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## THE MAIL ART COMMUNITY IN EUROPE: a firsthand view

*Editor's note:* Ginny Lloyd last July began a trek through the United States and Europe. First in Cleveland, she produced artwork and lectured on copy art, under the auspices of the Image Resource Center. Then in New York City, she met other mail artists and collaborated with them on some film and audio works, but the goal was Europe, which she visited for the next three months. The following is her report for *Umbrella*.

### ENGLAND

I stayed with Bill and Dorothy Wells in London. Dorothy had organized and shown a mail art exhibit in 1981 and had also spent several months in Los Angeles. She is best known in the mail art network for her color Xerox postcards, either sewn or pinned and collaged. Bill was working on pieces for his next paper show and inspired me to make several of my own, something I had not done for several years.

I then bussed up to Leeds to visit Michael Scott, whose wit, information on the network, art and sense of play were a non-stop delight. He even went on a jog with me one evening. His inventiveness with words, rubber stamps and images are always welcome in his mail art. Just seeing his bathroom door decorated with Players cards is worth the long bus ride.

Heading west, I then visited Hay-on-Wye, Wales, the town with the largest bookstore in the world. In fact, the whole town is one big bookstore. If you are a collector of books and like to pour over stacks and stacks, this is the place for you. This also happened to be the area my father's ancestors lived, making my presence here doubly important.

### HOLLAND

I had been advised that I would love Amsterdam and my informant was on target. Ulises Carrion of Other Books and So Archive and Aart van Barneveld of the now closed Stempelplaats were my gracious hosts, while I worked on various projects at both spaces. During my evening breaks, I met with Claudio Goulart, Flavio, Maya and Ronald Wegman, all participants in the mail art network.

The collection at Stempelplaats was unbelievable to see: rubber stamps from all over the world, some carved by artists whose names I recognized, the artists' rubber stamp books and the published catalogues of the exhibitions held in the gallery made the October closing of this space a great loss. At the Other Books & So Archive, I was able to pour over files and files of catalogued documentation of artists' activities, artists' books, mail art, sound tapes and magazines. After days of visual overload, I realized it would be impossi-



AART VAN BARNEVELD, Stempelplaats, Amsterdam

ble for me to see everything. I did more research on my return to Amsterdam, but did not completely go through every file that interested me.

Amsterdam is full of artists who are respected workers, making valuable contributions to society. I found the Dutch very responsive and interested in the lectures, demonstrations and information I was presenting. They wanted to know about art in the United States, especially on the West Coast. Most had been exposed to artwork from New York (I found this to be generally true throughout Europe) and were very curious about me as well.

While in Maastricht, I visited V.E.C. headquarters and Rod Summers. Rod has compiled an extensive audio art exchange project, working closely with Tom Winter. The audio exchange archives provided much to listen to and his creative management of the material was exciting to share. The archives on mail art and years of correspondence with artists all over the world was well cataloged. His record keeping is impeccable. I was able to work on some audio with Rod, Tom, Bass (another VEC assistant) and Lizbett (Rod's wife). Their approach to audio was both educational and certainly stretched my audio perceptions. Rod is also an excellent writer and shared with me several of his published pieces. His ability to weave a story is fascinating and will hold your attention for hours.

## GERMANY

Off to Kassel, West Germany, the second country where the native language was not English. Not speaking any other language fluently other than my own version of English, knowing only rudimentary French and Spanish, I was beginning to experience culture shock more than ever. It started in England built up in Amsterdam, where the average Dutch citizen speaks several languages fluently. Throughout my tour, I used my wits, intuition and nose to get around. I became adept at being able to spot someone who would be able to understand at least a little English, from a distance.

In Kassel, I lived and worked on projects at Kunoldstrasse 34, run by **Jurgen Olbrich**. Kunoldstrasse 34 is a unique space in that many projects utilizing the building and surrounding area are installations that artists actually live with. Jurgen seems to have never-ending energy, creating the most wonderful experimental Xerox books I have ever seen, many one-of-a-kind. He has an extensive archive and collection documenting projects held in the art/living space, as well as archives of mail art and correspondence projects.

Travelling from Kassel to Berlin through East Germany was very interesting. I have never been so close to the Communism I had been taught to fear and loathe. You can see where capitalism ends at the border, feeling the tension level rise among the passengers on the train. Basic tourist behavior is certainly not tolerated here. And you are promptly reminded by your compartment companions not to pull out the camera for snapshots. I know I could never live there. The restrictions on movement would not work well with my basic nature. I was very glad to arrive in Berlin.

Berlin seemed, upon first impression, like the European New York. The American influence is everywhere with a curious mixture of buildings that have never been restored after the war, traffic rushing through the streets and an overall gloom and dismal grayness that is ever-present. The city is throbbing with excitement every moment of the day and night. A continual center of political activity, Berlin on the same day had a demonstration against the Haig visit and a demonstration in support of the squatters.

My introduction to Berlin was with a friend, Doris "Boris" Berman, whose "photo actions" should not be missed if you ever have the opportunity to participate or attend one. She acted as an excellent and invaluable translator for my excursions and adventures in this exciting city. It was here in Berlin that the phrase "it is a small world" came to life when I ran into a good friend from San Francisco on the U-bahn one evening.

Political activists are serious here. The front line between the Russian and U.S. military might is personified in the existence of the Berlin Wall. The best graffiti in the world can be seen on the Wall. Artists are continually transforming the messages and slogans, while many original works of art are painted directly onto the wall. Some of the most curious train rides I have ever had on a subway system were on the S-bahn, the East Berlin subway system. Taking the train to the East Berlin sector and transferring back to the West Berlin sector can provide a peek into the life across the wall.

For me, the direction in my artwork and the German aesthetic values overlap quite frequently. There is a very healthy

interest in correspondence art, performance art, Xerox, video, bookworks, and anything that is new and American. The best music in the world can be heard everywhere here. It was with relief that I heard the newest German rock music and tasted their fine beer.

In Frankfurt, I had the best experience in any bar in Europe. Here, there was a cave lit by candles, in a huge communal room with long wooden tables. Everyone sat together at the tables enjoying an experience much like a Viking tribe. I happened to be in Frankfurt for the Buchmesse, the annual book and publishing fair that is impeccably organized and managed.

The fair is primarily a trade fare with publishers from all over the world represented. The most exciting part for me was the section that housed the artists' books and publications. Business was the primary activity of the week, and artists' publishers and artists' presses had an opportunity to meet with each other and view each others' wares. There were many social activities and lectures on artists' books held during that week at the university. Richard Kostelanetz was on hand to present the works he has developed during a German government-sponsored grant, the DAAD. Annabelle Levitt (Tod Jorgensen's store is located at her store front on Mott Street), was assisting **John Armleder** of Ecart Books. I later visited them and the Von Furstenbergs briefly in Geneva, Switzerland. Ecart Books have many hard-to-find publications. The artist or collector searching for a particular issue or title should write to them at c.p. 253, Geneva.

While in Frankfurt, I had the opportunity to visit the studio of artists working with copy art. Hermann Hess and Bernard Maurer collaborate on paintings derived from originals made on a copy machine. I also saw the best Polaroid works I have ever seen at their studio.

In Stuttgart, **Angelika Schmidt** was collecting the artwork for her upcoming photobooth issue of Common Press. I had the opportunity to get a sneak preview when I visited her. It should be another excellent book by Angelika. She has been a participant in the mail art network for several years now, and she has a very organized archive and record of this activity. All during my tour I was impressed by the collections and care the artists shared in keeping their archives. Hans Sohm and I had a chance to meet briefly, and he provided many insights from the perspective of a collector. He has what is considered to be the most extensive collection of Fluxus materials.

A great surprise was meeting up with **Henryk Gajewski** of Warsaw. We had tried to connect in three countries and had missed each other. Neither of us knew we would be in Stuttgart during this time. Henryk was lecturing and presenting his film of Polish Punk Rock and his tapes of Chinese Punk Rock music. A warm and fun-loving man, I pray he is all right after the recent political unrest in Poland.

I did visit East Berlin briefly with **Ruth and Robert Rehfeldt**. They too have an extensive archive and pulled out works and names that were new for me. They were very gracious hosts and were glad to have news about friends and events in the West. While I was there, we did a short performance together and documented this event while making lots of laughter and noise. It was quite an ordeal getting into East Berlin and fortunately it was smooth sailing coming out. Ruth and Robert appreciate the correspondence they receive



**RUTH & ROBERT REHFELDT with GINNY LLOYD, East Berlin** from their friends in the West. It is a vital link between them and the rest of the world. It was with this meeting that I saw in action how powerful this network is and can be in all of our lives. Mail art can make a difference.

#### FRANCE

With regret I left Berlin for Paris. Paris seems like the largest outdoor museum in the world. Now I can understand why during World War II everyone who had experienced Paris wanted to save Paris from the effects of the war. The French have an elegance and style that is not matched anywhere. The food is a sensual treat for your taste-buds.

I did have a chance to attend the opening of the FIAC, the French contemporary art exhibition that is an annual event. I was generally disappointed in what I saw. All over Europe it was known that the best contemporary art is being made in the United States. The consensus of opinion was that our artwork in progress is the most innovative and most advanced in the world.

Lillian Vincy of the Lara Vincy Gallery was extremely supportive and helpful while I was in Paris. Her gallery is the most interesting of all of the galleries I visited there. She is very interested and knowledgeable about what is taking place in the French mail art network, as well as in correspondence art in general. I visited several artists in Lyon, a very active area for artists involved with contemporary art. I was treated there, as everywhere, like royalty. A guest of the Art Adventure space, *Lieux de Relations*, run by Aubanel and Christian Van der Borght, I was introduced to the art community in Lyon. Working in performance, video, copy art, photography and installations, the artists had an excitement around them that is not present in Paris. Lyon does not have the years of tradition and art history that Paris has, making it easier to break new ground. While in France and Germany, I had the opportunity to spend time with one of the most prolific writers on contemporary art that is working in France today, Michel Giroud. He recently was involved with a new book about French and German Dada movements in the 20s and 30s. A very knowledgeable man who is known by just about everyone I met, he is a wealth of information on the subject of contemporary art in Europe today.

#### ITALY

My first impression of Italy when I stepped off the train was that Fellini was not so much a genius, as a documentarian of the Italian way of life. I felt I was living in the "film" while in Italy. I had hoped to meet Plinio Mesculam and see the Mohammed archive, but I was disappointed to hear he had to go to Rome on business.

Vittore Baroni offered to be my translator during my visit in Italy, and was absolutely charming. He invited me to travel to Arte Studio in Ponte Nossa, Bergamo, to do a performance and to stay with Emilio and Franca Morandi. Arte Studio is located in a village in the mountains and is home to some of the most friendly people I have ever met. Bass, of VEC in Maastricht, was there for a week as artist-in-residence and was presenting a project and performance with Baroni. We all trekked into Bergamo to view an exhibit of experimental works in an old church. It was so refreshing to be able to walk into an art show and be able to touch, walk on and be a participant in the art exhibits, along with the fascination of the building itself.

On the way back to Forte dei Marmi, Vittore and I stopped to spend a few days with Cavellini, where we again did a performance. Cavellini showed us his extensive archives of mail he has received from so many artists. I believe he has the largest mail art mailing list of anyone. He also has an extensive collection of Pop Art artists. And he let us pour over the immense collection of his original pieces. His books do not do justice to his own original works. They are fabulous! His home is beautiful and is a treasure for the lover of carved wood. He has become more serious since the last time I saw him in California, asking about specific artists he had met during Inter-Dada 80 and of their activities. Ken Damy showed the film *Cavellini in California* to me, and we reminisced about old times.

#### POLAND

I entered Poland on a Leningrad-bound train, full of Polish people who had been in the west and were returning. I was the only American and became a bit of a sideshow for those who had never seen a real live American before. Most were returning because of the rising political tension and bringing all of the items they could afford and carry. There were decreasing amounts of food, laundry detergent, good tobacco, coffee, etc. You were considered rich if you had Western possessions and clothes. My friends had to rise in the morning in order to stand in line at 5 a.m. just to get a meager hunk of bread or radishes or apples. What I could not understand was the presence of a beautiful, rich land and the fat cows with the meager diet provided by the government. The Russians were apparently taking the best of the products for themselves. Solidaridad was voting on the latest offer made by the government and Gdansk was blocked in many sectors to prevent sightseers and supporters from entering the union grounds. The weather was warmer than I had expected, and Pawel Petasz took me on an outing to see the Baltic Sea, enjoy Polish pizza and beer, and to photograph the downtown area of Gdansk. He predicted, as well as his comrades, that the opportunity for me to visit Poland was going to cease any day now, but I would have some valuable docu-

mentation of the city, lifestyle and political mood. Lack of money was not a problem for the average Pole. Having something to spend it on was *the* problem. The rising political tension was present everywhere. Talk of the Russian tanks moving into Gdansk and other key cities was common. Pawel's health and artwork were suffering under these stresses. The Common Press Project, one of the best correspondence projects directed by Pawel, was becoming more difficult for him to continue. Censorship was delaying the mails. When I prepared several pieces of mail art to send from Poland, he easily edited out the ones that would be censored. Leaving Poland was much more difficult than entering. The trains had been cancelled to the West, and I was stuck as I transferred in Poznan. Thanks to the help and assistance of a Polish agricultural student who spoke English (the Polish youth speak very good English), I was able to get to East Berlin after much delay and a very frightening ordeal. My visa had run out. The Polish officials could not understand why an American woman travelling alone, who neither spoke Polish or German or Russian would be coming from Gdansk during the Solidaridad unrest.



**PAWEL PETASZ, Gdansk, Poland with graffiti**

The Polish people are very special. They are the warmest, friendliest and most loving (on a basic human level) that I have ever encountered. Everyone on the trains and in the towns would go out of their way to assist me, many times missing train connections they should have caught, etc. They always did these kindnesses from the goodness of their hearts, because they enjoy giving. No one wanted anything in return. I feel tears running down my cheeks thinking about the fate of the Poles right now. Poland and her people touched me in a very special way that gave me hope for humanity. We should all treat each other with such love. Poland is like a fairy tale land to see. It is quaint and beautiful, as if time had stood still before World War II. Ask any Westerner that has been to Poland, and they will tell you the same about Poland and her people.

## BELGIUM

Johan van Geluwe of the Museum of Museums was my host upon my return from Poland. I was treated with luxurious cooking, a beautiful, warm room and the delightful company of his mother. Johan, an architect, has taken this interest in architecture and combined it into a mail art project. His archive is overwhelming to behold. He may have to build a wing or a new home soon if it continues to expand.

We were to attend the Mail Artist Encounter held at the ICC in Antwerp, organized by Guy Schraenen. So soon after my arrival, we were off to Antwerp. Guy and Anne Schraenen had done a remarkable job putting together an extensive exhibition of many of the correspondence projects that have occurred over the past decade. They also displayed the works that had arrived for Guy's *Libellus* magazine project. Needless to say there was so much work to be seen it took me several days to see it all. And the work that went into the hanging, installations and organizing was phenomenal.

While viewing the works you were treated to slide presentations and to audio projects. Everyone was madly trading work and addresses, rubberstamping, presenting actions, photographing, greeting each other, discussing projects, past, present and future. Guy was filming the event for posterity. Tables with the rubber stamps from Stempelplaats were available for use. A black and white copier was in another corner to make art works immediately and the atmosphere was very, very festive.

Some of the people who were there were Aart van Barneveld, Ulises Carrion, Niels Lomholt, Christian van der Borcht, Tomasz Schulz, Guy Bleus, Bart Boumans, Michel Giroud, Rod Summers and Tom Winter (who together did a beautiful sound performance), Henk Fakkeldij, Pier Van Dijk, Robert Joseph, Ko de Jonge, Danny Devos, Gabrielle Donder-Langer, Clemens Jongma, Ka-Mail, Valcarcel Medina, Alburquerque Mendes, Hetty Huisman, Wulle Konsumkunst, Jonas Wille, Sonia Van Der Burg, P.Nieuwenhuysen, Peter Paalvast, Ria Pacouee, Rolf Schuber, Eric Van Der Wal, Anniemie Van Kerckhoven, Am Van Oosten, Kees, Jonas Wille, Metallic Avau, Christine Balmier, Luc DeLeu, Lucia Del Sasso, Ron Huiskamp and many others.



**JOHAN VAN GELUWE in his archives, Waregem, Belgium**

**SUMMARY**

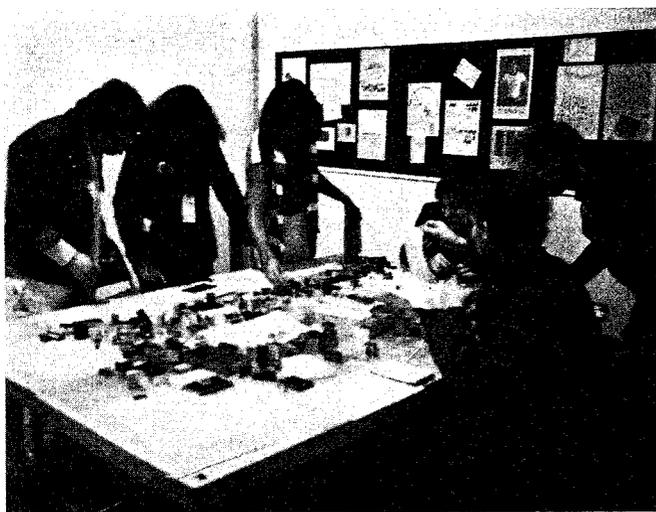
The mail art network does work. I was received by artists everywhere who had heard of my tour. Many times they would be in touch with another artist I planned to see, and would send invitations for visits via the mail. Some of the artists I had corresponded with previously; some not. That made no difference, for each artist was eager to hear news about mail artists I knew in the U.S.A., about previous visits to artists in Europe, to meet me and to show me their archives/projects. I completed many projects in collaboration with each artist (either working together or by the inspiration we each shared). Baroni and I did the largest mailing of one-of-a-kind postcards that I had ever done in one day. I found color copy machines all over Western Europe; Xerox 6500's and Canon. Color machines were treated like some mysterious technological wonder that could only be touched by a "trained" operator making this no artist's tool. Black and white copiers were abundant everywhere—some of the best I have ever seen. And the most innovative self-service copy shops are located in Germany. If you are into photo-booths, they are everywhere in Western Europe, with alot more choices of format and styles in the black and white version than in the United States.

—Ginny Lloyd  
P.O. Box 1343  
San Francisco, CA 94101.

All the photos in this article have been taken by Ginny Lloyd.



**MICHAEL SCOTT & HIS PLAYERS DOOR**



**MAIL ARTISTS ENCOUNTER, Rubberstamping in Antwerp**



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JUDITH A. HOFFBERG, Editor & Publisher  
BILL GAGLIONE, Contributing Editor, Mail Art  
LON SPIEGELMAN, Contributing Editor, Mail Art

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