

MAIL ART VS. E-MAIL: A Personal Inquiry

Recently I picked up Chuck Welch's *Networking Currents* again, an excellent book that draws a vivid picture of Mail Art in the mid-eighties by presenting a number of questions and issues. But, I realized, answers to these questions were never found, great expectations left unredeemed. In fact, an awful lot of people who were actively involved with Mail Art at that time have left the Net, some of them (whom I befriended through non-traditional Mail Art channels) rather disillusioned. The Net is a living, breathing entity. It changes all the time. People come and go, the fucking Tao at work. But what way are we heading? Change is going fast. For example, four years ago when I went slack, it was all Congress-talk. Now that I'm back I hardly recognize the picture. These observations (that Netland mutates—that great artists who promoted Mail Art as the New Cultural Strategy left the scene disappointed) brought the idea that everything moves on and communication, not only the means but ultimately the essence of it, changes as well. Whether we like it or not, we have to go along.

Communication has always been the goal of Mail Art. Postcards and stamps were a means to, not the aim itself. Why the mails? The universal postal network was the most interesting. Post is everywhere, relatively inexpensive and provides easy access to everybody interested in participating. See your personal Mail Art History book. However,, the (post)cards are shifted with the recently E-mail evolution. Once dealt with the initial (and considerable) investment of hardware, the networker can reach a mass of people (practically)anywhere on the globe. Costs are lower and it goes at lightning speed, which cannot be said of the traditional mail system. Is there a future for Mail Art as we know (knew)it? Question 1. Question 2. I am not on-line. This is no matter of being anti-this or pro-that. I even don't have a phone. It's a matter of priorities. The money I save this way I can spend on something else. But does that doom me to function in a second-rate network where a new generation of Mail Artists stamps and mails cards without realizing what these were used for? I'm not saying Mail Art today is second-rate compared to the hot hype of Internet. But these are my questions: What future is there for Mail Art, apart from the prominent nostalgia factor and how can e-mail absorb the democratic and social aspects of Mail Art? My friend Guy Bleus wrote that the more the communication media evolve, the smaller the distance between communicators becomes. In theory, he writes, this means that this distance will end on one point that is located between Somewhere and Nowhere. Am I Nowhere, together with the unwilling, the unable and the Third World?

These are old Mail Art issues. But the situation is changing rapidly. Two years ago everybody in the States was on-line while we in Europe didn't even know what was going to happen. Besides, there is a need for a critical attitude toward e-mail. Everyday information about/from Cyberia is blasted our way. The media are uniform in their hype and lack of criticism about the phenomenon and if even the rulers (both economic and political)present the mirror of Freedom to the masses, there must be a catch somewhere. Has Mail Art considered this aspect of the new Commedia?

These are some thoughts/inquiries. We all want to break those chains and rattle those cages, get in touch with people, share information and learn. Communication is our concern. There are promising things about the future (the past euphoria of "It will be better" is replaced with more sober "It can be better, but only if we work on it and make it worthwhile") and all too often Mail Art is too much of an insider's joke anyway. What are your experiences/thought/feelings about all the above or related subjects? Is there hope for a New Cultural Strategy or should there be? This is not a traditional Mail Art project but your reaction will be appreciated and documented in some way.

Send your comments (text only) about the Future of Mail Art to Kristof Debris, 24 rue de la Buanderie, 1000 Brussels, Belgium. Deadline: 23 December 1996.

