

# LETTERS TO Umbrella

I am rather surprised to read in *Umbrella*, one of the very few art magazines that speak of Mail Art regularly and without superficiality or hypocrisy the short essay titled *Mail Art is not Correspondence Art* by Robert C. Morgan. First of all, because the essay that is very well written and full of interesting remarks would have made much more sense if Mr. Morgan had documented himself a little about Mail Art history. Every regular mail artist will find the distinction of Mail Art and Correspondence Art made by Morgan completely useless unless, like him, he considers Mail Art just a matter of invitation-show-catalog routine. But I doubt there exists a single mail artist that limits his activity to exhibitions, especially in Europe where they are not so common and well advertised as in the United States.

A mail artist regular does what Morgan calls "Correspondence Art", that is exchanging on a one-to-one basis with a more or less limited amount of individuals. Of course, there is a way for all kinds of different relationships, emotional, informative, humorous, continuous, fragmented, boring, puzzling, breathtaking. . . This kind of intimate exchange is much more satisfying than the "anonymity" of exhibitions, which remain a usual context to document the phenomenon of Mail Art to a large audience. So all the remarks by Mr. Morgan on Correspondence Art are equally true to each mail artist that tries it every day, and to a lot of people that is exchanging creative works and information without having ever heard of "Mail Art."

Beside agreeing on what we wish to consider Mail Art or not, I think that this has already evolved into a complex network that defies any attempt to being merely an aesthetic analysis; therefore the term "Mail Art" is no longer valid, as the game is being played now in different media and with diversified aims. We exchange and exhibit not just visual works, but poetry, audiocassettes, information, magazines, actual letters; there is no such thing as "Canvas Art" and "Pasteboard Art", so why bother with "Correspondence Art"? The "Eternal Network" grew *spontaneously* into the international movement it is now, and the term *Mail Art* was spontaneously and collectively selected by thousands of mail artists as the more common and more adaptable label in circulation. What twenty years of correspondence among artists proved is a very simple and important issue: that *planetary cooperation is possible*, without mediators and censorship, without competition, without problems of language and borders, without officials and armies, without juries and mega-fund sponsors. Painters, poets, filmmakers, musicians, writers, dancers, as a varied sample of the population of planet Earth proved that it was possible to work together, to help each other on all sorts of particular projects. It was a collective urge for positive action that made possible the idea of Mail Art and carried it to the mammoth proportions of today. Mail Art is no longer an underground phenomenon; exhibitions are being held everyday in more "official" environments; lessons and lectures take place in schools and universities. But as this process of "historification" follows its natural course, we must realize that the postal system was just the most obvious medium to establish contact. The telematic world requires more direct and diversified action:

the term "Mail Art" will become old-fashioned and obsolete in ten years, but we may still keep it as a useful reference germ, feeling free to drop it anytime.

The problem posed by many art critics and mail artists themselves regarding "good" and "junk" Mail Art is another false problem, as what is important here is the activation of a *new cultural strategy*; the network is open virtually to everybody (this takes the form of audience participation of the 60s/70s to a radical development), what Alvin Toffler calls "prosumers" (producers + consumers) are in direct link with each other, sharing information and experiences. The "global village" was only theorized too early by McLuhan. The place of the artist in the 20th century shifts from the ivory tower to the everyday data bank: radical changes in the way mass media affect the collective imagination call for similar changes in the tactics of cultural activities. Contamination of genres and techniques is no more a field for elitist research but an obvious common ground genetically shared by the younger generations. What to the old-fashioned mind seems an inextricable paradox is just a practical example for the flexible mind. Mail Art is neither High Culture nor Popular Culture; it is a new breed. To understand this is to tune in with the non-dogmatism of all network-based projects.

There is room within Mail Art for the ephemeral "junk" sheet of printed trash and for the valuable hand-painted watercolor: if we want to document the phenomenon of mail art as a whole, we must understand and take into account both. Then the network is *free* of written rules, and you are free to charge \$1 million admission to your show or throw away all that you receive, or invite and answer only those people you wish to. There is no bible of Mail Art and while I write, no full-length studies have been published, although there have been rumors for years of books being prepared on the subject. I just hope that the whole movement will not be easily labelled and discarded as just another trend; the rubberstamps and stamps are just one facet of a complex activity that *is not art* after all; it is a network structure, a medium through which all kinds of communications are exchanged.

Although Mail Art is alive and well and expanding, there is a general tendency in many shows and projects to call for an *end to Mail Art*, or to make a show *about* Mail Art rather than *of* Mail Art. While longtime mail artists are beginning to meet in person and think of taking steps further on the path opened by the network activities, this may be a sign that something is changing. Out of the thousands of correspondents arises a collective need to redefine the network's aims and tactics, to turn the more deleterious stereotypes of Mail Art into humorous jokes, to elude again the classification and the mummification.

I am sorry for this long and partly disjointed letter. I hope that *Umbrella* will receive other better crafted articles on the subject of Mail Art. It is about time that somebody writes them and somebody prints them!

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