a
serious critique of the art establishment.27 By starting
the day with a smile - in response to receiving a joke
in the mail - the day begins well. Games per se can be
in the form of Add-to and Pass-ons, and as a means of
self-development in a materialistic world can provide
optimism and a hope for the future through the sheer joy
of playing in the network. A barrier to the
communication of play can of course be one of language,
however English is universally used and when there is no
language in common between two willing networkers, the
potential of visual images can be exploited to the full.
Fun can just as easily be had from visual as from
written communication.

Ecologically, mailart is often very sound indeed with
many networkers making the standard practice of
recycling envelopes, in many cases to the original
sender. Some make their own paper and many recycle all
sorts of printed ephemera. For artistic as well as
ecological reasons, a number of networkers reuse
envelopes and in some cases letters, until it is no
longer practical to do so. It could be argued that
producing so much mail is ecologically unsound, however
it uses less resources than traditional art media and
has a higher chance of being a positive power for good
in the world through its spreading of harmony. This

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perhaps rather ambitious aim is echoed by most of the
networkers who have commented on the value of mailart in
their writing, for example U.S.A. networker, Lon
Spiegelman:

"I sincerely believe that mailart activity points to a
political realisation which will have to come about if
we are to survive on this planet. It typifies the finest
points in each of the battling giants (capitalism and
communism). Shows are truly a social effort, displaying
a whole that is indeed greater than the sum of its
individually produced and free parts. It's a collage.
Like Zabbla says, 'Art is a prison.' Mailart keeps one
sane and alive and producing in a world that demands
one's time performing mundane tasks in order to pay the
bills." 28

Spiegelman sums-up what above all is the importance of
mailart: keeping the participants healthy by allowing
them, through distance relationships, to find their
place in the world.

5.7. The Future of Mailart.

The disconcerting question that remains is whether
mailart, by melding countries, contributes to the
destruction of cultures, in effect mirroring the
conquering of the world by Coca-Cola and McDonalds, thus
producing a blandness through familiarity. This is an
undeniable danger but one that is balanced by the
positive potential for countering racial and cultural
prejudice through familiarity and understanding,
generated by one to one networking.

There are three key issues in the consideration of the
future of mailart. The possibility of mailart involving
money in its transactions signals a big danger; the
development of electronic mail could change the
appearance of mailart considerably and - possibly
related to the development of electronic mail - the cost
of snail mail, already a problem for some people could
become prohibitive for the continuation of mailart.

The issue of the relationship of mailart to money has
been raised, in particular in the 1990s, with networkers
selling their zines and even curated exhibitions with

sales and the potential for networkers with archives to sell them.29 This raises two issues, the inherent compromise of the integrity of the individual in selling mailart against all the established principles and, of rather more danger, the possibility that this would result in sales to public collections, leading to public exhibitions with inevitably critical writing and therefore commodification.

The clear dictum, 'money and mailart do not mix' is questioned by many, notably veteran Canadian networker Anna Banana.30 For her, standards of production in mailart, as epitomised by her professionally produced artistamps which she prints and perforates for others as well as for herself are of paramount importance (plate 35). Understandably she charges a fee for printing and perforating artistamps, but this could well be perceived as the same as paying photocopying bills. The difference in this case is that Banana is a mailartist as well as, in effect, a photocopy shop and whereas she could combine the two without compromising the integrity of mailart, she states that mailart has to involve expense, arguing that she needs to live.

It is with artistamps that marketing is most likely to make inroads in mailart, given the well established market for commercial stamps and the visual similarity of artistamps to the commercial product. The 1989 Seattle exhibition, referred to above, at which numbered and signed editions of stamps were for sale, gave full documentation of the works as though they were limited edition printmaking, thus very clearly signalling marketing which had already been announced by calling the exhibition a 'Bourse.' Since then, philatelists have begun to take an interest in artistamps and dealers have begun to produce catalogues and approach networkers with a view to buying their work.

As mailart has no end product, logically, it cannot be possible to commodify it, however it is perfectly possible to commodify the individual elements (artistamps; artists' postcards etc.) in the same way that no-doubt many mailartists have isolated pieces that they have received by framing them on their wall. The critical point is that the object is perceived as what it is (an artistamp; artist's postcard etc.) rather than mailart, which it clearly no longer is, once removed

from its context. This becomes even clearer when considering that the word 'networking' has become a replacement word for 'mailart' and the impossibility of commodifying a postal network.

Nine years after Banana's call for the mixing of money and mailart, it still remains a rarity, with the vast majority of networkers believing that money and mailart must not mix, in order to prevent anyone being excluded from participation on financial grounds. To embrace money would be to embrace a capitalist tool that would associate mailart with an establishment from whom it wishes to distance itself and create the potential for value judgements to be made about the work sent - based on the perceived quality of the work - related to available finance for production. It is the latter concern that those who believe that it is important to mix money and mailart subscribe to because they see the 'quality' of the work related to the harnessing of expensive technology. Whilst this is completely understandable, to extend this argument to the belief in the necessity of spending money on, for example the production of a Zine, and therefore the need to recoup that investment by charging for it is to totally misunderstand the whole principles by which mailart has existed and perhaps more importantly to confuse creativity and 'quality'. It seems highly likely that the network having almost entirely rejected the mixing of money and mailart to date, will continue to do so.

If it is the sending and receiving that is of most importance in mailart, or the exchange, then Fax and E-mail must have equal status with Snail Mail. There are however reasons why they do not have equal status and therefore are unlikely to dominate. Although electronic mail is praised for its speed and efficiency, this is precisely its limitation in that it removes any sense of distance - even though in both Snail Mail and E-mail, the sender is absent - the relationship of distance and time are destroyed and with it the credence of the transaction that takes place, the awareness of that distance. The recipient might just as well be in the room next door: there would be no perceptible difference at all in the exchange. For the mailartist, the incidents of the ravages of postal systems, transport, handling and the elements all contribute to the proof of the journey that has taken place and the origin of the

dispatch. It is this journey, the distance relationship (Poinsot's "distance concept") which is the attraction for the mailartist.

Further, electronic mail lacks the physical appeal of snail mail. Much of the aesthetic is missed and, most obviously, it misses any three dimensional qualities and all those of weight, texture and subtleties of appearance. More important though is the 'presence' through handling, of the sender, in the form of traces of smell, secretions and residues, that can be experienced by the recipient. Again, this is evidence, proof, a further signature, a mark left, like an animal leaving its scent. This is analogous to the response of the mid. 19th century public to the debate of the relative status's of the portrait photograph and the portrait painting, that still holds good for today. Whilst the painting had tradition, scale and proven durability, it was subject to interpretation, the work of the artist, whereas the photograph was the 'shadow of a loved one.' The photograph exists literally as the capturing of the 'shadow' of the sitter, falling on the plate. It has been 'touched' by the sitter and is therefore a part of them. It is clear that electronic mail intervenes and interprets (like the portrait painter), it is not a direct sending, therefore missing the potential for the 'touching' sender to 'touch' the recipient.

Mailart does have its limitations, primarily the fact that it is still not available to all. For example, because of the repression of art in Turkey, it wasn't until 1995 that the first mailart show was held and there may well be other countries that would still prevent mailart shows being held.31 In some respects, mailart can be seen as a model of westernisation and communications in the world. The network extends to North and South America, Europe, the far East and Australasia but has made very few inroads into Africa, India, China and the Middle East. It seems inevitable that the situation will change fairly rapidly in China with the fast changing political situation towards a Western Capitalist manufacturing economy. Funding is a further restraint and the cost of postage in some countries can actually prevent mailartists networking as I have discussed.

5.8. Conclusion.

As to the future, the likelihood of the status of
mailart changing seems remote, the lack of critical
writing about it - significantly two years after the
death of Johnson - indicates that it is problematic for
and/or not interesting to the art historian. Apart from
Ray Johnson's contribution - relating in part to proto
Pop art - and the exploration of the postal system by
Fluxus and conceptual artists, mailart remains publicly
invisible and always anonymous. Whilst I have argued it
as Democratic Art as Social Sculpture, accepting all who
wish to participate - a Beuysian concept - it is
unlikely to receive the acclaim that Beuys achieved
because, unlike mailart, Beuys was always a producer of
objects and therefore, in spite of his theories,
remained and remains in the art historical eye.

I have argued that whilst the number of people
communicating through electronic mailart will inevitably
continue to grow, it will not replace snail mailart. The
debate about the mixing of money and mailart will
continue but will always remain an issue for a minority
of participants. Mailart will carry on evolving as it
has done over the last four decades and participants
will come and go, but mailart will continue because it
demonstrably performs a valuable role in the lives of
the many participants in many countries of the world,
keeping alive a belief in the importance of creativity
and communication for its own sake, independent of
critical response or financial gain. Mailart is the
evidence of Mauss's "collective mind" and the
reassurance that we posses more than a "tradesman
morality".

1 I go on to argue that mailart can only be seen as one
network.

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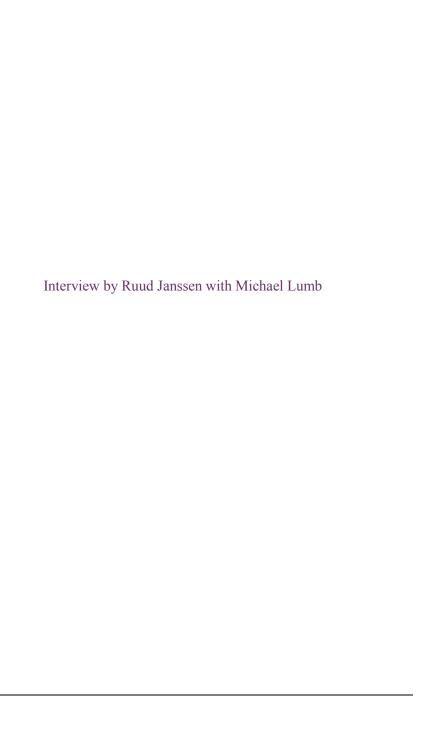
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Interview by Ruud Janssen with Michael Lumb

This interview was conducted in 1994/1995 as part of the MAIL-INTERVIEW-project. It was published online by JAs W. Felter (Canada) and in booklet-format by myself. If you want to know more about this project go to www.iuoma.org

Started on: 24-11-1994

Ruud Janssen: Welcome to this mail-interview. First let me ask you the traditional question. When did you get involved in the mail-art network?

Reply on: 02-12-1994

Michael Lumb: Hope I pass your test with my answer! It is, of course, an extract from the thesis. Tomorrow I will see my tutor & find-out whether I have to re-write everything - I sincerely hope not!!

NOTE: Michael Lumb sent the document "MAIL-ART, A Personal Introduction" as his reply. It tells about how he became involved in the Mail-Art network and describes his first projects.

RJ: A mail-interview is not a test, but if you see it like that I must say you passed perfectly with this long answer. You are now working quite some time on this thesis, and the research you are doing is the main reason why I started this interview with you. Can you tell me first the main reason why you are writing this thesis? Is it just for graduating, or is there more to it?

Reply on: 12-12-1994

ML: Thanks. Glad I passed, perhaps I see all of life as a test! Your next question is perhaps personal though I think I quite like the distance/personal/warmth relationship. My reasons are perhaps boring to mail-artists. Firstly I feel that there is no existing thorough history and current survey/assessment/critical appraisal and I wanted to write it. Secondly my institution is putting pressure on staff to improve their qualifications and this seemed to be an ideal opportunity to combine the two and get professional guidance with research methods and writing techniques. I hope eventually to get the support of my institution to publish the book & produce an exhibition of examples plus a 'teaching pack' video.

RJ: Could a thesis on mail-art be written by somebody who isn't doing mail-art, and could a thesis about mail-art be understood by somebody who isn't participating in the mail-art network?

Reply on: 23-12-94

ML: Complex. Define a thesis! - Lets take it to be a PhD (100.000 words) thesis. The simple answer to both questions must of course be yes. I must also assume that you mean a thesis of minimum 'Pass' quality. A great deal of a thesis is demonstrating the ability to produce a cogent argument. The subject matter should be written by someone with real enthusiasm for the material and this, in the case of mail art must mean a networker of some years experience. If it is 'properly' written it should easily be understood by anyone but there is no

RJ: Let's go back to mail-art. Most mail-artists know of the starting and Ray Johnson's role in this. But mail-art itself is changing over the years very rapidly. The new change is the E-

mail services. Will this new communication form take over the traditional mail and also the mail- art?

Reply on: 4-1-1995

ML: My impression is that most mail artists do not know of Ray Johnson! However, I would agree that mail art is changing and has changed. I think I would prefer to refer to mail art networking as distinct from a necessarily conceptual (and enquiring) approach to mailart.

Mail art is primarily concerned with communication. E-mail permits the fulfillment of this. It is also important that mail art should be egalitarian, E-mail is a very long way from becoming egalitarian both in its availability and its expense.

This question could perhaps also relate to the future of books, - part of the pleasure of books is being able to read them in bed, on the train, on the beach. Technology will no doubt permit this in time but it will never be able to replace the tactile quality of a book that is also a fundamental pert of the pleasure of mail art. Technology is the way forward for reference material and that also has a part to play in mail art - I would answer this by E-mail if I had access to it for example.

It has been suggested that video (in your home) will replace traditional art. I believe painting; sculpture; photography; printmaking to be dead as vehicles for original creativity. However, the event of going to a gallery still has a function if only active and social (as opposed to unhealthy couch-patato) and single screen video; computer; holography, even virtual reality can not replace the time and travel experience of a multi-media installation.

I therefore see a future that is inclusive rather than exclusive and is therefore pluralistic. The same arguments would seem to me to apply to E-mail and mail art.

As for traditional mail, one might have expected the telephone (in the future the videophone) to have replaced letter writing but again, letter writing can express things that the telephone can not; for example formality. Above all, letter writing is an art, a craft with its individual expressions. This could be carried by E-mail but the personality of the sender in terms of choice of paper, envelopes, handwriting etc. All allow expression that E-mail does not. Further, the lack of immediacy of the letter has advantages as well in terms of consideration of suitable reply. Again, the answer must be in plurality.

RJ: I must say I agree for a large part with your views. Mail art just depends on the tools (paper, pen, computer, stamps, paint, xerox-machine, etc.) the artists has at hand. What tools do you prefer the most in your mail art?

Reply on: 11-1-1995

ML: When you ask me what tools I prefer most in my mail art, I am instantly faced with a problem, because in their use I have no preference for any tools. I do not gain any pleasure at all from making art. For me the pleasure is in developing the idea and having the completed work. If I could, I would have an assistant to produce all my work to my designs. I do not however agree that mail art 'just depends on the tools' and suspect that you were being provocative in writing that. To me the medium is irrelevant, it is the content that is important. I am not clear as to the intentions of your question, it feels as though the question is about my own working habits, and the answer to that would be very long and complex indeed.

Superficially, the answer relates to my interest in the working habits of the great British writer, Anthony Burgess who wrote a fugue every morning (he had trained as a composer), I have in many ways approached mail art in the same way, as an exercise in creativity, an adjunct to my other creative work and teaching; an exercise in creativity and communication. It naturally follows that I have frequently used rubber stamps because of their immediacy, given a number of stamps that reflect my thinking and creative areas of interest. I particularly enjoy responding to projects that I have already explored as part of my own work and can respond to the request with a photocopy or copy from an edition of a work produced by me at an earlier time. Whatever, I certainly do not recognize a higherarcy of materials or techniques, it is the level of communication that is important.

RJ: This level of communication is an interesting thing. Communication means that there is an interaction, in this case between the artists. Could you tell what you see as 'levels' in this communication, and is it that some levels have certain consequences for you? Can it become more than 'an exercise in creativity and communication' as you call it?

Reply on: 25-01-1995

ML: For me interaction is of paramount importance. Networking frequently is much more than an exercise, but identification of precisely what it is, is very subjective. The levels of communication refer to the degree to which two people are communicating anything meaningful to one another and ultimately, as you imply the affect that that communication may have on the life of one or both of them. It would be possible to list all the ways in which mail art may give that value added something. This will differ for different people at different times in different places and different

situations. Primarily, it must be the global importance of peoples understanding each other more. The importance to the individual is in realizing that she or he is not alone in this world of fears, worries, trials and tribulations. There is no hierarchy of medium, technique or image, purely the way in which the communicated affects the receiver, and this might even dispense with mail art per se and simply be a very personal letter but remains mail art networking because the communication is within the context of the mail art network. This communication does not have to be personal however; the anonymous pass-on may bring humor, warmth or optimism to the receiver at a critical moment and so becomes effective.

RJ: This diversity in mail art is probably the most interesting aspect of it. Sometimes mail-artists go in a specific direction after 'doing the net' for a while. Others become addicted to this diversity. How is this for you?

Reply on: 4-2-1995

ML: I am not aware of a direction that is affected by the Network and certainly no deliberate decisions. I do however have certain parameters, specifically that I am not in a position to spend much money on mail art and certainly am not in favor of any mail art that asks for money. I do not have much free time and so am not able at the moment to join any project that requires multiple copies.

I enjoy a variety of relationships with different networkers; those who make no pretence at producing mail art any more and simply send letters, those who are in very difficult times (e.g. Bosnia); those with whom I exchange a range of work, (bookarts, postcards, artistamps); those who send lively mail with projects that I can reply to fairly instantly and mostly those with whom I feel a spiritual affinity. I somehow feel that

there is an essence to your question that I am missing, something implied about contacts that I am not understanding.

RJ: For me mail art brings new ideas, new contacts, not only 15 years ago, but still today. In a way I am addicted to this diversity that mail art brings. The essence is that this diversity now fits perfectly in my life and for some mail-artists 'doing mail-art' is just a part of their work. So to put the question more precise, has mail-art infiltrated in your life or is it a separate part?

Reply on: 9-2-1995

ML: This is a frighteningly complex and personal question but I will endeavour to answer it. Firstly, I am not at all sure about addictions, in some senses I do become addicted to things but on the other hand I can just as easily reject them and never look back, so I don't really know. I have no plans to stop networking. I am not sure whether addiction implies enjoyment and I am not really sure, if I am honest, what I enjoy and don't enjoy or why I do things. As an example, for about twenty years or more I drank alcohol every single day but three years or so ago I had an enlarged liver and so stopped for a month and now only drink at weekends (normally) but I am aware of trying to find some sort of reward from the alcohol. Perhaps it is like this with mail art, in that I am trying to find some sort of reward. I am a perfectionist and so consequently despise most things that I do and am disappointed by a great deal of that that I see.

To the second part of your question, whilst I am wary of frustrating you, I am not sure that I understand the question. In the sense that you have used it, I am not sure that I know what life is. Every morning, mail art is part of my routine before I go to work and when I return home if I haven't finished

everything in the morning. There was a time, when my children were little that I quite literally involved my family in the production of my work, for instance, on a family Sunday walk, we would take my portable white canes and search for a suitable installation place in which to photograph them. But, perhaps this was egocentric. It feels as though the answer, or at least in part lies in my answer to your question about working practices. Attempting another tack, I do sometimes wonder, as a loner and with no one to share my art or interests with whether mail art is not my salvation and that without it I might go mad. I am a Nihilist and so it is difficult to find purpose and as an idealist, all to easy to destroy any proffered proof of purpose or value in life, but perhaps it could be said that mail art keeps me going. What is perhaps difficult for me is to sort out the truth in terms of the reality that I do enjoy some things, and certainly enjoy some mail art that I receive, but have very high ideals and so it is easy to objectively question a lot of the things that give me pleasure. Perhaps one of the advantages of mail art is that you can just get on with it and not think. Whilst I claim to be a Nihilist, I do nevertheless have a very strong need for spirituality, (one of the things that I loved about Poland) and abhor Capitalist Materialism, it is difficult to be optimistic in these times.

I have not commented on your point about new contacts; for me it is my link with other human beings and I suppose for that reason alone, is very important to me but it also feeds my idealism, in that there is always new hope with new networkers to postally-meet.

I am avoiding the temptation to sum up this response, in a sense it shouldn't be because my answer must be complicate and even difficult and contradictorary.

RJ: Strangely enough the answer fits perfectly to the question, in lots of ways. But lets focus again on the history of mail-art. On your envelope the rubberstamps "40 years of -55-95- mail art" and "Ray Johnson 1927-1995" are mixed together. Do you have any predictions to what will happen to the mail-art network now Ray Johnson has died?

Reply on: 1-3-1995

ML: I don't really do predictions! However, it does seem to me difficult to imagine what could bring about an end to mail art, now that it has lasted four decades. A possibility of course is that the cost of postage could rise to such an extent that it becomes totally unviable, this seems highly unlikely to me though as I have faith in the need for people to send postcards home when they are on holiday and to send greetings cards. If the cost of postage were to prohibit this, it would also impact on the very lucrative and thriving Greetings Cards industry and this seems unlikely. Furthermore, whilst I am aware that in countries such as Estonia, networkers have already had drastically to reduce their mail art activity because of escalating postal costs, it also seems likely that as the tide of capitalism catches up with them, so also will the Greetings Card industry and a subsequent fall in the cost of postage. We have already debated the possible impact of technology on the future of mail art and to me it would seem that communication of the sort that mail art provides fulfills a basic need in people that in whatever way the world develops will never go away.

RJ: If everybody has a need for communication (which I think is true) then only a few of all people on earth have chosen the mail-art way. Who becomes a mail-artist? Is it all 'pure chance' that one stumbles on the network? If that is so, will the effect of the INTERNET on mail-art be that the mail-art network will grow even more. What do you think?

ML: Gosh, what a question. This seems to require an exploration of one's own personal faith rather than a belief about mail art. To a degree, those who find-out about mail art do so through chance but maybe there is a wider controlling force than just chance, I just don't know. Of course many people are aware of mail art but choose not to explore it. Of these no doubt some make the wrong decision for them in that they would enjoy it if they did pursue it. Is there something about the kind of person who is responsive to learning about things like mail art?- again I am unsure but it seems possible. Is the mailartist a type of person? If so I would like to identify that type for my thesis, although I am arguing that there is not a typical mailartist.

As for the expansion of the network through INTERNET, it seems highly likely, if only because any new chain of information must increase the numbers from a logical point of view. However, it would be useful in considering this question to be able to assess the affect of for example the mail art column in Artists Newsletter in Britain on the number of mailartists and to predict the rise of the INTERNET and the public that it will reach and by when. So, to summarize, the short answer is yes. A longer debate, based on research that would seem to be impossibly difficult given the nature of the mail art network would however be more interesting.

RJ: Even for two mail-artists is sometimes seems to be difficult to talk about the mail art network and what it is in their eyes. Did you succeed in explaining to your tutor what mail art is all about?

Reply on: 20-3-1995

ML: She hasn't asked me! That in itself is interesting because it suggests that people think they know what mail art is, but we networkers know that it is a very complex thing and one that evolves in ones understanding as one becomes more and more involved with an ever wider network. From the point of view of my thesis, she will judge me on the cogency of my argument so that she will assess whether I appear to have logically and thoroughly described mail art however, as she doesn't know what mail art is, she can only judge the cogency, not the accuracy of my description, always assuming that there is such a thing.

RJ: Well, I must say I am becoming more and more curious about the complete thesis, especially the part in which you will write about the years 1980 and lateron. The books I have seen so far show me obviously that the writers always are writing about their own network, and that every mail-artist has his/her own network in mail-art. Therefore every story will be different and only by knowing lots of stories one can find a common basis that is making us do this mail-art. In my eyes all mail- artists have something special that they are looking for which they can't find in their surroundings. Is this true? If so, what are you looking for?

Reply on: 3-5-1995

ML: Your question suggests others, for instance, how am I going to ensure that I do not simply write a personal account of mail art? Of course I cannot be sure but I will not be setting out to write the 'story' of mail art, rather to identify what it is, where it has come from and how it has evolved. From my vast bibliography, I feel as sure as possible that I will not simply tell my own story.

As for what I am looking for in mail art, I think it relates to my next performance, 'An Attempt At Survival In Alien Circumstances Too'. I think we are in alien circumstances and I am particularly aware, having just returned from New York, that there is a whole world 'out there' and I want to be a part of it. So, I want to try and survive and for that I need to communicate, I want to try and make sense of the world and I want to participate and have some fun. I want there to be serendipity in my life. Mail art seems to me to be the best way to satisfy all those needs especially as it is all things to all men.

RJ: We haven't discussed your performances yet. Could you describe what they are sometimes like?

Reply on: 12-5-1995

ML: I haven't written about them before so I find the question interesting but one that could result in an extremely long essay if I am not careful. The background interests me in that my Mother was a dancer, my paternal Grandfather a priest and my Father a teacher: all what could be perceived to be performance professions. My early thoughts were of being an actor but I changed and did a degree in theatrical design. I then spent five years in television, giving it up to start an arts center. Throughout this time I continued to produce my own work and realized that fine art was what I should be doing full-time as far as was possible. In May 1968 I wrote my first performance pieces, "The Darkness Concert" these involved dance, music, silence and a cat, as yet they are unperformed. The major part of my work at that time centered around experimental painting but in the early seventies changed to a much more social form of art that took the artist (me) out of the studio and involved other people going about their daily lives and no longer involved paint.

In 1991 I began a series of photoworks using my own body to explore issues that whilst specific to me, I felt had universal application. In the mail art network I produced the work Madonna and Child, asking networkers to send me a Madonna and Child in return I sent it back with my face superimposed on that of the child as well as photo-copies of those that others had sent me and full documentation of the project. I did not explain that the purpose was for me to try and experience what it would have been like to have been cuddled as a child.

In 1993 I made my first visit to Poznan, Poland where I had two wonderful weeks with no responsibilities at the Summer Academy and produced my first performance video (I had previously produced my first video artwork in 1983) this was a harrowing piece entitled, 'Rebirth' which was an improvised work where by I methodically removed my clothes, laboriously folding them and then, in the foetal position, tied myself up with string until I was in considerable pain, I then released myself, rubber-stamping my forehead with the word 'Rebirth'. The following year (1994) I returned to Poznan as a visiting professor and made the video-performance work 'Pathway'. In this I tied chairs to my leg until I was unable to proceed and fell over, finally collapsing under the weight. This work made use of English language in that I tied the chairs to me and that related to family ties, however it is important to state that I deliberately returned to pickup extra chairs, indicating that the ties were of my own volition.

In the winter of 1994 I made a performance in Ipswich, entitled 'Ambition', this was intended to be an 8 hour performance but because of technical problems (the threat of a severed central heating pipe) I had to abandon it after 5 hours. This work consisted of my attempt to produce a construction out of string that would enable me to reach the ceiling. (I was not permitted to make a rope ladder). During this I engaged in

debate with the visitors to the performance about the nature of ambition and the pitfalls.

In May 1995 I made my latest performance, this was of 8 hours duration, with no breaks, and consisted of me dressed in black and white with a bowl of water and a bowl of flour, making paste and tearing images out of a vast pile of newspapers and sorting them out into categories and pasting them to the wall, using nothing but my hands. The work, making reference to the important English performance artist, Stuart Brisley, was entitled, 'An attempt at Survival in Alien Circumstances Too.' At the end of the performance, I scattered the remaining flour and water on the large residue of newspapers and emptied the dregs over my head, falling prone over the papers. Throughout the performance I talked in a fairly low volume about the images but communicated with no one.

My next, projected, performance is to be entitled, 'Pressing Engagement' and will consist of me wedged between a column of newspapers and a beam in the roof of the gallery, 10m up in the gallery for two hours, apparently naked. There will be no dialogue.

I did not plan to move into performance but it feels right at the moment, I can't predict the future but it certainly solves the problem of the marketable commodity in a market that I have serious concerns about.

RJ: In the beginning of the interview you said "I see all of life as a test". Is a performance a kind of test for you?

Reply on 22-5-1995 (disk)

ML: Gosh, what a thought, the answer, spontaneously is yes, but also about survival, clearly, by the fact that I still exist, I am a survivor. Fundamentally, I believe that art must communicate, that is why mail art is so wonderful, in that there is guaranteed communication, and I want to share my experiences with other people, hopefully, if they can identify with any of my pain, they might realize that they are not alone. This appears to be moving off the point of your question, I must ask myself, what are the tests that I am setting myself?

To begin with, undertaking a performance is a test in itself. For me everything that I do is judged (not least by my own harsh standards that always finds everything wanting) but also by those outside. So often with a preview people comment on the wine, ask after your family but never comment on the work. It is really good in the network when you receive feedback on something that you have sent, for example I was extremely nervous about my 'birth canal stamps', I was worried that they would be misinterpreted as being pornographic but felt that I had to make them. The feedback was the most positive I have ever received from the most number of people who happened to be predominently women.

'Rebirth' was a very difficult piece, being naked, although there was no 'full frontal' as the work was not about that, but especially revealing so much of my inner self and then sharing the video-performance afterwards in a very public way. My first eight hour piece, 'Ambition' (which was abandoned for technical reasons after 5 hours) was very much about endurance but nothing compared with my latest eight hour work '...Alien...' which did last for eight hours with no break at all and involved no communication at all.

About eight years ago, I explored a series of drawings which consisted of covering the surface of the drawing paper with

candle wax and attempting to draw with a hard pencil which would not take on the wax. I also attempted to draw difficult technical shapes free hand, intuitively. I do seem often to need to make things difficult, partly the Protestant Work Ethic which I was very much brought-up with but it is also as though it can't be taken seriously unless it has involved considerable struggle. No pain, no gain. Maybe I need to convince myself that I am serious and that my work (I?) am worthwhile. This question has I am afraid resulted in a very egocentric answer.

RJ: Well, your answers are certainly worthwhile. I guess it is time now to end this interview unless there is something I forgot to ask you?

Reply on 28-05-1995

ML: Thank you for your kind comments. I have found the interview very interesting and quite revealing, enabling me to consider a number of personal issues.

RJ: Thank you for the interview and good luck with your thesis!

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