

Pushing the Envelope: The Evolution of Mail Art in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Pushing the Envelope: The Evolution of Mail Art in Canada

Emily Robertson

Mail art can be most basically defined as art that uses the postal system. The post is the support, comparable to the painter's canvas. The art produced within a mail art context is traditionally exchanged outside the museum setting. Since its making is a shared responsibility between artists and the post office, each piece of correspondence undergoes a series of manipulations, some of which are intended by the sender, and others which are the inadvertent results on the part of the postal system in printing or sorting. Today, participants in the mail art movement are known interchangeably as mail artists, correspondents and networkers.

Pushing the Envelope explores the mail art phenomenon, providing readers with a detailed investigation of its emergence and evolution in Canada. This thesis covers such topics as the historical roots of mail art, the development of mail art magazines and archives, the relationship between mail art and the institutions that exhibit and collect this art form, as well as the movement's recent branching out to incorporate aspects of self-help. Each chapter explores a different decade, from the 1950s to the present day. Mail art projects by Anna Banana, Henrik Drescher, General Idea, Image Bank, Sarah Jackson, Ray Johnson, Amy Lam, Ed Varney and Frank Warren illustrate how the production of mail art evolved over time.

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Like many of you, my mailbox is too often left empty or is stuffed with unwanted bills and publicity. Where have all the postcards, love letters and birthday cards gone? For the past year, however, I have been fortunate to discover my mailbox full of colourful envelopes, eccentric stamps and thesis corrections. I would like to recognize those friends, colleagues and artists who have busied my postman with correspondence.

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Introduction

In 2003, Irene F. Whittome introduced me to the work of On Kawara. His series of postcards *I Got Up* (1968) was my first contact with mail art. By November of the same year a fellow student, Misha Gingerich, and I were corresponding almost daily, exchanging photographs, postcards, letters, photocopied journal entries: anything that could fit into an envelope. Marked up and altered by their journey through the post, everyday objects were transformed into works of art. We tested the limitations imposed by the postal system by mailing oddly shaped packages, intentionally misspelling addresses and at times forgoing the stamp. All works created within the context of this collaborative project were carried out solely through snail mail; hence the title of our project, *The Snail Project*. Throughout its two-year existence, *The Snail* became an extensive collection of miniature artworks, later stored away in boxes and suitcases. On two occasions, our collection of mail art was pinned to the walls of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University, first at Café X (January 2005), then at the VAV Gallery (November 2005).

It was thus out of personal interest that I subsequently began researching the mail art movement. Surprised with how little had been written about Canada's involvement, I realized it was time to give Canadian mail artists their due. This decision led me to correspond with several passionate artists from across North America, including AA Bronson, Anna Banana, John Held, Jr. and Ed Varney, each of whom has influenced mail art scholarship and history.

This thesis is the first to provide a detailed investigation of the emergence and evolution of mail art in Canada. Each chapter explores a different decade, from the 1950s

to the present day, while examining the range of motivations, ambitions and aesthetic affiliations leading to sending art through the post and thus to the production of mail art. The artists were chosen as being representative of the dominant mail art-related concerns of their respective eras.

Chapter 1, “The Pre-History and History of the Mail Art Phenomenon,” introduces the origins of mail art, answering questions about which artists came to use correspondence as art and why they did so. Previous research, notably Michael Crane’s *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity* and John Held’s *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography*, declared the American artist Ray Johnson to have become the father of the mail art movement, in the early 1950s.¹ While Johnson’s influence was great, this chapter presents his work within the context of a much larger history, one that finds roots in modern art movements such as Futurism, Dada and Fluxus.

It was thanks to a postcard sent from New York to Vancouver in 1968 that mail art surfaced in Canada. How did this missive affect the history of mail art? Chapter 2, “Networking Through the 1970s: Mail Art Magazines and Archives,” focuses on the work of Image Bank, General Idea and Anna Banana. All three developed innovative ways to expand the mail art movement, both across Canada and internationally. This was achieved through the creation of magazines such as *FILE Magazine* [sic] (1972) and *VILE International* (1974), which provided readers with extensive mailing lists and examples of correspondence as art. In addition, all three – Image Bank, General Idea and Anna Banana – independently established public and private archives, including Art

¹ Michael Crane, *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity* (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1984); John Held, Jr., *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography* (New Jersey & London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1991).

Metropole (Ottawa and Toronto) and the Banana Mail Art Archive (Vancouver), so that mail art might be better conserved, viewed and researched.

In the beginning, correspondence artists believed that the creation of an art accessible to all necessitated the rejection of any form of input by institutions. By the 1980s, mail artists such as Anna Banana, Sarah Jackson and Ed Varney appeared consumed by this sense of obligation, spending thousands of dollars in postage fees. Yet how could mail art grow if it refused to take part in the 'official' art scene? How could artists truly understand their position within contemporary art if they ignored the art market? Chapter 3, "Opening the Mailbox to the Art Market: Exhibition and Sale," explores the shift towards the display and commercialization of mail art. Beginning with the guidelines adopted to properly install a mail art exhibition in a gallery or museum, this chapter goes on to examine public institutions' interest in acquiring mail art, which had grown as a result of the works being shown to large audiences.

The last chapter, "A New Direction for the Mail Art Movement," presents the work of Amy Lam, Henrik Drescher and Frank Warren, artists who have recently become interested in using the post to create art. Transforming mail art into a subscription service, even using it to investigate the possibility of life after death, the latest generation of mail artists has given the art form renewed purpose by changing the relationship between sender and receiver, favoring one-way correspondence. While mail art's first objective was to create an open community of artistic exchange, it appears that a number of newcomers to the medium have chosen to approach correspondence art as a tool for self help. By focusing on Lam, Drescher and Warren, Chapter 4 explores the present practice

of mail art, providing insight into its future, while raising questions as to how these artists are changing the categories of “mail art,” “mail artists,” and “mail art movement.”

Throughout, this thesis demonstrates mail art’s impact within contemporary art and Canada’s important role in the movement’s development. The four chapters illustrate how the production of mail art evolved over time, with examples from artists from across the country. Mail art emerges as an art form that is open to all, unpretentious and inexpensive: one which attempts to challenge both conventional authority and traditional art-making.

Chapter 1 – The Pre-History and History of the Mail Art Phenomenon

“The history of mail art does not exist,”² proclaimed Guy Bleus, a mail art scholar from Belgium, in 1991. As each mail artist was to account for his or her own history, art critics and theorists were left to juggle a palimpsest of histories. Debating the constant variations controlling the *what*, *where* and *when* of mail art, most scholars and practitioners agree that the phenomenon can be most basically defined as art that uses the postal system; the medium, format and intent of each mail art piece is left open. The post is the mail artist’s support, comparable to the painter’s canvas. The art produced within a mail art context is exchanged outside the museum setting to remain spontaneous and unmonitored. Since its making is a shared responsibility between artists and the post office, each piece of correspondence undergoes a series of manipulations, some of which are intended, and others which are the inadvertent results of the chance errors on the part of the postal system occurring during printing, sorting or delivery. The mail art movement thus emphasizes the process more than the final result.

Before the movement was even known as mail art, it was understood as a grouping of individuals who communicated through a postal network. They were united by a common disdain for the Arts (capitalized) and by frustration with the limits imposed by art institutions. No longer wanting to take part in the official art ‘scene’, artists chose the mailbox to replace the gallery as a site to exhibit and exchange art. In the mailbox there is no hierarchy, no jury, no possibility of having one’s art defined as ‘bad’. Today,

² John Held, Jr. *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography*, ix. Held later added: “Guy was commenting on the fact that there are as many ‘histories’ of mail art as there are mail artists.... Of course, some want no history written to maintain the spontaneity [sic] of the experience. Others like myself, survey the field as best we can, use decades of experience to gain a perspective, and tell the story as we see it ... from our viewpoint, not some objective truth.” The author’s correspondence with John Held, Jr., March 20, 2006.

participants in the mail art movement are known interchangeably as mail artists, correspondents and networkers.

Although Bleus warned that the movement's history was not the result of a single narrative, past scholarship has focused on American artist Ray Johnson to describe the whole of mail art. Certainly, no other mail artist has achieved comparable renown for his mail art alone. Since his ambiguous death in the waters of Sag Harbor Cove, Long Island, in 1995,³ mail art enthusiasts worldwide have developed a cult attraction to Johnson and his art practice, often disregarding the existence of mail art prior to his arrival in New York City from Michigan in 1948. To this day, Johnson's presence dominates both the literature and the exhibitions dedicated to this medium.⁴

This chapter will explore the motivations for the creation and production of mail art. A brief history of the evolution of postal activity in Canada will lead us to the beginnings of the mail art network. As noted above, the formation of a network was intended to help free artists from the grip of art institutions, and to connect them to others in their field. The desire to move away from the museum's domination and curatorial constraints not only applied to mail art, but was closely associated with a variety of artists and groups, most notably Marcel Duchamp and the Dadaists. An investigation into the predecessors of the mail art movement will permit us to identify how the arrival of Ray

³ Johnson's death remains a mystery, although it was identified by police officers as an apparent suicide. On Friday, January 13th, 1995, the artist checked into the Baron's Cove Inn, in Long Island. At 7:15 that evening, two girls saw a figure jumping from the bridge connecting North Haven and Sag Harbor Cove. They saw him fall into the water and do backstrokes, swimming off into the distance. Johnson's body was found the following day. Andrew Moore and John Walter, *How to Draw a Bunny* (Toronto: Moticos Motion Picture/Elevator Picture Production, 2000), 90 minutes.

⁴ Articles have been written about Ray Johnson since 1955. Since then, his name has appeared in *Artforum*, *Art News*, *New York Times*, *Art in America*, and many more. He is considered to be the 'father of mail art' in every mail art source book: Michael Crane's *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity* (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1984), John Held, Jr.'s, *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography* (New Jersey & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1991), and Chuck Welch's *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology* (Toronto: University of Calgary Press, 1995).

Johnson and his mailing network – referred to as the New York Correspondance [sic] School⁵ – relates to the anti-authoritarian tradition of art history.

GREETINGS: A BRIEF PRE-HISTORY

In Canada, the *coureurs des bois* were the first letter carriers.⁶

When the mailbox made its appearance on Canadian ground in 1859,⁷ folded cards embossed with cupids and musical notes were already *passé* in Europe, having given way to illustrated letter paper and ornate, prepaid envelopes. Not much later, the postcard appeared in Europe, emerging in Canada a decade later, in 1871.⁸ The postcard made a lasting impression on the history of postal activity, for not only was it less expensive than a letter, but it combined illustrative work (print or photograph) with correspondence. Potentially open to viewing while *en route* to its destination, the postcard – also known as the view card – was noticeably different from any other item distributed through the postal service. It provided the voyeuristic opportunity for people other than the sender and the recipient to read/look at both its recto and its verso without anyone knowing, thus feeding our “panoptic and democratic obsession with transparency, display, opening, bringing into the light and placing into circulation [*mise en lumière et en circulation*].”⁹ Postcards were (and are) quick and inexpensive means of

⁵ Ed Plunkett was the first to describe New York’s circle of correspondents as “The New York Correspondence School” (NYCS). The expression, which originated in 1962, was adopted by Ray Johnson although he change its spelling to ‘correspondance.’ See later in this chapter for a fuller discussion of this.

⁶ Robert M. Campbell, *The Politics of the Post: Canada’s Postal System from Public Service to Privatization* (Peterborough : Broadview Press, 1994), 24.

⁷ These letter-boxes were first seen in the streets of Toronto in 1859. David Stewart-Patterson, *Post Mortem: Why Canada’s Mail Won’t Move* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1987), 17.

⁸ Christraud M. Greary and Virginia-Lee Webb (eds.), *Delivering Views: Distant Cultures in Early Postcards* (Washington & London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1998): 14. The reader is invited to look into Robert M. Campbell’s *The Politics of the Post*, in which the author explores the arrival of the Canadian Post. Campbell noted (p. 24): “[T]he postal system was first established on a regular basis in 1734, with the opening of a road between Montreal and Quebec City.”

⁹ Philippe Hamon, *Expositions: Littérature et architecture au XIXe siècle* (Paris: J. Corti, 1989), 72.

communication, also doubling as souvenirs or collectibles – all characteristics that would later characterize the practice of mail art. But it was their sense of public display and accessibility that would most appeal to the networker. On the other hand, as Naomi Schor rightfully points out by referencing Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987), the postcard's display of content can be deceiving: "[It] is the postcard's very openness that makes it the ideal vehicle for putting encrypted messages into circulation."¹⁰ In *The Post Card*, Derrida reproduced a series of found postcards from which he removed both the author's signature and random sections of the text. Here is an excerpt:

4 September 1977

Hound them at the post office. Does the search go through them? [*Large blank space.*] No, I will never rewrite it, that letter. [*Large blank space.*] You have spoken to me again of your 'determination,' what does that mean? ... and me, then what do I become in this affair, it would still have to be returned to me somewhat, the letter would still have to be come back to its destination, etc. [*Large blank space.*] First stamp, or frank, then obliterate, or punch.¹¹

In commenting on his approach, Derrida wrote as a foreword: "Who is writing? To whom? And to send, to destine, to dispatch what? To what address?"¹² By deliberately confusing the reading of these items of correspondence, Derrida underlined the postcard's possibility of deceit; although its text is exposed, it may be coded and misleading. Mail artists were attracted to the postcard because it could be at once transparent and encoded.

In Derrida's *Post Card*, it is not only the signature, but also the return address that is missing, as is the case with most postcards: "With no return address... authenticated

¹⁰ Naomi Schor, "Cartes Postales: Representing Paris 1900," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18 (Winter 1992), 210.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida (trans. Allan Bass), *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 57-58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3-4.

[only] by a postmarked stamp purchased in the local currency... the postcard has a sort of ghostly presence.”¹³ It arrives with no absolute marking of authorship, as many postcards are left unsigned or may even be autographed by a pseudonym.¹⁴ While most artists fear anonymity and dread that their individual work will not be recognized, many mail artists embrace this possibility. As is the case for all correspondence – and postcards are merely an example – the artist/author can easily remain anonymous. There is no gallery, nor is there any official signage to identify the work of a mail art correspondent.

Before anyone knew of the existence of mail art, it was possible to send postcards or letters *in the name of art*: a postcard with a freshly painted watercolor, a letter to a patron or museum, or the announcement of an exhibition. While all these examples unite the practice of mailing and art, in mail art the sender has the distinctive intention of creating an art piece and chooses the mailbox as a new setting – one that negates the museum as a validating institution – for the exchange of both art and art criticism. However, mail artists were not the first to contest the grip of art institutions. Indeed, the interest for anti-art concerns grew to motivate some of the most influential art production of the twentieth-century, and marked a defining break with nineteenth-century aesthetics. Futurism, for example, originating in Milan in 1908, expressed the need for a new art: one that would go beyond established notions of good taste. “Who is the judge of the beautiful?” asked the Futurists. And why should *not liking* be relevant to the criticism of an art piece? The Futurists refuted the desire for the pleasurable either in poetry or in the

¹³ Kristen Emiko McAllister, “Held Captive: The Postcard and the Internment Camp,” *West Coast Line*, Vol. 35, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 35.

¹⁴ An example of this would be Marcel Duchamp who signed his correspondences with at least 23 different nicknames, including Duche, Marcel Dee, Marcelavy, Morice, Totor and of course, his famous alter ego Rose Sélavy.

visual arts, demanding the “immediate disappearance of all intellectual sentimentality.”¹⁵ On February 20th 1909, *Le Figaro* published F. T. Marinetti’s *Manifesto of Futurism*, the first of many manifestoes in which Marinetti (1876-1944) and his colleagues declared that museums, libraries, academies and professors of all kinds were blinded by ignorance and that the time had come for their annihilation. Both utopian and naïve, the Futurists fought against art critics – “those complacent pimps!”¹⁶ – denouncing their presence as useless, or even detrimental to the process of creation. In 1910, Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916) painted *The City Rises* [*La città che sale*], a dynamic representation of Milan’s industrial cityscape (fig. 1). “Take up your pickaxes, your axes and hammers and wreck, wreck the venerable city, pitilessly!” urged a Futurist manifesto in 1909.¹⁷ This message was reiterated in Boccioni’s painting, as *The City Rises* provides a visual representation of the Futurist goal: the uprising of the city for the start of a revolution in which tradition and convention will be eradicated. *The City Rises* blends citizens and city, blurring the foreground into the background, leaving the viewer to stand at the center of this whirlwind, and conveying what the Futurists described as a dynamic sensation. In an attempt to capture all surrounding atmosphere as well as every facet of a single event into one image, the works of Boccioni and other Futurists, such as Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini, had certain affinities with Cubism. Yet, although there are clear similarities, the Futurists wrote: “While we admire the heroism of [the Cubists], who have displayed a laudable contempt for artistic commercialism and a powerful

¹⁵ Umbro Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 145.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

hatred of academism, we feel ourselves and we declare ourselves to be absolutely opposed to their art.”¹⁸

Experimenting with the limits of art, other avant-garde artists similarly broke away from the established canons of great art and literature. Some ripped to pieces the traditions which had held the history of art so tightly, piecing them back together on their own terms in the form of flat photomontages. Pablo Picasso’s *Guitar* (1913), for example, is an assemblage of pasted paper, charcoal, crayon and ink. The outline of a guitar was created by the juxtaposition of a yellowed newspaper to a flowered wallpaper, leaving the viewer to read “the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost.”¹⁹ Yet to read all quotations, and to attempt to deduce from them a single meaning, only led to confusion, as – once removed from the art context – the newspaper, cigarette packs, wallpaper and other elements that created Picasso’s *Guitar* had little or no aesthetic value in themselves. Mocking the traditional Western values embedded in European painting since the Renaissance, collage permitted artists to take non-art and make it art, transforming nothing into something of value.

The anti-art gestures and attitudes were best exemplified in Dada, which appeared first in Zurich, borrowing ideas from collage and Futurism. In 1916, at the heart of World War I, Dada artists protested what was seen as the pointless bloodbath created by the war, calling into question their position and future as artists. Dada equated oppositions: “order = disorder; self = non-self; affirmation = negation”; and soon art became entangled with anti-art.²⁰ Hans Arp’s (1886-1966) series of collage made “according to the laws of chance” (c. 1916; fig. 2) became an archetype of Dada methods. Arp claimed to have

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes (trans. Stephen Heath), *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

²⁰ Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1964), 34.

thrown the strips of paper on the ground and assembled them where chance had let them fall, although his final result is surprisingly ordered to today's eye. However, the use of chance was a direct rejection of logic and an interpretation of the Taoist book *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese system of divination that employs chance to understand or reflect on the universe's order.²¹ Because accident – or chance – intervenes so openly in Dada, “the artist's role was startlingly reduced in a way that commented upon the state of the world in which fate had overtaken the determination of human plans.”²² Like collage, Arp's work – and that of the other Dadaists – was evocative of the tendency towards patchwork, random collecting, deconstruction, and dematerialization.

Unbeknownst to the original Dadaists in Zurich, a similar movement was independently growing in New York. Many European artists, notably Francis Picabia (1879-1953) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), had fled to this city to escape the war. Both reached New York in June 1915. Duchamp was “welcomed like the Messiah”, his arrival preceded by “the unforeseeable *succès de scandale*” of his controversial *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*, exhibited at the Armory Show two years previously.²³ Duchamp's partaking in the Dada movement was initiated by his desire to break away from aesthetic tradition and create “*un art sec*” – an art that would negate the subjective input of taste.²⁴ With some contradiction, Duchamp claimed that this *dry art* would be achieved by uniting precision and chance, a dichotomy that appealed to Dada.

²¹ Harriett Ann Watts, *Chance: A Perspective on Dada* (Michigan: University Microfilm International Research Press, 1975).

²² Matthew Gale, *Dada & Surrealism* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997), 63.

²³ Francis M. Naumann; Hector Obalk (eds), (trans. Jill Taylor), *Affectionately Marcel: The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp*, (Ghent: Ludion Press, 2000), 13.

²⁴ Watts, *op. cit.*, 35.

It was to attack early twentieth-century aesthetic standards of taste and craftsmanship that Duchamp created his first ready-made in 1913. Four years later, he submitted his most famous ready-made, *Fountain* (1917), to the New York Independent exhibition. *Fountain* was an overturned porcelain urinal marked in black with the false signature “R. Mutt”, and one of the many everyday manufactured objects Duchamp would present as art. Providing little or no modification to the object, the artist claimed that it was the act of choosing that made it art. Therefore, the status of bottleracks, bicycle wheels and urinals as art did not lie in their aesthetic quality, but in their power to redefine the nature of art and art-making. It is for this reason that today *Fountain* is often seen as the single most influential artwork of the entire century. Undermining traditional definitions of art, Duchamp paved the way for mail art. In fact, Duchamp’s *Rendez-vous du dimanche 6 février 1916 à 1h ¾ après-midi* is the earliest example of mail art acknowledged or published in any of the literature relevant to the network’s production (fig. 3). It consisted of an assemblage of four postcards taped together, sent by Duchamp to his New York neighbours – and key patrons – the Arensbergs. The recto of each *Rendez-vous* card is a typewritten text providing details concerning the meeting referred to in the work’s title. On the verso, “a less ciphered text tells us about the *Grand verre*”, also known as *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* (1915-1923).²⁵ At the time the piece was mailed, the *Grand verre* was still in the process of creation. Although the term ‘mail art’ had not yet been added to the lexicon, Marcel Duchamp’s postcards met the basic requirement of correspondence art: to communicate art through the post. The piece was retrieved from the Arensbergs and re-sent in 1956, this time to George Hamilton, a professor at Yale University. In a letter accompanying the work, Duchamp

²⁵ Crane, *op.cit.*, 60.

commented on his hopes of having the four postcards published.²⁶ Prior to the investigation of mail art's origins, *Rendez-vous* evoked little scholarly interest. However, Duchamp's use of postcards was an important precedent for much subsequent mail art, as "[p]ostcards are the most popular of all mail art media, even symbols of the entire field."²⁷

Duchamp was also involved in a different type of postal network: correspondence chess. As opposed to a traditional game of chess in which the participants sit on opposite sides of the board, correspondence chess is, as the name implies, a game played through the mail between players in different locations. The grid of the board is divided vertically by numbers and horizontally by letters to enable the players to move their pieces with little confusion. Interestingly, chess – to which Duchamp became famously devoted – is reminiscent of his original desire to combine precision and chance. He discussed this practice in several letters to Dada artist and fellow chess player Man Ray: "As-tu reçu l'échiquier de poche?... Koltanowski [world champion of blindfold chess] et moi avons un petit bureau down town [où] il joue en ce moment une cinquantaine de parties [par correspondence]. Si cela t'amuse de jouer ... écris moi –" ²⁸ Although the practice was never connected to mail art, Duchamp's interest in correspondence chess should be noted as being representative of the wide range of possibilities provided by the post, especially as defined by an influential figure in the debate about the relationship between art, non-art and anti-art. Many artists followed Duchamp's interest in artistic postal activity. Futurists sent postcards made of metal and the Dadaists mailed their collages. Surrealists

²⁶ Naumann; Obalk, *op.cit.*, 351.

²⁷ Crane, *op. cit.*, 26.

²⁸ Naumann; Obalk, *op.cit.*, 239.

crafted complex letters combining text and images, while other artists, such as Yves Klein, printed stamps.²⁹

RAY JOHNSON & THE NEW YORK CORRESPONDANCE SCHOOL

According to Ray Johnson, the most interesting object he ever received in the mail was a mouse's ear.³⁰

As much as mail artists attempt to work against tradition, their history is almost always attached to one name: Ray Johnson. While the interdisciplinarity of correspondence art made it easy to give oneself the title of *mail artist*, no one did it with quite the same dedication and authority. Ray Johnson (1927-1995) claimed to have begun producing mail art at the ripe age of sixteen, while attending Cass Technical High School in Detroit.³¹ Corresponding with his friend Arthur Secunda, Johnson covered his postcards and letters with intricate drawings, clippings, and of course, the day's gossip (fig. 4). After he left Michigan in 1945 for Black Mountain College, North Carolina, Johnson's correspondence with Secunda continued as he studied under the supervision of artists such as Josef Albers and Robert Motherwell. Albers' influence in particular has been cited as having shaped Johnson's formal sense of design. Certainly, Albers' particular interest in sets of images and in multiplicity could be compared to Johnson's obsessive serial mailings that were to come.

Albers had encouraged his students to draw on clear-cut shapes, but a few years after his training Johnson ignored the term 'clear' and simply cut through his artistic

²⁹ The reader is invited to take a closer look at specific examples of mail art's pre-history. For example, Marcel Duchamp's *Rendez-vous du dimanche 6 février 1916 à 1h ¼ après-midi* (1916), Joseph Cornell's correspondence or the stamps Yves Klein used to mail the invitations to his 1958 exhibition *Le vide* at Galerie Iris Clert, Paris.

³⁰ Sevim Fesci, "An Interview with Ray Johnson, 17 April 1968," *American Art Journal*, Vol. 40 Issue 3-4 (2000), 22.

³¹ Donna De Salvo; Catherine Gudis (eds.), *Ray Johnson: Correspondences* (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1999), 16.

production, destroying “most of his paintings and [cannibalizing] the fragments into other works.”³² This tendency to recycle, shred and obliterate past projects became part of Johnson’s working method, frustrating friends and patrons. Ad Reinhart once remarked about the artist’s collages: “Well, they’ve probably been cut up and put into new collages.”³³ Certainly, Johnson was never afraid to damage his artworks, even after they were purchased and paid for. He attached little value to the art object; he was more interested in the process and its exchange. In fact, Johnson’s interest in performance art was seen as an extension of his mail artworks.

Johnson moved to New York in 1948, where he shared an apartment with sculptor Robert Lippold. The two had met during his years at Black Mountain College, when Lippold was artist in residence.³⁴ Their apartment building housed visual artists and musicians, and soon became a gathering place for up-and-coming artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and other Black Mountain alumni.³⁵ During this period, Johnson published drawings and short texts for avant-garde literary magazines, designed a book cover, and was invited to take part in a solo exhibition at the One Gallery and Wittenborn Books, in New York.³⁶

In 1951, Ray Johnson, who had abandoned painting not long before, joined the American Abstract Artists group, in which he became an active member.³⁷ It was during his last year of involvement with the group, in 1953, that Johnson began sending

³² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³³ David Bourdon, “Cosmic Ray: An Open Letter to the Founder of the New York Correspondence School,” *Art in America*, Vol. 83 (October, 1995), 109.

³⁴ At the time, Richard Lippold was married with children. As David Bourdon writes (see “Cosmic Ray”): “Back in those days (and nights), any husband who wanted to hold onto both a wife and a boyfriend had to perform some pretty fancy footwork.”

³⁵ De Salvo; Gudis, *op. cit.*, 202.

³⁶ *Idem.*

³⁷ Ray Johnson served as treasurer from 1951 to 1953. He also exhibited with the group for those three consecutive years.

postcards to his friend Isabelle Fisher. Next to the receiver's handwritten address, in the section reserved for the correspondence, Johnson pasted comic strips gathered from his frequent *découpage* of catalogues and newspapers (fig. 5). The mailings continued steadily for the next two years. As names were added to his address book and his circle of correspondents grew, Johnson's collages became more diversified and complex.

It was by cutting and reconstructing elements borrowed from popular culture that Johnson created his first *moticos*, a term he began using in 1955. *Moticos* is an anagram for the word *osmotic*.³⁸ By appropriating an existing term ('osmotic') derived from the word osmosis, Johnson seemed to be suggesting that his work was akin to a flow of ideas and a transmission of knowledge. Indeed, *moticos* and *osmotic* were perfect descriptors of the artist's small collages. Attracted to elements from all spheres of influence, Johnson wove images and texts found in cigarette logos, comic strips, art magazines, as well as the headlines and advertisements of newspapers. Following the interest in collage and assemblage instigated years before by Picasso and Braque, Johnson created *moticos* whose citations were "anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they [were] quotations without inverted commas."³⁹

Johnson described his work as a "compression of ideas and images into envelopes."⁴⁰ These compressions can be seen in works such as *Untitled (The Luckies)* (ca. 1958-60; fig. 6), which were sent serially to poet Gerald Ayres. *The Luckies* were crafted with the specific intent of responding to Ayres's haiku poems and were, in

³⁸ The term is said to have originated from a discussion between Ray Johnson and Norman Solomon. Lucy Lippard created other anagrams from *moticos*, just as plausible as the origins Johnson attributed to the word. She wrote: "How about *cosimot*, loosely seen as space traveler, or "almost word" in French... [How about] *tomocis* or *mostico* – searching for smooches, or somehow mistaken." De Salvo; Gudis, *op. cit.*, 21; 141.

³⁹ Barthes, *op. cit.*, 160.

⁴⁰ Ray Johnson in *How to Draw a Bunny*.

essence, a simple chronicling of Johnson's activities, interests and findings. Although *The Luckies* typically incorporate only three elements (a postcard, a photograph and a red *Lucky Strike* logo or two), they demonstrate Johnson's sleek aesthetic. But, although Johnson's aesthetic was ordered and highly researched, by placing his collages in the mailbox he caused his work to undergo a certain amount of random modification. Like Duchamp's, Ray Johnson's work combined precision and chance.

Johnson *moticos* became key witnesses to his "ubiquitous activities [and seemingly] invisible presence in the art world."⁴¹ On one postcard sent to William S. Wilson, Johnson transforms an advertisement for a toy figure called Action Jackson into a humorous portrait of Jackson Pollock (fig. 7). Connecting the toy's circular MEGO logo to the figure's crotch with a red marker, Johnson inscribed: *This squirrels [sic] got nuts*. Johnson, who sent the postcard in 1973, was challenging his rival long after his death. While Pollock's drip paintings had transformed him into nothing short of a legend, Johnson remained "New York's most famous unknown artist" throughout his career.⁴² Jealous of others' success, Johnson's collage transformed the abstract expressionist into an Action Jackson with a limp red penis and a drooping MEGO scrotum. This work in particular clearly embodied a certain amount of anti-hero and anti-canon content.⁴³

⁴¹ De Salvo; Gudis, *op. cit.*, 45.

⁴² This is how critic Grace Glueck described Ray Johnson in 1965 in the *New York Times*. The title stuck to him throughout his career. Since then, almost every article written on the artist makes reference to this quote.

⁴³ It should be added that Ray Johnson's collages chronicled his activities, interests and obsessions. These were clearly influenced by gay culture. In an early correspondence to Wilson in 1964 (fig. 8), Johnson mailed an advertisement for Camp Records' new release: *I'd rather fight than swish*. The title was a parody of Tareyton's cigarette billboards that originally featured a figure with a blackened eye accompanied with the slogan 'I'd rather fight than switch.' This mailing was also a direct reference to Camp, which Susan Sontag explained in her *Notes on Camp* published that same year. With its washed-out pink cover featuring a man looking every bit like James Dean, Camp Records was notorious in gay culture and recognizable with their hot pink records and outrageous titles such as *Old Fashion Balls* or *The Queen is in the Closet*. Of course, some mailings were subtler. This was the case for a 1953 mailing to Judith Malina, depicting

Certainly, before Johnson's arrival in the art milieu, many artists had declared war on art, the notion of the artist as sole source of genius and the authority art institutions held over them. For example, Marcel Duchamp used the ready-made to challenge artistic canons and to demonstrate that art could exclude both skill and 'good' taste, reducing the process of creation to a simple choice. In part to counter the idea of genius, artists formed collaboratives, leading ultimately to the emergence of Fluxus in 1962. The idea of creating art as part of a group – a concept appearing in different forms with performance art and conceptual art – influenced Ray Johnson and the mail art network.

Prior to 1962, there was no specific term to describe the mail art community and, as if to complicate things, Johnson himself made somewhat unclear use of the made-up word *moticos*. This led Ed Plunkett, a fellow mail artist, to allude to the movement as "The New York Correspondence School" (NYCS). Plunkett later explained that the NYCS was created in response to abstract expressionists and action painters, who were famously described as the New York School.⁴⁴ Inserting 'Correspondence' into the expression, Plunkett came up with a name that caught on. Johnson immediately adopted the title and claimed it as his own, although he did change the second *e* of 'correspondence' to an *a*. Johnson's decision to switch the vowels was meant to underline the character of mail art practice as a dance (*correspondance*), a performance, or a medium in movement. For over a decade, Johnson's mailings were referred to as the fruit of the NYCS, the school of one. While Johnson orchestrated the artistic correspondence blooming in New York, he annotated his mailings with "instructions to 'Please send to'

three images are placed one over the other to describe the coming of age of a young man. The upper image is of a young boy and girl; the second of an adult man and woman; the last, of two older men.

⁴⁴ Ed Plunkett, "Send Letters, Postcards, Drawings, and Objects," *Art Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Spring, 1997): 234.

so-and-so, as if the communication would remain incomplete until it was forwarded to a third party.”⁴⁵ As a result, the mail art pieces became the fruit of a series of exchanges and interactions, created by correspondents sending and receiving mail and by the post office marking and otherwise altering the correspondence before delivery. No one artist or individual could be credited for the work, a phenomenon that took into account physical changes, from postmarks to miscellaneous damages, that the postal system itself inflected on mail art. Johnson seemed “accepting [of] the principle and the experience of several people writing together” to produce a single body of work.⁴⁶ While Roland Barthes warned of the death of the author, the artists who followed Johnson’s interest in the postal system felt comfortable knowing that their art was composed of multiple writings and images, leaving the reader without a single history to follow, just as Guy Bleus later claimed was the case.

Original artworks turned into spam: “[Y]ou’d receive [Johnson’s] missives whether you wanted them or not... [creating] a theatrical compact cosmos, [which] he connected.”⁴⁷ Johnson’s *moticos* were soon transformed into a substantial *moticos* mailing list, which became the envy of many colleagues.⁴⁸ His *moticos* were sent out by the thousands, and soon were received as throwaway art. Gerald Ayres said about the mailings he received from Johnson: “Ray sent out such a mass of material that the idea that you were supposed to be collecting it and that ... it would have some sort of value if

⁴⁵ David Bourdon, “Cosmic Ray: An Open Letter to the Founder of the New York Correspondence School,” 108.

⁴⁶ Barthes, *op. cit.*, 144.

⁴⁷ Nancy Princenthal, “Ray Johnson: Correspondences, Whitney Museum of American Art.” *Art on Paper*, Vol. 3 Issue 4 (March-April, 1999): 59-60.

⁴⁸ After Ray Johnson was found dead, the police examined the contents of his car and found the coveted address book in the trunk. The entries included almost every artist of note.

you collected it together was never the case.”⁴⁹ Johnson’s unsolicited envelopes reached their destinations frequently unsigned and often disregarded by their recipients, as might have happened with the damaged correspondence Derrida chose to transcribe in *The Post Card*. Johnson insisted that his mailings, often infused with pop art imagery, the epitome of throwaway culture, negated the museum. In spite of this, however, he always made sure to mail out flyers to museum curators, directors and dealers, announcing their availability.⁵⁰ Militant about proving that an artist could be recognized without the help of institutions, he contradicted himself by constantly searching for the latter’s approval: “Dear Whitney Museum, I hate you. Love, Ray Johnson” (fig. 9). However, while Johnson – like many other artists such as Duchamp and the Futurists – was hostile to the idea of the museum as a validating institution, this did not mean that he did not attempt to create compelling artwork. Certainly the art produced by many movements associated with the anti-art sensibility had “pro-art tendencies”, as Hans Richter states in *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (1964).⁵¹

At once hating and loving art institutions, Johnson may ultimately have feared being rejected by them. Declaring war on the museum with ‘I hate you,’ Johnson was quick to redeem himself by signing ‘Love.’ If art institutions were not to exhibit his work, then at least they would be bombarded by it. Pusillanimously, he navigated around curatorial constraints, only finding validation when his work was noticed. He could then brag that his art had been selected even though he had defied the institution’s constraints. One instance of Johnson’s refusal to cooperate with museums occurred in 1991, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York decided to mount an *Artist’s Choice* exhibition

⁴⁹ Gerald Ayres in *How to Draw a Bunny*.

⁵⁰ De Salvo; Gudis, *op. cit.*, 21.

⁵¹ Richter, *op. cit.*, 49.

featuring portraiture.⁵² Chuck Close, the artist of choice, was to select portraits by artists from the museum's permanent collection. Although the museum did not own a work by Ray Johnson fitting this criterion, the artist subverted his way into the museum's archives. Knowing that the museum's library had the policy of keeping everything that was sent to it, Johnson began an extensive correspondence with the librarian, Clive Philpot, thus becoming a part of the collection without succumbing to the authority of a juried committee. This is how Johnson's photocopy of *Bill de Kooning* – a portrait of the artist as a bunny head – was included in the exhibition next to portraits by Picasso and Van Gogh.⁵³ This is one of the many ways Ray Johnson circumvented the art institution and created a new path for sharing his art.

When asked, in 1968, about the possibility of exhibiting correspondence art, Johnson retorted: "I don't know how it could be organized, because just to do it would kill it."⁵⁴ Yet two years after this interview, he organized the *Ray Johnson: New York School of Correspondance* exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art with the help of curator Marcia Tucker. Under the title of New York Correspondance School, Johnson organized several gatherings and performances. Indeed, the NYCS was active from 1962 until 1973, when Johnson declared it to be dead. Interestingly, the official death of the NYCS in 1973 coincided with Johnson sending the Action Jackson collage to his friend William S. Wilson, mocking a famed New York School success story. Johnson reported the death of the NYCS on several occasions, including a 1967 letter that read:

⁵² Chuck Close: *Head-On/The Modern Portrait* (1991)

⁵³ David Bourdon; Robert Pincus Witten; Nam-June Paik; Chuck Close; Jill Johnston; James Rosenquist.

"Return to Sender: Remembering Ray Johnson," *Artforum*, Vol. 33 (April 1995), 73; 111.

⁵⁴ Fesci, *op. cit.*, 23.

“The NYCS attacked itself and strangled itself.”⁵⁵ Afterwards, he referred to the school as “The Dead School” or “Buddha University.” These multiple pronouncements of death were certainly connected to mail art’s larger ideologies. How could mail art at once be a school and simultaneously voice its dissatisfaction for the restrictions imposed by institutions? The paradox was noted and the school was killed. While he repeatedly proclaimed that he would prefer having his *moticos* returned to him or even destroyed, rather than sold, he engaged in constant negotiation with patrons to debate the value of his art, evaluating their worth at a thousand dollars one day, and a million the next. While Johnson claimed to fear the commodification of his *moticos*, he mass-produced them. Despite what he said, starting from his arrival in New York until his death 47 years later, he would participate in solo and/or group exhibitions almost yearly, contradicting the essence of his practice.⁵⁶

In 1962, coinciding with Ed Plunkett’s baptism of the mail art movement as the New York Correspondence School, Fluxus took root in the United States. Fluxus, which owed its origin to George Maciunas, a Lithuanian-born American artist, derived its name from the word *flux*, a word chosen to exemplify the 1960s quality of being in a constant state of change, fluctuation and unrest, as were Fluxus members themselves. Fluxus artists shared with mail artists the objective of creating an open art forum for communication and exchange. They latched onto the foundations of the network, claiming Ray Johnson as a member, even though he never gave himself any art group

⁵⁵ De Salvo; Gudis, *op. cit.*, 72.

⁵⁶ From his arrival in New York in 1948 to his death in 1995, Ray Johnson was included in an exhibition every year with some exceptions, generally at the beginning of his career (1950, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1958, 1964 and 1980).

labels.⁵⁷ In 1963, the Fluxus poet Robert Filliou wrote a short poem about the human condition, concluding with the line, “The network is eternal.” From then on, mail art was referred to as the “Eternal Network.” Indeed, the process of sending and receiving was cyclical. Both mail and Fluxus artists considered themselves to be a community of exchange through which art would flow, thus creating a palimpsest layering of communication, mail and art. The perception at the time was that this process was infinite.

Fluxus’s participation in the network was very strong. Not only were its artists influential in giving the network a new name (“Eternal Network”), but they also affected mail art scholarship. Indeed, Chuck Welch’s *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology* (1995) opened with a foreword by Ken Friedman, a Fluxus scholar. The first two chapters focus on Fluxus’s influence, relegating Ray Johnson’s contributions to mail art to the third chapter only. Today, scholarly interest in Fluxus is more widespread than interest in Ray Johnson, thus making it easy to credit the Fluxus movement with having created mail art’s social and aesthetic sensibility.

Fluxus artists were especially intrigued by the network’s use of the postal system, since it was seen as an easy vehicle for communication. To better explicate their group’s intentions, Fluxus artists agreed on a list of twelve characteristics for which every member should strive:

- 1 Globalism 2 Unity of art and life 3 Intermedia 4 Experimentalism 5 Chance 6 Playfulness 7 Simplicity 8 Implicativeness [sic] 9 Exemplativism [sic] 10 Specificity 11 Presence in time 12 Musicality.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ However, the first mail art book was written by Ray Johnson and published by Fluxus participant Dick Higgins, in 1965. The book was entitled *The Paper Snake* (New York: Something Else Press).

⁵⁸ Ken Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader* (Chinchester: Academy Editions, 1998): 244.

It is not a coincidence that Fluxus artists such as Ken Friedman and Dick Higgins chose to place *globalism* in the first position. Because of the considerable size of the Fluxus group and its motivation for promoting “dialogue among like minds, regardless of nation”,⁵⁹ Fluxus’s effect on the Eternal Network was to enlarge its circle of communication, even encouraging mail artists to send correspondence to random addresses. Fluxus’s key role within mail art was to enable Ray Johnson’s New York-based network to achieve international status, expanding the list of contacts as far as Japan, Europe, Australia, South America, and of course across Canada.

Under Ray Johnson’s leadership, it was the exchange of quirky messages, random newspaper clippings, and the mailing of complex collages that prevailed. Though Johnson’s contact list was extensive, he was known as a loner, as someone who guarded against outside interference.⁶⁰ To maintain control over the growing network, Johnson kept his address book under wraps, hid his materials from visitors and deflected questions during interviews. Fluxus’s interest in mail art in the early 1960s came to disrupt Johnson’s self-sufficient circle of pen pals by introducing visions of international awareness. Priding themselves on having a democratic approach towards art and culture, Fluxus artists and scholars such as Higgins, Filliou and Friedman encouraged correspondents to branch out. It is one aspect of this expansion – to Canadian ground – that will be further addressed in Chapter 2. As American correspondence artists affixed the additional postage to send their mailings north to Canada, mail art periodicals and archives began to appear. While Canada’s key role in promoting mail art at the beginning of the 1970s has generally been ignored in mail art scholarship, the following chapter will

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁶⁰ John Held, Jr. *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography*, xxiii.

focus on its emergence as well as on Canadian mail artists, and on their efforts to document the network.

Chapter 2 – Networking Through the 1970s: Mail Art Magazines and Archives

The period of the 1960s and 70s was marked by suspicion of the establishment. Many artists and intellectuals of the time refused to take part in social organizations, and went to great effort to create a new art or process that better suited their changing values. Mail art's set of guidelines respected the epoch's vision of freedom and inclusiveness: "Anyone can participate in mail art from children and up. It democratizes art. Everyone can participate despite location. It decentralizes art. Everyone can participate no matter the level of skillfulness. It dematerializes art."⁶¹

The idea that one could find a way into the visual art mainstream and do so without the input of established institutions – a philosophy Ray Johnson had promoted, but without following it – was stimulating. With time, each networker's mailing list grew, sometimes with little consideration as to whether recipients were artists or not. This was one of the appeals of mail art: it brought artists and non-artists together. The possibility of becoming a correspondence artist was open to all. John Held Jr., an American researcher dedicated to the promotion of mail art, later described correspondence art as being "a democratic art movement whose greatest accomplishment has been the construction of an open system that creative people could take part in without fear of rejection."⁶² The creative person could metamorphose into a full-fledged artist overnight, at least for the duration of his or her participation within the network. The institutional infrastructure associated with more established media – such as painting and sculpture – tended to place great importance on hierarchy and status, thereby generating a sense of rivalry between

⁶¹ John Held, Jr., *Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography*, xii.

⁶² John Held, Jr., "A Living Thing in Flight: Contributions and Liabilities of Collecting and Preparing Contemporary Avant-Garde Materials for an Archive," *American Art Journal*, Vol. 40 Issue 3-4 (2000), 11.

artists. In contrast, mail art's openness seemed to promote no such pecking order. Connoisseur or amateur, anyone could begin to correspond with any mail art affiliate.

The mailbox had originally been chosen in the hope of destabilizing the boundaries of traditional artistic categories. However, the mailbox only permitted participants to view incoming mail. Since mail art's foundation was the creation of a system of exchange that would be available to all, it became clear that new methods of viewing and new forms of distribution needed to be instigated. The mailbox alone could no longer accommodate the mail artist or the movement's growing public. Some form of documentation and archiving was necessary.

Canada was at the forefront of the shift towards this development. As Chapter 2 investigates the emergence of mail art in Canada, we will examine Canadian networkers' growing interest in creating magazines and archives that would both explicate and enlarge the correspondence art practice. To illustrate the approach of the 1970s, this chapter will focus on Image Bank, General Idea and Anna Banana. All three were united by their ambition to establish a new context for the distribution, documentation, discussion and criticism of mail art. Each was influential in developing the mail art movement in Canada through magazines and archives. To date, there have been 23 mail art magazines in Canada, three active mail art archives and four acknowledged private collections (Appendix 1).

LIFE, FILE, VILE: THE MUTATION OF THE ENVELOPE INTO A MAGAZINE
Plagiarism is inherent in all artistic activity; it implies a sense of history.⁶³

In 1966, Ken Friedman, an influential figure within the Fluxus movement in the United States, began compiling the addresses of active mail artists. Working under the

⁶³ Stewart Home, *Neoism, Plagiarism & Praxis* (Edinburgh & San Francisco: AK Press, 1995).

nom de plume Fluxus West, his goal was to eventually make this list public and thus enlarge the mail art network. Two years later, Friedman succeeded, sending the list as a brochure, hoping to make it a recurring publication. Friedman's index of mail artists was the first to be printed and sent out. Although the "idea lasted one issue [only, it] established a notion of gathering as the editorial principle of a magazine."⁶⁴ Internationally, underground newspapers and publications began to grow exponentially, giving way to informal 'zines such as *The New York Correspondence School Weekly Breeder* in the United States (Ken Friedman, 1971) and *Banana Rag* in Canada (Anna Banana, 1971), both of which dealt exclusively with mail art. The editors of these self-published newspapers wove webs across the globe, establishing contact "through the post, [forming] a loose community of like-minded individuals who [constituted] a sort of parallel alternative society."⁶⁵

The first appearance of mail art in Canadian mailboxes, in 1968, is credited to Michael Morris (also known as Marcel Dot or Marcel Idea). Ray Johnson was flipping through the pages of *Artforum* when he came upon a reproduction of Morris's *The Problem of Nothing* (1966), which is today part of the Vancouver Art Gallery collection. Morris's oil painting was a rhythmic composition of overlapping wallpaper-like stripes, shapes and colors. An undulating speech-bubble was placed at the center, filled with bands of yellow, black and blue. Struck by this Op Art painting, Johnson sent Morris a cryptic letter discussing his interest in 'nothing.' It read: "Find your *Problem of Nothing* very interesting since I have performed 'nothings' during the years of 'happenings' and

⁶⁴ Friedman, *op. cit.*, 145.

⁶⁵ The author's correspondence with A.A. Bronson, February 19, 2006.

now am concerned with 'meetings' with New York Correspondance letter-writers."⁶⁶ Thus began the mail art exchange connecting New York and Vancouver. While Morris had been making use of geometric patterns and contrasting colors to create the illusion of movement, his correspondence with Johnson pushed his art into a network of postal activity. In March 1969, Morris invited Johnson to the University of British Columbia for the opening of *Concrete Poetry*, an exhibition of collage and concrete poetry held at the University's Fine Arts Gallery. Since the beginning of Morris's involvement with Ray Johnson's network, he had been diligently compiling addresses of mail artists and adding the names of fellow Canadian artists. By the time Ray Johnson organized the *New York Correspondence School* exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970, many West Coast artists had been added to his mailing list. Sharing Morris's interest in the network were Gary Lee Nova, Vincent Trasov (Mr. Peanut), Dana Atchley, Eric Metcalfe (Dr. Brute) and Ed Varney (Mr. Poem), all of whom contributed to the exhibition.

In 1970, with the help of Trasov and the early participation of Lee Nova, Morris established Image Bank, a mail art organization through which the artists issued the *Image Request List*. Quite literally, Image Bank was a bank of images, which acted as a public art-depository. The *Request List* was a one- to two-page inventory mailed at regular intervals to fellow artists. The alphabetical index recorded the contact information of active networkers from Canada and abroad, and by 1972, included artists such as Joseph Beuys, Joseph Cornell, Greg Curnoe, Robert Fillou, Joseph Kosuth, Ed Ruscha, Henry Saxe, Michael Snow and Ray Johnson. Next to each name was added the artist's

⁶⁶ *Hand of the Spirit: Documents of the Seventies* (Vancouver: UBC Fine Arts Gallery, Morris/Trasov Archive, 1994), 7.

request. For example, in 1971 Coach House Press requested pictures of beavers, while General Idea asked for “borderline cases and sweeping generalities.” The correspondence format chosen by Image Bank was instrumental in concretizing the emergence of a Canadian mailing network. The *Image Request List*, which underwent a variety of name changes, including *Legal Tender Image Bank Annual Report* and *International Image Exchange Directory*, provided artists with the possibility of exchanging images, thus becoming aware of each other’s fields of interest. Most importantly, this repository of addresses gave artists a sense of physical presence and proximity. If every artist were represented by a dot, then the artist directory helped to connect the dots, uniting artists who would otherwise have remained isolated. It also provided artists with a feeling of independence and self-sufficiency by replacing the gallery, as a means of validation, with a large network of other artists.

The response was positive and the Image Bank’s mailing list grew exponentially from month to month. In 1972, Ken Friedman added the names of over 1400 correspondents to those already identified in the Image Bank.⁶⁷ Soon, it was realized that if Image Bank did not find a new method for distributing its index, the cost of its mailing would outstrip its resources. Fortunately, AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal, a young trio of artists based in Toronto (who had formed the artistic collective General Idea in 1969), had plans for the creation of an art magazine that would promote alternative art practices.

In the early 1970s, General Idea was put in contact with the founders of Image Bank through their existing association with Toronto’s independent publishing company Coach House Press, with which they had collaborated on the series *Snore Comix*

⁶⁷ Crane, *op. cit.*, 90.

(1969).⁶⁸ Soon, General Idea began using Image Bank's *Request List* to correspond with a vast number of artists including Ray Johnson in New York, and Gilbert Proesch and George Passmore, better known as Gilbert & George, in London.

In 1971, the federal Liberal government extended the Opportunities for Youth (OFY) employment programmes, offering grants under both the OFY and the Local Initiatives Programs (LIP).⁶⁹ Artists' groups discovered that they could benefit from this seed money, as the LIP would provide financial support to enable, among other things, the development of artists' centers and programmes, as well as to help budding artists create an audience for themselves. It was through a \$15,406.00 grant, received in January 1972 from the Government of Canada under the LIP in Toronto, that General Idea created the first edition of *FILE Magazine*.⁷⁰ The term 'megazine' (as opposed to 'magazine') was used to underline *FILE's* 'zine quality, a 'zine being a publication issued at irregular intervals, with limited means, often of an informal nature, and in which little advertisement was found. According to AA Bronson, *FILE* was a mega-zine, "in the sense of having an overview. *FILE* was a magazine with a mega-view of the world, more particularly of the art world. It was a simulacrum ... of the museum."⁷¹ The megazine was edited and designed by all three members of General Idea, along with the initial help of Sharon Venne (better known as Granada Gazelle).⁷² Published by Art Official Inc., *FILE's* first issue came out on April 15th, 1972, its cover graced by Mr. Peanut (Image

⁶⁸ The third issue of *Shore Comix* was edited by Michael Tims, soon to become AA Bronson. Later, during *FILE's* first years in print, Coach House provided the only advertisement, which was placed on the back cover.

⁶⁹ Diana Nemiroff, *A History of Artist-Run Spaces in Canada, With Particular Reference to Véhicule, A Space and the Western Front* (Thesis (M.A.): Concordia University, 1985), 11.

⁷⁰ NGC (grant #311-178)

⁷¹ The author's correspondence with A.A. Bronson, June 1st, 2006.

⁷² Granada Gazelle was crowned Miss General Idea 1969 and was one of the employees working for *FILE Magazine*. Records show that Gazelle was one of *FILE's* four directors, with AA Bronson, Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal.

Bank's Vincent Trasov) standing before the Toronto skyline (fig. 10). Choosing to copy *LIFE Magazine's* cover layout, General Idea replaced the well-known white and red logo with an anagram. This decision later caused the group to face substantial legal problems, ending with a settlement in the *LIFE's* favor. *FILE Magazine* dropped the red and white logo in 1975.

A quick glance at the table of contents reveals that at least a third of *FILE* was dedicated specifically to "Mailing Exchange," with separate sections titled: "Image Bank," "Image Exchange" and "Artists' Directory." In the section entitled "Image Bank," the reader found an assortment of the correspondence sent to either General Idea or Image Bank. This included photographs, collages and letters. On the other hand, "Image Exchange" consisted of an extensive list of artists, their contact information, and their individual mailings requests (what Morris and Trasov had originally named the *Image Request List*). The "Artists' Directory" section did not include requests. Instead it listed the names and addresses of artists interested in corresponding with each other. *FILE's* first editorial, "You're Not Just One of the Herd" by AA Bronson, proclaimed Ray Johnson to be mail art's "sugardada." The remainder of the publication consisted of an assortment of miscellaneous mail art facts and projects, in which readers could find requests for anything from photographs of raised skirts to proposals for the architectural design of the mythical 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion. General Idea engorged their quarterly with extensive questionnaires, asking readers to mail in suggestions or vote for their favorite artists.

Today, *FILE Magazine* is recognized as being the first major mail art publication anywhere.⁷³ However, at the time, the members of General Idea were more interested in decentralizing the art scene and creating a medium of exchange between artists than in creating mail art *per se*. That an art practice might emerge from this exchange was simply an interesting potential upshot. Indeed, *FILE* was created to respond to the protests of Canadian artists who felt removed from active art scenes: “The number of serious art dealers, interested in unproved local art – especially art made in a spirit of questioning and experimentation with form and medium – was small”.⁷⁴ Canada’s geographical reality often resulted in the isolation of alternative artists. Living even in a city as large as Toronto, AA Bronson felt that young artists such as himself had “no art scene to speak of, and very little in the way of fellow artists.”⁷⁵ How different this was from New York, for example, where artists congregated to join others who moved there and *made it*. Bronson claims that neither Toronto nor anywhere else in Canada had an equivalent draw. Canadian artists were spread out, from sea to sea, making the notion of communication abstract. To improve this situation, and to provide art-related employment (25 employees were eventually hired by *FILE*⁷⁶), General Idea proposed the creation of a magazine

⁷³ Although the *New York Correspondence School Weekly Breeder* (Ken Friedman) was published a year before the first issue of *FILE*, it is not considered to be the first major mail art publication. While the *Weekly Breeder* was (and is) certainly well-known within the networking community, the 'zine was chaotic in appearance, with its scrapbook format. It was often only a page long, hand-written and limited in its content (mail art or otherwise). *FILE Magazine*, on the other hand, had a polished appearance and, more importantly, a much wider audience. The members of General Idea took seriously to establishing communication between artists, making available the *Image Bank Request List*. In this way, *FILE* popularized the network and made it available to a large public, something the *Weekly Breeder* did not succeed in doing.

⁷⁴ Nemiroff, *op. cit.*, 16.

⁷⁵ The author’s correspondence with A.A. Bronson, February 19, 2006.

⁷⁶ *FILE*’s 25 employees: Michael Tims (AA Bronson), Ron Gabe (Felix Partz), George Saia (Jorge Zontal), Sharon Venne (Granada Gazelle); Paul Oberst (O Burst), Julie Cowan; Rodney Werden, Heitt Lock, Danny Freedman, Jack Taylor (P.J., Plastic Jack), Simon Holman, David Hlynsky (H. Lynsky), Anna Long (Anna Banana), Susan Werden (Susan Harrison, A.S.A. Harrison), Mimi Paige (Miss General Idea 1968), Tom Dean, John Jack Baylin (John Jack), Carole Fisher, Margaret Coleman (Miss Generality), John Mascivch,

“with the specific intent of facilitating the exchange, development, and integration of ideas and projects between artists across Canada.”⁷⁷ One of *FILE*’s press releases in the early 1970s added that the magazine had “provided a means for some 500 Canadian artists to set up exchange links and contacts previously impossible.”⁷⁸ Moreover, *FILE* provided a new context for artists to document and (consequently) archive their input within an artistic community. As Bronson claimed, *FILE* was a museum’s simulacrum. In this sense, *FILE*’s second issue, for example, ‘exhibited’ correspondent Mimi Paige’s Polaroid portrait of Winnipeg native Ahsram Rrac on the cover page. Both their names were acknowledged in the table of contents – as would be done by a label in an art gallery. Also, a collage of banana images sent by Anna Banana was reproduced in full on page 31, accompanied by a brief biography of the artist. These are only two examples of how General Idea represented the 33 mail artists found in this issue. The exhibition space thus became “the printed page rather than gallery walls.”⁷⁹ The artworks, comments and votes artists mailed in to General Idea guided the direction of each issue. *FILE*, “a transcanadada art organ produced by artists for artists quarterly,” was created for the artist rather than the art consumer. At the center of *FILE Magazine* was always the artist.

In a letter supporting General Idea’s proposal for *FILE Magazine* in January 1972, Kirman Cox of the Local Initiatives Program wrote: “Both *Artscanada* [sic] and *Vie des arts* don’t fulfill the function that General Idea hopes to pursue.”⁸⁰ Indeed, the Canadian

Myra Knetchel (Mary Beth Knetchel), Honey Novick (Miss Honey, Miss General Idea 1970), Stuart Murray (Pascal), Michael Morris (Marcel Idea, Marcel Dot, Miss General Idea 1971), and Kate Metcalfe (Kate Craig). General Idea, Box 30, File Magazine series (d), General Idea Fonds, 1972, NGC Archives.

⁷⁷ General Idea, Box 29, *FILE Magazine* news releases, ca. early 1970, NGC Archives.

⁷⁸ *Idem.*

⁷⁹ Karen McKenzie; Mary F. Williamson (eds.), *The Art and Pictorial Press in Canada: Two Centuries of Art Magazines* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1979), 7.

⁸⁰ General Idea, Box 29, Confidential (letter from the Local Initiatives Program in Toronto, signed by Kirman Cox), January 4, 1972, NGC Archives.

art magazines that were widely available at the time (*Artmagazine*, *artscanada* and *Vies des arts*) were “glossies ... which tend[ed] to reflect the concerns of the critics and artists of these centers”.⁸¹ On the other hand, alternative magazines – or artists’ magazines – such as *FILE*, *Region* (Greg Curnoe, 1961-68), *Impulse* (Eldon Garnet, 1975-90), *Centerfold* (Clive Robertson, 1976-80) and others promoted non-established and often local artists. What’s more, the appearance of these alternative magazines and ‘zines resembled works of art in their own right due to the limited number of copies printed of each issue and their informal, ‘handmade’ look (they were often hand-written and photocopied at a local print shop). For example, only four copies were printed of *Region*’s first issue, while 3000 to 5000 copies of each issue of *FILE Magazine* were distributed.⁸² This number is still fairly small in comparison to magazines like *Artmagazine* and *artscanada*, for which 10,000 copies were published bi-monthly.⁸³

General Idea circulated their magazine’s first two issues for free, mailing it to friends and fellow networkers. By December 1972, subscriptions were requested. General Idea explained: “A lot of people have told us *FILE* is priceless but that doesn’t pay the printer.... It costs us about \$2000.00 to put out an issue of *FILE* which is all material costs.... On page 32 [of *FILE*’s third edition] you’ll find the inevitable subscription form.... *FILE* is *freer* at \$2.00 [the price of a yearly subscription].” Without having to depend on grant money or sponsors (as did Coach House Press), General Idea would be *freer* to discuss taboo subjects that were often sexual or vulgar in content. They shifted their interest towards becoming a transgressive publication, including a photograph of a “knife up the ass” or printing a feature article titled “Pablum for the Pablum-Eaters”,

⁸¹ David Buchan in *The Art and Pictorial Press in Canada: Two Centuries of Art Magazines*, 40.

⁸² *Idem*.

⁸³ Ulrich’s International Periodicals Directory.

pushing the limits of the acceptable. The editorial of *FILE*'s fourth issue in May 1973 warned the reader: "Cut up or shut up. Everything is permitted." This must have appealed to their readers, since by February 1974 the Artists' Directory had reached a staggering 32 pages, in comparison to four for the first issue. Priced at an affordable fifty cents in 1972 (one dollar by 1973), available at both corner street stands in Toronto and by subscription, *FILE* was successful in reaching thousands. General Idea widened the network's membership while establishing a trans-Canadian artistic infrastructure.

Only mailings that interested the members of General Idea were published, giving new artists the opportunity to have their names and work recognized, discriminating against those judged of lesser talent. The mailings sent in by Image Bank (either Michael Morris or Vincent Trasov), as well as by Robert Cumming and Ray Johnson, were clearly personal favorites of General Idea, as their names appeared in every pre-1975 issue of *FILE*. Because General Idea accepted submissions from both artists and non-artists, they were quickly swamped: with "getting up ... making coffee and then sitting down to sift through the masses of that day's mail."⁸⁴ In addition, echoing Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), in which an underground mail delivery system requires its members to send at least one letter per week even if they have nothing to say, the mailings sent back and forth between networkers worldwide became generic. *FILE* had opened Pandora's box, letting the world's artistic misfits believe that a stamp could replace actual talent. Mail art's open network, which had seemed so appealing in the beginning, meant that General Idea received works from a surprisingly "wide range of talent, most of which was less developed than their own."⁸⁵ By 1974, Robert Cumming, a

⁸⁴ The author's correspondence with A.A. Bronson, February 19, 2006.

⁸⁵ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, February 21, 2006.

regular contributor to the magazine, sent several letters of complaint, most of which *FILE* published. Cumming demanded that “new correspondents ... stop violating [his] mail slot each morning”, claiming that he could “no longer answer a bad piece of mail”.⁸⁶ In a private letter addressed to Jorge Saia (Jorge Zontal of General Idea) two years later, Cumming wrote: “I’ve been flashing back on a lot of pre-mail MAIL ART; 1967-1970 that was quite inventive, unobtrusive, strong and thoughtful ... *FILE* #1, and the discovery of the network thru Image Bank was an excitement unimagined that turned out to be an ultimate downer and redundant, mis-match [sic] of intents.”⁸⁷ What correspondence art had thought of as its strength – the exchange of pure and unrefined ideas – in fact led to its decline. Because General Idea made the network accessible to the general public, Bronson claims that the first few issues of *FILE* “‘killed’ the mail art scene [as h]oordes of people began participating who were essentially visual bores and we began to lose interest.”⁸⁸ According to Anna Banana, “[It killed] it for him/them/those whose concepts of art had remained exclusive.”⁸⁹ John Held Jr. agrees: “I think it was “killed” for the ... generation already engaged in the field ... But [mail art] didn’t die – it transformed.”⁹⁰ By 1975, the subject of mail art was no longer addressed in *FILE*, and the magazine’s selling price was raised to five dollars. Questionnaires and votes for the “artist of the month” were *passé* and so was the network. The Artists’ Directory was last published in the *Glamour Issue* that same year.

⁸⁶ General Idea, *FILE*, January 1, 1974 (84), 40. After one of Cumming’s previous attacks on mail art, Anna Banana responded in *FILE*: “How clever of you to print Mr. Cumming’s timely demise of ‘Mail Art’ – and leave off his address – guarantees you a big response and him no risk of retaliatory bilge from those who consider themselves condemned.”

⁸⁷ General Idea, Box 29, File Megazine Series (correspondence with Robert Cumming), March 26th, 1976, NGC Archives.

⁸⁸ The author’s correspondence with A.A. Bronson, February 19, 2006.

⁸⁹ The author’s correspondence with Anna Banana, February 26, 2006.

⁹⁰ The author’s correspondence with John Held Jr., March 9, 2006.

There had been several warnings of *FILE*'s declining interest in mail art. Not only had Robert Cumming's letters of complaint begin to appear in every issue, but the second page of *FILE*'s sixth issue (December 1973) published a small advertisement for '*VILE*: Sequel to the Late Life Coum [sic; *cum*] File.' The half-page advertisement suggested the impending death of *FILE*, inviting readers to send "contributions verbal, visual, news, gossip, doings [or] happenings [to] 3199 Clay Street in San Francisco." The call was accompanied by a photograph of Ray Johnson looking through a cut-out *FILE Magazine*, his face smeared with what seems to be mud.

VILE (also referred to as *VILE International*) was founded by Anna Banana, a Victoria-born public school teacher turned full-time mail artist. She was a frequent contributor to *FILE Magazine*, in which her contact information, requests (images of foolish things, bananas, Queen of Hearts and rainbows), collages and retaliatory letters concerning Robert Cumming and the demise of mail art were published. Banana's artistic activities had begun in 1971 in Sooke, British Columbia, where she became the *Town Fool of Victoria*, parading around the city in a rainbow costume and volunteering as a visual arts teacher. That same year Banana began publishing the *Banana Rag* newsletter (100 copies were printed of the first edition) in which she clarified her intentions in becoming the *Town Fool*. It was by sending *Banana Rag* to fellow friends and artists that she was put in contact with Image Bank and received their *Image Request List*. From then on, Banana was a networker. *Banana Rag* is still in print today; its most recent issue – number 34, of which 200 copies were printed – was sent in January 2006. The newsletters are short; with the last issue only six pages in length. *Banana Rag* focuses primarily on mail art and artistamps (artist-made stamps that have no postal currency). It also

discusses the author's whereabouts and projects, always including images and tidbits related to bananas, her infamous trademark. The reader is casually addressed as "dear networker."

After spending two years living as the *Town Fool* – years that culminated with the *Victoria Day Parade* in April 1972 – Anna Banana began "feeling terribly isolated and odd ball".⁹¹ In 1973, she chose to relocate to warmer San Francisco, where the mail art community was vibrant. There, she continued to correspond with General Idea and to receive *FILE Magazine*. Neighbour to *Speedprint*, her local print shop in San Francisco, Banana reasoned that anyone could walk in and become a small-scale publisher. It was after reading one too many letters disapproving of mail art's quality that she sent *FILE* an advertisement for *VILE*, with the goal of publishing her own mail art bulletin.

Back in 1972, *FILE* had appropriated *LIFE Magazine's* logo. In a semiotic twist, General Idea had subverted *LIFE's* recognizable font and format. Similarly, when embarking on a mission to revive mail art, Banana plagiarized *FILE's* name and design. *LIFE* turned into *FILE*, which turned *VILE*, with the latter bearing little resemblance to either one of its predecessors. Indeed, Anna Banana's first issue of *VILE* was far removed from General Idea's Mr. Peanut cover; it depicted mail artist Monty Cazazza ripping his heart out, either screaming or sadistically laughing (fig. 11). The cover did justice to the magazine's title. *VILE* lasted for seven issues, published between 1974 and 1980. Although all issues were published in the United States, where Banana had established herself and married fellow mail artist Bill Gaglione,⁹² she considers the periodical to be Canadian. Banana claims that it was to have *VILE* acknowledged as a Canadian

⁹¹ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, March 13, 2006.

⁹² Gaglione (also known as Dadaland) is the American rubber stamp and mail artist Banana married and later divorced in 1981.

periodical that she published *About Vile* (1983) in Vancouver, where she now lives.⁹³ *About Vile*, also referred to as the eighth issue of *VILE*, describes the magazine's history.

Banana expected the arrival of 'quick-copy' images, in the style that had turned General Idea off mail art. She was surprised to receive intricate full-page collages, complex artworks, poetry and even fiction. Banana still believed that in the mailbox there existed no hierarchy, no jury and no bad art. Although Banana ignored *FILE*'s policy of sorting through the mailings and choosing the better ones, surprisingly, artists who responded to her advertisement in *FILE Magazine* seemed to take more time and care with their mailings. Banana printed 200 copies of each mailing received, binding them together. Submissions included the work of many mail art regulars such as Dana Atchey, Michael Morris, and even General Idea. By *VILE*'s second issue, Ken Friedman and Ray Johnson had also sent in their contributions. Most networkers were inspired by Banana's name, sending banana-themed correspondence. For example, Neil Felts, a Fluxus artist from Washington, sent Anna Banana *Fake Collage by Richard C: Nil Poem*, a collage depicting Christ with a Chiquita Banana logo halo. Felts collage was published in *VILE*'s last issue in 1983. Felix Partz, from General Idea, sent *VILE's Double International Issue* (1976) a postcard of a penis-less young man, scribbling "Anna Bananna [sic] ate my banana" on the postcard's verso.

Copies of *VILE* were sent to networkers as well as to several bookstores in New York, London, Amsterdam and Geneva.⁹⁴ In 1975, 1977 and 1979, Banana received \$500 from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines to invest in *VILE*.⁹⁵ Since the magazine never received enough funding to be sent for free, a mail-order promotion was

⁹³ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, March 12, 2006.

⁹⁴ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, June 9th, 2006.

⁹⁵ *Idem*.

needed. This promotion was forwarded to those on Banana's mailing list and to larger institutions. Subscribers included the National Gallery of Canada, Art Metropole, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and many more.⁹⁶ *VILE's* price ranged from three to twelve dollars.

As noted above, in San Francisco, Anna Banana had been collaborating with Bill Gaglione on several projects and performances. She also consented to let him both edit and publish *VILE's* fourth issue (1976), having herself performed these tasks for the earlier issues. Previously, Banana had extended the definition of mail art to include literature. However, Gaglione's *Double International Issue* focused exclusively on correspondence art. The magazine opened with a table of contents listing the artists represented as well as their countries of origin, and closed with an "Index of Participating Artists." This index was a scaled-down version of *FILE/Image Bank's* artist directory and listed the names and addresses of 72 mail artists, 17 of whom resided in Canada. The sixth issue, entitled *Fe-Mail Art*, (edited by Bill Gaglione and published by Anna Banana in 1978) represented 111 female artists, only six of which were Canadian. Lady Brute (Kate Metcalfe) was from the collective Western Front, Rose (C'est La Vie) (real name unknown), Adrienne Saunders and Dana Long were from British Columbia, while Ms. Generality (Margaret Coleman) and Granada Gazelle (Sharon Venne), both connected to *FILE Magazine*, were from Ontario. *Fe-Mail Art* was divided into three distinct categories: "Postal Art," "Postcards" and "Correspondence." "Postal Art" included photographs, collage and newspaper cut-outs. "Postcards," the largest section, including 61 of the 111 artists, reproduced postcards sent to either Banana or Gaglione, and "Correspondence" included interesting (in design or content) letters.

⁹⁶ Anna Banana, *A Book About VILE* (Vancouver: Banana Productions, 1983), 3.

Although *VILE* was successful in taking over a portion of *FILE*'s mail art market, Banana's periodical was never printed in editions exceeding one thousand. Because the majority of *VILE* readers were members of the Eternal Network (as opposed to *FILE* Magazine, which was available outside the mail art community), "*VILE* had little impact outside its own community".⁹⁷ Nevertheless, Anna Banana's contribution to the mail art scene remains important because of her constant determination to document the movement's history and because of her ongoing activities as a mail artist. Besides *Banana Rag* and *VILE*, these included such exhibitions (in which she participated) as *Art Travels: Mail Art Festival at the National Postal Museum* held at the Museum of Civilization in Gatineau (1992), and those she curated, which included *Popular Art of Postal Parody* at Open Space in Victoria (2000). While 'traditional' mail art was described by critics such as Robert Morgan and John Held Jr. as both a sophisticated and an open art forum, the emergence of Canadian art magazines devoted to the mail art movement, such as *FILE* and *VILE*, provided a forum of greater magnitude.⁹⁸ Both magazines opened a new space for mail artists to document and exhibit their input within the mailing community.

FORWARD CORRESPONDENCES TO THE ARCHIVES

Guy Bleus described his archive as a cemetery where the results of mail art activities were mummified to ensure their preservation.⁹⁹

"Since when does the artist become also a collector and a private museum?" asked J. C. Palmer (also known as Rudi Rubberoid) in a letter to John Held Jr. in 1990.

⁹⁷ *Idem.*

⁹⁸ Robert Morgan to John Held, Jr. in "A Living Thing in Flight: Contributions and Liabilities of Collecting and Preparing Contemporary Avant-Garde Materials for an Archive," 13.

⁹⁹ Guy Bleus, *Aerogramme Mail-Art Project Tienen, CP56 Commonpress Retrospective B.T.S.* (Tienen: Stedelijk Drukkerij, 1984).

Although the letter ended abruptly with the order to “Burn this”, it still managed to find its way into the Archives of American Art.¹⁰⁰ Held, the recipient of the correspondence, is a mail art collector. It therefore seems natural that he would choose to ignore Palmer’s demand, preferring to have the correspondence catalogued at the Smithsonian Institution than to see it destroyed.

While collectors such as Held agree that the initial postal exchange remains at the core of the mail art practice, its archiving allows both art historians and artists to retrace the steps taken to advance the movement. As Held explains: “Mail Art may be an ephemeral exchange, but cumulative archiving allows us to draw certain conclusions only drawn after contemplation of an ongoing process.”¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the archiving, cataloguing and even exhibiting of mail art requires the removal of the mailings from their original context. The archiving of correspondence art also conflicts with networkers’ desires to dematerialize the art object since, in this new context, the preserved mailing will be recognized as a final result rather than as part of a process. Just as the entomologist must trap the insect to take a closer look, the mail art collector will “catch a living thing in flight, to pin it down and make a ... [display] of it”.¹⁰²

Mail artists were not the only group to be interested in the archival process. It became a common practice for a large number of conceptual artists and performance artists during the 1960s and 70s. Among these were Robert Smithson and Marina

¹⁰⁰ John Held Jr., “A Living Thing in Flight: Contributions and Liabilities of Collecting and Preparing Contemporary Avant-Garde Materials for an Archive,” 11. Held donated three storage boxes of mail art to the AAA after the director (since retired) Dr. Paul Karlstrom asked him for a contribution. As a result of the donation, Held was asked by the editor of the *Archives of American Art Journal*, Darcy Tell, to contribute the essay “A Living Thing in Flight” to the *Journal* (2000).

¹⁰¹ The author’s correspondence with John Held Jr., March 14, 2006.

¹⁰² Kasha Linville, “New York: Ray Johnson, Whitney Museum,” *Art Forum* 9 (November 1970): 86.

Abramovic, two very different artists who documented their art processes seriously. Artworks that are by definition transient or conceptual often generate archives of physical documentation. Smithson carefully photographed and provided preparatory drawings for his earthworks, for example *Partly Buried Woodshed* (1970), in which Smithson temporarily transformed land into art. Abramovic did the same for her performance piece *Lips of Thomas* (1973-1994). These pieces were thus kept from occupying only fleeting moments and from being witnessed only by a selected few. The artists' documentation of the process can later be exhibited, sold or archived, giving the original, ephemeral pieces importance and influence long after they have ended or been destroyed.

Correspondence art's first attempt to archive art and make correspondence accessible to those outside the network was the mail art magazine, particularly *FILE* and *VILE*. The format chosen by *VILE*, which divided the magazine into categories of mailings, was especially akin to the cataloguing of an archive. It was not long before Canadian mail art archives were created in response to the thousands of mailings received through these periodicals. As such, correspondence archives did not *emerge*, but rather *accumulated*.¹⁰³ While involved in the creation of mail art periodicals, General Idea and Anna Banana set up mail art collections and archives, in the public and private domains.¹⁰⁴ These are known respectively as Art Metropole (National Gallery, Ottawa) and the Banana Mail-Art Archive (the artist's residence, Roberts Creek, Vancouver). The following sections briefly describe the content and purpose of these archives.

¹⁰³ This distinction was pointed out to me in a correspondence with Anna Banana, April 23, 2006.

¹⁰⁴ It should be noted that Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov transformed Image Bank into both the artist-run center Western Front (in the spring of 1973, in Vancouver) and the Morris/Trasov Archive (now housed at the Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver). However, for the purpose of this thesis, the author has chosen to use Art Metropole as an example of a 'public archive,' while recognizing that both archives had considerable similarities.

Art Metropole opened its doors on October 26th, 1974. Neighbour to *FILE Magazine's* office on Yonge Street in Toronto, it was housed in an abandoned restaurant that had originally been one of Toronto's earliest art galleries: Art Metropole. General Idea advertised Art Metropole as "an extension of *FILE Magazine*".¹⁰⁵ The term *extension* is key in describing this archive, since the materials collected were also those received through *FILE's* involvement with mail art. Although not all mailings were published in the pages of *FILE*, as Anna Banana would do with *VILE*, they certainly could all be preserved. AA Bronson explained in 2006: "It was as a result of the volume of material [received in response to *FILE*] – and we were absolutely sure that this material had historical value – that we began Art Metropole".¹⁰⁶ The materials collected were received rather than commercially purchased. In fact, most of the items in the archive's early collection were sent from correspondents who were unaware of the archival process associated with *FILE Magazine*. It was the "impulse to clarify and document the artist's vision [that] generated Art Metropole's collection", wrote Bronson in 1987.¹⁰⁷ Through the accumulation of correspondence and ephemera, the archive would narrate *FILE's* history, becoming a relic of the mail art process. The archive thus becomes an artwork in its own right. This idea has been shared by many avant-garde artists, such as Marcel Duchamp (*Boîte-en-valise*, 1935-41) and Marcel Broodthaers (*Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*, 1968-1972).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ General Idea, *FILE*, December 1973.

¹⁰⁶ The author's correspondence with AA Bronson, February 19, 2006.

¹⁰⁷ AA Bronson in Snow, Weiner, Nannucci. Toronto: Art Metropole, 1987.

¹⁰⁸ Luis Jacob, *Golden Stream: Artists' Collaboration and Exchange in the 1970s (Image Bank, General Idea, Banal Beauty Inc., and New York Corres Sponge Dance School of Vancouver)* (Toronto: Blackwood Gallery, 2003), 3.

General Idea was deeply committed to mapping the terrain of the avant-garde in general, not just in their own work. As a result, Art Metropole was home to both an archive and a distribution center. A thriving concept at the time, artist-run centers began to crop up across Canada. Among these were Montreal's Véhicule, Toronto's A Space as well as Intermedia and the Western Front in Vancouver.¹⁰⁹ The artist-run centers emerged thanks to a new generation of artists who were critical of available art venues and who sought more outlets to foster the growing interest in new media. Typically, these centers did not collect or archive art. Art Metropole differed because it was the first artist-run center in Canada to be established with the specific purpose of creating an alternative to the museum collection. It also provided an alternative to museum space by hosting video screenings and book launches.¹¹⁰ By the mid-1980s, this concept had proven so successful that Art Metropole added a small gallery space where works from the collection could be exhibited. By 1977, Art Metropole was distributing and publishing artists' books such as Tom Sherman's *Three Death Stories* (1977) and General Idea's *Ménage à Trois* (1978). A decade later, this activity was expanded to include artists' videos.

In 1996, Art Metropole ceased adding to its collection, focusing instead on its distribution programme and the organization of exhibitions. Its permanent collection of over 13,000 items was donated to the National Gallery of Canada in 1999 by Bronson and patron Jay A. Smith. Approximately 9000 searches are made yearly on the Art

¹⁰⁹ The reader is invited to look into Diana Nemiroff's Master's thesis from Concordia university: *A History of Artist-Run Space in Canada, With Particular Reference to Véhicule, A Space and the Western Front*, for more information on the subject.

¹¹⁰ www.artmetropole.com, December 14, 2006.

Metropole online database.¹¹¹ The distribution center continues its not-for-profit activities on King Street in Toronto. The Art Metropole archive includes original copies of *FILE Magazine* as well as the responses it generated, exhibition invitations, photographs, newspaper clippings and various correspondence, sent either to General Idea or to Art Metropole's staff. Once filed, every object is treated equally: whether it be a letter of complaint, a letter of request, a collage, a photograph, or a letter between *LIFE* and *FILE* lawyers. Interestingly, this new context changed the way mailings were viewed. Now handled with white gloves, the wide range of correspondence is united in the archival box. Placed side by side, all missives could be identified as mail art, even though this was not necessarily their original intent. Through the archival process, the mail art was often removed from its original envelope, thus enabling the archival box to become mnemonic. Since the archive is open to the public, viewers can enter the archive, open the cartons and find correspondence, thus preserving the experience of opening an envelope to find mail art.

The Artist's Collection or the Involuntary Archive
3747 Highway 101, Roberts Creek, British Columbia (V0N 2W2)

Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt wrote in 1966: "[The] artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the result of his premise."¹¹² As mail art attempted to break away from art institutions by creating new methods of viewing and distributing art, the artists were often called upon to double as collectors and archivists. The mail artist's home could thus be viewed as something of a private museum. For mail art, the collection is the spontaneous, often

¹¹¹ The author's correspondence with Peter Trépanier (National Gallery Library and Archive), August 30, 2006.

¹¹² Sol LeWitt, "Serial Project #1, 1966," *Aspen Magazine*, nos. 5-6, ed. Brian O'Doherty, 1967, n.p.

involuntary, result of an active participation in the network. As Ray Johnson insinuated in 1968, the creator becomes a collector by default: "I myself am an Archive of sorts having put in a forty year history of letter-writing and have had as a single person (non-funded) to deal with the receiving and distribution of global communications to a rather large cast of participants."¹¹³ The gathering of correspondence to create a substantial art collection was an appealing byproduct of the mail art process that influenced many to join the network. However, the proper cataloguing of a private mail art collection is typically a pre-requisite to establishing the collection within a public institution. For example, with the hired help of six full-time and nineteen part-time employees, General Idea was well-equipped to catalogue their mail art collection prior to Bronson donating it to the National Gallery of Canada. The same is not true for most mail artists, like Anna Banana, who became overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of correspondence that enters their mailbox. Although Banana continues to privately conserve the material sent her way – "I simply could not part with it"¹¹⁴ – the artist does so without succeeding in cataloguing it. The informal collection of mail art by artists such as Banana therefore results in the creation of many private 'archives'.

Banana's archive was begun in 1971, the year the artist joined the network.¹¹⁵ Anna Banana's private collection was identified in Welch's as the Banana Mail-Art Archive. In 1995, her collection was described in Chuck Welch's anthology, *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, as comprising "twelve boxes of mail art correspondences, collages, printed sheets; 4 boxes of unanswered, unfilled mail; 4 boxes

¹¹³ Fesci, *op. cit.*, 18.

¹¹⁴ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, March 3, 2006.

¹¹⁵ The accuracy of the term 'archive' is debatable in this context, seeing that her collection is more of an accumulation of material than it is an archive.

of mail art show invitations and catalogues; 1 box of postcards; 1 box of artistamps; 3 shelves of mail art books and publications.”¹¹⁶ A decade later, in 2006, her collection has grown to contain approximately 200 running feet of material. The collection is divided primarily into artistamps (including 2800 full sheets of stamps, as well as loose stamps and stamped envelopes), mail art (unsorted correspondence and miscellaneous mail art projects), related published material (*Banana Rag*, *VILE*, *Artistamp Collector’s Album*) and images of bananas.¹¹⁷ Stored in the artist’s home, the collection may be visited by appointment. With time and effort Banana’s private collection could be transformed into a public collection, as happened with General Idea. This is certainly one of Banana’s objectives. She wrote in the January 2006 issue of *Banana Rag*: “One of the projects I wish to get on with, is cataloguing my 35 year collection of mail-art ... I don’t wish to see this material go into the dumpster when I’m no longer able to house or take care of it, and I’ve come to the obvious conclusion that no institution will take it on without having a detailed idea of what’s in it.”¹¹⁸ To date, Banana has succeeded in cataloguing and selling 400 mail art pieces (including letters, envelopes, artistamps and various publications) to the Postal Museum, in the Museum of Civilization, Gatineau.

While the Eternal Network put great effort into circumventing the support of galleries and museums, it eventually dawned on mail artists that mail art as a process would face extinction if the larger public remained unaware of its existence. AA Bronson wrote in 1987: “[B]ecause we had not seen ourselves [alternative artists – specifically

¹¹⁶ Chuck Welch, *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology* (Toronto: University of Calgary Press, 1995), 265.

¹¹⁷ The author’s correspondence with Anna Banana, June 15, 2006.

¹¹⁸ Anna Banana, *Banana Rag*, Issue 34 (January 2006), 1.

General Idea] in the media ... we forgot that we ourselves were real artists".¹¹⁹ How could the network evaluate its success if mail artists remained unheard and unseen except to the other participants in the network? The goal of mail art magazines and archives was to promote the post as a support, gain membership, collect material, as well as preserve and document an important but potentially ephemeral art activity. As a result, mail artists secured their position within contemporary art, in the process providing motivation to have their correspondence art exhibited. The subject of mail art exhibitions will be explored at greater length in the following chapter.

¹¹⁹ AA Bronson (ed.), *From Sea to Shining Sea* (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1987), 164.

Chapter 3 – Opening the Mailbox to the Art Market: Exhibition and Sale

The first mail art exhibition in the world was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970. The exhibition featured the works of the 106 networkers who replied to Ray Johnson's invitation to "Send letters, post cards, drawings and objects to Marcia Turner, New York Correspondance School Exhibition" (fig. 12). Sent directly to the museum, all the mailings were exhibited. One year later, Canada followed with the *Image Bank Postcard Show*, an exhibition organized by the Image Bank to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the picture postcard. The exhibition included the works of eighty correspondents. All submissions were displayed at the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, in Vancouver.

Correspondence artists were not the first to organize juryless exhibitions.¹²⁰ In 1917, for example, this same concept was proposed by the *Société des Artists Indépendants* in New York City as a patriotic approach to the display of modern art. To put on a show "free of judges and juries," only days before the United States' involvement in the war, was seen as a way of encapsulating "the democratic values that America was fighting ... for."¹²¹ Or at least, this was the plan until Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) was unpacked. The directors of the New York Independent exhibition considered this factory-made object a mockery. Appalled that Duchamp would pass a *pissoir* as art, the directors discarded *Fountain* from the show. Clearly, the urinal was an

¹²⁰ Many exhibitions were set up without the help of a jury. An interesting example is the *Salon des Refusés* (Paris, 1863) that showcased all the artworks that had first been rejected by the official *Salon de Paris* exhibition. Many works were of poor quality and mocked by the press. Recently, the exhibition *Snapshots* (Gallery 25, California, 2005) was organized to display digital art and photography. Although multiple entries were permitted, a fee was requested for every submission, therefore limiting the amount of works of poor quality. Mail art exhibitions, on the other hand, do not have entry fees, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

¹²¹ Allan Antliff, "The Making and Mauling of Marcel Duchamp's Ready-Made," *Canadian Art*, Vol. 23, Number 1 (Spring 2006), 58.

unexpected arrival, pushing the exhibition's directors to act as impromptu jurors. In a similar vein, there are great challenges associated with the exhibition of mail art since the contents of the envelope are varied, obliging curators to make-do with unexpected mailings.

Between 1970 and 1979, seventy-seven mail art exhibitions took place worldwide, as compared to 546 during the decade that followed. Ray Johnson claimed that there were at least fifty thousand mail art participants by the mid-eighties, a far cry from the few hundred that first comprised the network.¹²² This growth coincided with two influential events within the mail art community. The first of these was the publication of *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Activity*, edited by Michael Crane and Mary Stofflet, in 1984.¹²³ This reference tool was the first mail art anthology. In 1986, the network held its first Decentralized Mail Art Congress, permitting correspondents to meet and discuss the future of their movement.¹²⁴ This congress, which occurred simultaneously in eighty different sessions around the globe, involved approximately 500 artists from twenty-five different countries.

While the number of people interested in the mail art movement increased, participants remained unclear as to mail art's impact on contemporary art and unsure as to the monetary value attached (or not) to their art practice. It was in an effort to better understand mail art's position within the art market, that networkers set out to have correspondence art exhibited in museums and galleries, spaces traditionally qualified as

¹²² *Flue: Mail Art Then and Now, Mail Art International Show* (New York: Franklin Furnace, 1984), 6.

¹²³ Michael Crane, *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity* (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1984).

¹²⁴ The Decentralized Mail Art Congress was organized by two mail artists from Switzerland, Gunther Rüh and Hans Rudi Fricker, It was referred to as 'decentralized' because it could occur any time two or more mail artists met face to face.

‘official’ art contexts. Taking examples from Canadian artists who particularly marked mail art’s exhibition history – Anna Banana, Sarah Jackson and Ed Varney – this chapter will investigate how each chose to display correspondence art at a time when networkers sought institutional validation. The challenges associated with the display of this eclectic practice will be discussed, providing specific examples as to how curators chose to interpret mail art. A study of artistamps and art money will help understand mail art’s worth.

CARDS ON THE TABLE: HOW TO DISPLAY MAIL ART

Amusement is rarely the public’s first goal when visiting a museum.¹²⁵

According to Hutton, an eighteenth-century bookseller: “Should a piece of withered paper lie on the floor, I should, without regard, shuffle it from under my feet. But if I am told it is a letter written by Edward the Sixth, that information sets a value upon the piece.”¹²⁶ Certainly, a typical museumgoer could appreciate the historical worth of royal correspondence and understand how it found its way onto a museum wall. The same was not true of mail art, which entered the museum without any such predilection or understanding. When Ray Johnson and Marcia Turner pinned pieces of correspondence to the white walls of the Whitney Museum in 1970, the documents appeared out of place. This incongruousness was not lost on art critic Hilton Kramer of the *New York Times*, who commented, after seeing the exhibition: “What you and I might deem fit for the waste basket, the Whitney Museum of American Art judges worthy of its exhibition space.”¹²⁷ Such remarks point to the fact that mail art was not showcased as a

¹²⁵ Gary Edson; David Dean, *The Handbook for Museums* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 147.

¹²⁶ Kenneth Hudson in *The New Museology* (London : Reaktion Books, 1989), 47.

¹²⁷ Hilton Kramer, “Art: Out of the Mailbox,” *New York Times* (September 12, 1970), 23.

cultural artifact, but as having artistic and aesthetic properties – however indiscriminating many of the examples were in terms of aesthetic worth.

No guidelines had ever been issued to indicate how mail art should be presented in a gallery setting. It was to remedy this situation that two American networkers, Lon Spiegelman and Mario Lara, released a mail art manifesto in 1980, in which they identified specific considerations that needed to be taken into account before exhibiting mail art. These guidelines, which are still respected today, became the Eternal Network's five rules for preparing a correspondence show: "(1) No fee (2) No jury (3) No returns (4) All works received will be exhibited (5) A complete catalogue will be sent free of charge to all participants."¹²⁸ By following these guidelines, described as "sacrosanct,"¹²⁹ mail artists ensured that all participants would be given an opportunity to have their work exhibited, and, this was hoped, would encourage newcomers to join the movement. Once the guidelines were set in place and observed, there remained the actual exhibition of the work. The following section will describe the general display of a typical mail art exhibition, identifying materials supporting the exhibition and discussing issues related to the labeling of correspondence art.

Exhibition panels offer a nutshell explanation as to what viewers can expect to see, and contextualize this information. When used, these provide the viewer with brief statements concerning the network's history and objectives. For example, a panel from *Show Your Colors*, an 1983 exhibition organized by Anna Banana at the Arts, Science and Technology Center in Vancouver, stated:

¹²⁸ Chuck Welch, *Networking Currents: Contemporary Mail Art Subjects and Issues*, Boston: Sandbar Willow Press, 1986, p. 109.

¹²⁹ Carlo Pittore to John Held, Jr., "A Living Thing in Flight: Contributions and Liabilities of Collecting and Preparing Contemporary Avant-Garde Materials for an Archive," 11.

Mail art is the name applied to the visual, verbal and sometimes audio (cassette) exchanges, sent by mail between creative individuals. Playfulness is an important aspect of the content.... The International Mail-Art Network (IMAN) is a community of creative individuals who have come to know each other through mailed exchanged. There are no membership fees, and anyone can join or quit whenever they choose.¹³⁰

The texts presented on the walls of *Show Your Colors* were taken directly from the exhibition catalogue written by Banana.

Mail art catalogues list the names and addresses of participating artists. Some catalogues, such as the one for *Arts & Artists of the 20th century* (Comox Valley Art Gallery, Vancouver, 1999), extended this list by providing a description of each artist's work. Since most mail art exhibitions have a meager budget of a few hundred dollars, the catalogue is modest in size and quality, often crafted by folding sheets of letter-sized paper and stapling them through the center. Ed Varney and Donna Hagerman's catalogue for the *First Vancouver International Heartbreak Hotel Valentine's Day Sweetheart Mail Art Show* (Pitt International Galleries, Vancouver, 1985) is a typical example.¹³¹ The catalogue consists of five standard sheets of pale pink paper, which were folded and stapled together. The cover shows a photocopy of a drawing submitted by Vancouver resident Don Murray. The first five pages are photocopies of invitations and press releases sent to promote the exhibition. One invitation requested "an original, any medium, Valentine's card and envelope"; one press release explained that "[v]irtually anything that can be sent through the mail qualifies as mail art". The following four pages of the catalogue, as well as the back cover, show examples of valentines submitted to the

¹³⁰ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, May 18, 2006.

¹³¹ Other examples illustrate the 'cheap,' hand-made qualities of the mail art catalogue: *The First Man on the Moon* (The Big Red Dot, Vancouver, 1994), *Arts & Artists of the 20th century* (Comox Valley Art Gallery, Vancouver, 1999), *Order from Chaos* (Oceanside Gallery, Parksville, British Columbia, 2004).

show: two from American artists and one each from Danish and German artists. Eight pages listed the names of the 299 participants and their contact information. Although 156 participants were Canadian, only four lived outside British Columbia (in Alberta, Ontario and Quebec). Indeed, while mail art is produced by an international network of artists, the exhibition's organizer will use his or her personal mailing list to contact artists willing to participate. This list will generally have a large number of artists from the organizer's vicinity. Consequently, the *Heartbreak Hotel* exhibition had many artists from British Columbia as both organizers lived and worked in Vancouver. Finally, the last page of the catalogue depicted three photographs: one taken during the opening, one showing of the piles of entries before they were set up and one depicting how the entries were placed on the wall (fig. 13).

The last photograph reveals something that is conspicuously absent in all mail art exhibitions: the labels. Because of the amount of correspondence exhibited (299 items, in the case of *Heartbreak Hotel*) it could be argued that, from an aesthetic point of view, the labeling of individual mailings would only serve to clutter the exhibition. As well, in many instances, the labels would probably be larger than the mailings themselves. However, this is not the only reason. Mail art exhibitions do not add labels and only rarely use framing devices in order to avoid the implication that mail art is a 'precious' art object that has, in some way, become 'high art.' Because the work is of a collaborative nature – only together do the mailings form an art piece – all mail artists are meant to have equal visibility, with no one artist stealing the show. The multiplicity of correspondence therefore enriches the mail art exhibition, setting no one artist or submission apart. As far as Anna Banana is concerned: "[If] the artist hasn't signed or

otherwise put their name/address on the face of their work, then it's their problem that viewers can't identify them. However, [participants' names are always] listed in the catalogue, and that seems to satisfy their need for acknowledgement."¹³² In other words, it is the artist's responsibility to identify the work for the viewer.

If mail art exhibitions were to add labels to better inform the viewer, who would be credited for the finished product? The sender? The post office? The recipient, perhaps? And if the correspondence was exchanged between several networkers, who would be designated as the rightful author? This awkward situation arose with *Fake Collage by Richard C: Nil Poem*. The correspondence was in fact the result of a series of exchanges between Felts, Richard C and Anna Banana. After Banana, in 1979, used the mailing as her own without giving either men any credit, she received a letter of outrage from Felts:

I don't think you realize the bad feeling I have for you ... That christ-banana [sic] sticker halo collage you used as your christmas [sic] card one year wasn't credited to me. You covered my signature and the title (which I had given to Richard C. for his inspiration).... How many of those art pieces and ideas are really yours or more likely someone elses' [sic].¹³³

To be clear, situations like this one rarely occur in the context of mail art exhibitions because correspondents are asked to respond to specific requests within short time frames.¹³⁴ In this way, the exhibition simulates a traditional exchange between networkers: "[T]he exchange isn't between one artist and another, but between artist and

¹³² The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, May 17, 2006.

¹³³ Anna Banana, *A Book About VILE*, 25.

¹³⁴ It can be possible for organizers to showcase their personal mail art collections, as did Ed Varney at the Oceanside Gallery (*Order from Chaos*, Oceanside Gallery, Parksville, British Columbia, 2004). In this case, artists do not respond to a deadline nor are they aware of any theme.

organizer, who supplies the catalogue ... [so that] instead of sending to exchange ideas and works ... one sends to an exhibition to get a catalogue.”¹³⁵

Traditionally, the results of a mail art exchange were not for display. The purpose of the correspondence was to create a connection between a mailer (or mailers) and the post, one that was said to have artistic intent. Once exhibited however, the purpose of the art has already been fulfilled or stopped midway. What is therefore presented to the viewer is but a remnant (documentation) of the mail art procedure. By preventing the correspondence from continuing its voyage through the mailbox, or by simulating an exchange between networkers with strict deadlines and specific themes, it is difficult for organizers to properly translate the mail art process. These are in fact the words Nayland Blake used in *Artforum* to comment upon the retrospective exhibition of Ray Johnson’s work, held at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1999: “It is difficult to exhibit many pages of the correspondence and still maintain visual interest. But some of the problem is that the meaning of much of Johnson’s art was in how he did things, not what he did.”¹³⁶ Certainly, pinning pieces of correspondence to a wall hardly translates the feeling associated with the sending and receiving of mail art. *The Handbook for Museums* (1994), a book intended to establish professional procedures, commented that not all objects and ideas are suitable for the museum setting.¹³⁷ Certain ideas and processes, such as mail art (or, as *The Handbook for Museums* suggests as an example, an abstract concept in philosophy) are difficult to translate into exhibitions. This problem also arises in the context of exhibitions featuring new media and Conceptual Art. As early as 1966,

¹³⁵ The author’s correspondence with Anna Banana, May 17, 2006.

¹³⁶ Nayland Blake, “Ray Johnson: Whitney Museum of American Art.” *Artforum*, Vol. 37 (March 1999), 108.

¹³⁷ Edson; David, *op. cit.*, 156.

Mel Bochner's exhibition *Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper not Necessarily Meant to be Viewed as Art* could not be accommodated by the museum's traditional side-by-side display. *Working Drawings* – described as the first conceptual exhibition¹³⁸ – showcased four black binders, each placed on individual white plinths. The binders contained black and white photocopies of drawings rather than the original artworks. This push towards transforming and redefining both the format and space of exhibitions greatly influenced the mail artist. The following paragraphs will identify different exhibition modes found across Canada, as well as alternatives from exhibitions overseas. Each method presented was tailored to better translate the mail art process into a comprehensive visual display.

There are various ways to display the results of a mail art project, the most common of which is to place the works side-by-side. Characteristic of a mail art exhibition is the lack of space between the works on the wall, making it “almost impossible to make any sense of individual pieces,” both because of the correspondence's size and the large amount of mailings submitted.¹³⁹ Most often, only pushpins are used to anchor the art to the wall. Submissions are therefore received and randomly pinned to the wall by the organizer(s). There can be several variations on this method. For instance, when *Popular Parody of Postal Art* (2000) was exhibited at Open Space in Victoria, Anna Banana painted a four-feet-high tan-coloured strip around the entire gallery.¹⁴⁰ The strip delimited the area where mail art projects and artistamp sheets were displayed. Chuck Stake, a mail artist from Calgary, prefers to cover gallery walls from floor to

¹³⁸ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions,” *October*, Vol. 55 (Winter, 1990).

¹³⁹ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, May 11, 2006.

¹⁴⁰ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, May 19, 2006.

ceiling with Styrofoam sheets to facilitate the installation and removal of push-pins. Stake explains: "I lay the works side by side and treat the installation of the work as a giant collage."¹⁴¹

To simply affix the works to the wall does not convey the network's function as a tool of communication and exchange. "In some way," argues Michael Lumb in *Mail Art 1955 to 1995: Democratic Art as Social Sculpture* (1998), "the exhibiting of mail art 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 had/has function."¹⁴² Indeed, engaging with the audience is particularly important since the mail art process is dependent on the interaction of individuals. *Popular Parody of Postal Art*, for example, included two interactive elements. The first invited visitors to write a postcard to one of the artists whose work was on display, and the second gave them the possibility of designing their own artistamp.¹⁴³ Both activities momentarily transformed viewers into artists. Similarly, in 2003 Ed Varney brought boxes of stored mail art to the Sunshine Coast Arts Center in Sechelt, British Columbia, where he was artist in residence. In these boxes were 3500 works of mail art that comprised his personal collection. For five days, Varney invited the public to select works from his collection, making it clear that the chosen works would later be displayed. The exhibition took place the following year, at the Oceanside Gallery in Parksville, British Columbia. The resulting catalogue, *Order from Chaos*, reveals that 75 works were selected through this process. From this total, 22, including correspondence from Anna Banana, were chosen for framing. The remaining 53, which included a collage by Ray Johnson and a color photocopy by Chuck Stake,

¹⁴¹ The author's correspondence with Don Mabie, May 18, 2006.

¹⁴² <http://fortunecity.com/victorian/palace/62/index.html>, March 14, 2007.

¹⁴³ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, May 19, 2006.

were placed into binders, echoing Mel Bochner's exhibition from 1966, which also displayed photocopies in binders. Varney was surprised by the results: "[It] was not the show that I would have chosen," he wrote.¹⁴⁴ Varney's approach transformed viewers into curators.

Ed Varney's method for setting up *Order from Chaos* was particularly interesting as it permitted viewers to scavenge through the boxes, find the art, and examine it attentively. By doing this, the public engaged in physical contact with the work, examining both recto and verso, something that is too often impossible when the mailings are attached to the wall. Clearly, new modes of display needed to be integrated into traditional mail art's display exhibitions to correct this situation. For example, correspondence could be fastened to the wall with a string or a hook, permitting the viewer to turn over the mailings for a better look. This is what Sarah Jackson and Douglas E. Barron did at the *International Mail Art/Copier Art Exhibition* (Technical University of Nova Scotia, Halifax, 1985):

The envelopes, letters and art works were all included in clear plastic bags and suspended in front of a softly reflective silver curtain made from material used on large insulating boards.... Some artists had several bags hung together if they sent more than one piece. They were hung in clusters so that you were invited to come ... and touch.¹⁴⁵

In London, England, the sense of touch was exploited by the English networker Jason Skeet (also known as O. Jason), as he kept "the works unopened until the aptly named 'opening' of the show at which he invited the public to open the contributions."¹⁴⁶ As a

¹⁴⁴ Exhibition catalogue, *Order from Chaos* (Ed Varney, Oceanside Gallery, Parksville, British Columbia, 2004).

¹⁴⁵ The author's correspondence with Anthony Jackson, June 24, 2006.

¹⁴⁶ <http://fortunecity.com/victorian/palace/62/index.html>, March 14, 2007.

result, viewers were given the opportunity to experience first-hand the excitement associated with opening the envelopes and discovering the art.

If the curator is anxious about having artwork manipulated, the correspondence can also be displayed in double-sided frames, affixed perpendicularly to the wall. In 1992, Sarah Jackson helped organize *Art Travels, Mail Art Festival* held in the spacious Grand Hall of the Museum of Civilization (Gatineau). There, the works were hung from floor to ceiling, displayed in transparent plastic curtains as well as on double-sided glass walls. These improvised partitions were suspended from the top floor or from available sections of wall, enabling viewers to circle the entirety of the works (fig. 14). In 1977, On Kawara, a leading mail artist born in Japan and today based in New York, exhibited his extensive series titled *I Got Up* in Bremerhaven. The series was begun in 1968, in Mexico City, when every day the artist would stamp the words “I got up,” followed by the exact time of his awakening, on the back of a postcard.¹⁴⁷ In Bremerhaven, only photocopies of the postcards were exhibited. The reproductions were assembled into pairs (recto and verso), placed one above the other and laminated as one piece. The cards were displayed in a single row, thus permitting the audience to simultaneously view both the front and back of each piece of correspondence without ever seeing the original (fig. 15).

FACE VALUE: MAIL ART AND MONEY

When mail art is sold, items are not priced according to quality.¹⁴⁸

In the mid-1980s, it became increasingly common to see mail art in coveted gallery spaces. However familiar, the art market remained guarded about its value, perplexed by the display of everyday correspondence, photocopies, as well as bogus

¹⁴⁷ *On Kawara* (London & New York: Phaidon, 2002): 93.

¹⁴⁸ The author's correspondence with John Held, Jr., June 14, 2006.

stamps and money. Today, mail art's monetary value is a sensitive issue among networkers, as the exchange of mail art for money remains vague or undisclosed. Anna Banana claims not to remember how much she received for the 400 mail art pieces she sold to the Postal Museum in 1992, only specifying that it was "not a lot."¹⁴⁹ Ed Varney warns: "Mail art and money don't mix,"¹⁵⁰ while John Held Jr. finds himself "very hesitant to get into the money aspect of it."¹⁵¹ It is fair to say that mail artists do not join the network for financial gain. Yet even though the correspondence is not sold during its exhibition, some artists have profited from it. Larger organizations, like the Art Metropole in Toronto, which work as distribution centers, sell mail art and various related ephemera through the Internet and head-offices. Some artists have also succeeded in profiting from mail art. John Held, Jr., for example, sold a portion of his private collection for an undisclosed sum to the Museum of Modern Art in New York (3700 items related to mail art publications), the Getty Center (1700 items including mail art catalogues, posters, invitations), and the Smithsonian Institute (the correspondence of 276 mail artists from 46 different countries). Most recently, Held sold 4000 sheets of artistamps to the private collector Jim Swanson, publisher of the artistamp book *Axis of Evil* (2004).¹⁵² Why, if mail art is increasingly accepted as exhibited or sold art, do examples of success such as these remain so few and far between? The following paragraphs will examine the mail artist's use of artistamps and art money, looking into the monetary value of these items.

¹⁴⁹ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, June 14, 2006.

¹⁵⁰ The author's correspondence with Ed Varney, June 20, 2006.

¹⁵¹ The author's correspondence with John Held, Jr., June 14, 2006.

¹⁵² Swanson will also be publishing Held's upcoming book and film on artistamps, *Artist Postage Stamps from the International Mail Art Network*. The author's correspondence with John Held, Jr., April 30, 2006.

The mail artist's favorite decoration for his or her envelope is the artistamp, a term coined in 1982 by the Canadian philatelist Michael Bidner to identify this new genre of stamp making. However, the creation of the artistamp stems from a long history of postal activity. It was in 1840, over a century before the birth of mail art, that artists were called upon to design postage stamps. Thereafter, beavers, boats and royalty were authorized by the government to decorate the upper right corner of Canadian envelopes and postcards. With the emergence of mail art grew an interest in vandalizing these regulated stamps. As early as 1958, for example, Yves Klein painted over valuable postage stamps with his 'International Klein Blue' color. The monochrome stamps, which appeared on each invitation to his exhibition *Le vide* (Galerie Iris Clert, Paris, 1958), bore the cancellation mark of the French postal service. Klein's stamps are recognized as being among the first artistamps.

Generally created by using the same techniques as the postal stamp, the artistamp is printed on gum paper with a perforated outline. The artistamp can also be drawn, rubber-stamped, or created with a photocopy machine or digitally, on a computer. Like the Cinderella stamp (those often added to the back of an envelope to show support for a charity organization or to decorate a correspondence for a specific holiday or occasion like Christmas or Valentine's day), the artistamp has no postal value. Artists create personalized artistamps to enable their work to be easily identified by the recipient. As a result, the artistamp is often synonymous with the artist's signature, authenticating the piece of correspondence art. Mail art from Anna Banana for example, will probably come in a recycled envelope that has been painted over to match the stamps (both arti- and regular). Her artistamps are inspired by a multitude of themes and patterns either

depicting friends or family, zebra stripes or her trademark banana imagery (fig. 16). Ed Varney's stamps for *Canadada* are more likely to be inspired by Canadian iconography: fishing boats, a map of the Canadian territory or even Canadian money (fig. 17). Banana and Varney most often exchange their artistamps with other mail artists rather than selling them. When sold, however, the items are not individually priced. Rather, the artist establishes a fixed price that is multiplied by the amount purchased.¹⁵³ Therefore, artistamps of higher quality or deemed to have superior aesthetic properties will not be sold for more money.

Canada was the first country to organize an exhibition featuring artists' stamps. *Artists Stamps and Stamp Images* (Simon Fraser University, 1974) displayed approximately 3000 different stamp works from nine different countries, and included the work of many Canadian mail artists and art groups such as Dana Atchley, N.E. Thing Company, Michael Morris and Coach House Press.¹⁵⁴ A decade later, Michael Bidner organized the first philatelic exhibition permitting not only the trade of regulated stamps but also of artistamps. This exhibition, *Artistampex*, was held at the Forest City Gallery, in London, Ontario, in 1984. Imitating Yves Klein's creation of an unorthodox stamp for his exhibition *Le vide*, Bidner printed a large green artistamp that served as the unorthodox invitation card to the exhibition. Two stamps were printed per standard sheet (8 ½ x 11), making each artistamp less than eight inches in height and approximately five inches in width (fig. 18). The sheet was perforated, as it would have been for regular-sized stamps. Bidner's artistamp invitation, which was also enlarged as an announcement poster, read: "Philatelic Artistamp Exposition & Bourse: A Mail Art Event". The image

¹⁵³ The author's correspondence with John Held, Jr., June 14, 2006.

¹⁵⁴ Crane, *op. cit.*, 346.

on the artistamp was that of a woman identified as Cinderella, most probably a *clin-d'oeil* to the Cinderella stamp. The sheets of artistamps that were submitted to *Artistampex* were displayed as any form of correspondence would have been in a typical mail art exhibition: pinned to the wall.

The artistamp was (and is) used to promote artists' fictional postal services, such as Anna Banana's *Banana Post* and Ed Varney's *Canadada Post*. Through the use of artistamps, "artists have [also] developed countries, logos, aka's, cancellation marks, pseudo-characters and individual alphabets in conjunction with their stampwork."¹⁵⁵ Banana suggests that the artistamp is "a way of claiming independence from the regulations of officialdom, acknowledging one's own authority ... and in doing so, taking the 'officially sanctioned' down a peg or two."¹⁵⁶ In the United States especially, mail artists have been creating artistamps to pass as real stamps. In the early 1970s, for example, American artist William Farley created *USXX* (1970-1974), an artistamp depicting the back of a girl's head. It read: "US Post Office XX Ten cents." Farley's stamp was used illegally to replace official postage.¹⁵⁷ Most famous, perhaps, is the work of Chicago artists Michael Hernandez de Luna and Michael Thompson. With de Luna's stamp *Prozac* (1996) and Thompson's shocking *Kill All Artists [Cynic]* (2000), on which the artist printed both the gruesome message and a shotgun, it comes as no surprise that their falsified stamps were quickly identified and rejected by postal authorities. Their mailings were immediately banned with the order to "cease and desist".¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ *Flue: Mail Art Then and Now, Mail Art International Show, op. cit.*, 37.

¹⁵⁶ The author's correspondence with Anna Banana, July 6, 2006.

¹⁵⁷ Crane, *op. cit.*, 340.

¹⁵⁸ Anna Banana, *Popular Art of Postal Parody: International Artiststamps* (Victoria: Open Space Arts Society, 2000).

As opposed to official postage stamps, which lose value once imprinted by a cancellation mark, artistamps, like those created by de Luna and Thompson, gain in value. The artist stamp is created in multiples, and, like any print, the sheets are often signed and numbered. The cancellation logo printed over the artistamp records its successful journey through the post, marking it as a one of a kind. John Held, Jr. writes that the post's cancellation mark gives the artistamp "validation" and "extra panache. Especially so when it is unencumbered by official postage."¹⁵⁹ Records show that an envelope with a cancelled stamp by de Luna or Thompson is worth between \$1,200.00 and \$1,500.00, while a single stamp by the same artists, which has not traveled through the post, is valued at approximately \$15.00.¹⁶⁰ Canadian networkers Banana and Varney, however, place their unique artistamps next to those regulated by the postal system, complying with postal rules. Together, their artistamps and the official stamps create a colorful array of miniatures on each envelope or postcard. Even though Banana and Varney's artistamps do not attempt to pass as official stamps as do Farley's, de Luna's and Thompson's, Varney admits: "I like to fool the eye, that is the public eye, who often think my stamps are real. They ask 'Are they real?' and I say 'Yes, they are real... but they are not valid for use in the universal postal system without the addition of official stamps."¹⁶¹

Since April 2000, Canada Post found a way to mimic the artistamp, with the marketing of "Picture Postage."¹⁶² For twice the price of a regular stamp, it is possible to scan a photograph or image and create a unique stamp with actual postal value. Anna

¹⁵⁹ The author's correspondence with John Held, Jr., September 13, 2006.

¹⁶⁰ Anna Banana, *Popular Art of Postal Parody: International Artiststamps*.

¹⁶¹ The author's correspondence with Ed Varney, July 17, 2006.

¹⁶² The author's correspondence with Josée Devost (Canada Post, Customer Service), July 24, 2006.

Banana argues: “[The stamps created by Picture Postage] are decidedly not artistamps, as artistamps have no postal value . . . they mimic the postage stamp, and thumb their noses at the officialdom that is the international postal system.”¹⁶³ The artistamp can depict any subject, plagiarize, quote or mock any image or person. However, because Picture Postage is issued by the government, the images submitted can be refused, and those accepted are subject to change without the customer’s approval. Also, once the Picture Postage is completed, its’ copyright is given to Canada Post rather than to the artist. Banana, who earns income creating artistamps for others through Banana Productions’ *International Art Post*, fumes: “Canada Post’s ‘Picture Postage’ ... has cut drastically into my stamp production business.”¹⁶⁴

For mail artists who make very little or none of it from their art, money is certainly a recurring concern. It perhaps comes as no surprise that the representation of banknotes would provide a source of inspiration for many artists. This was especially true within the Pop Art movement, which emerged during the same period as the Eternal Network. Playing with cultural symbols of the time, such as Marilyn Monroe, the American flag and Campbell’s soup cans, pop artists depicted elements of modern popular culture and the mass media. Money was one of those icons, and its portrayal was seen as central to the representation of North American culture. In 1956 for example, Roy Lichtenstein produced the lithograph *Ten Dollar Bill*, a black and white pop version of a ten-dollar banknote. In 1962, Andy Warhol drew a copy of an American dollar bill, known as his *One Dollar Bill with Washington Portrait* (private collection). That same year Warhol printed a black, green and brown silkscreen reproducing eighty two-dollar

¹⁶³ The author’s correspondence with Anna Banana, July 17, 2006.

¹⁶⁴ *Idem*.

bills titled *Two Dollar Bills (front and rear)*, now housed in the Museum Ludwig. In the early 1970s, Ray Johnson followed the pop aesthetic by creating several collages using actual American money. These include *Henry Fonda Foot Dollar Bill*, *Cervix Dollar Bill*, *Joe Buck Dollar Bill*, *Marilyn Monroe Dollar Bill*, *Midnight Cowboy Dollar Bill* (all from 1970), as well as *S&M (Shirley Temple)* from 1971.

The creation of art money, or the imitation of money as an art project, emerged at this time as a response to the debate surrounding mail art's worth. Like the artistamp, art money subverted regulated government symbols with its playful Monopoly-like appearance. First created in the early 1960s by American mail artist and Fluxus member Robert Watts,¹⁶⁵ his offset print *Dollar Bill* (1962) was a somewhat realistic replica of American money, quite similar to the drawing Warhol had completed that same year. By 1987, Watts was creating the *Dollar Bills Books* that bound his *Dollar Bill* images in sets of 100, 500 and 1,000. The result consisted of a series of thin and thick books filled with fake money (fig. 19). In the same way that Monopoly money has no real value except when engaging in the financial dealings of the game, can we assume that art money is only valuable to the mail artists participating in its exchange? Certainly, art money appears to be particularly hard to accept within the gallery setting, appearing rarely. In Canada, not a single exhibition has featured this art form in connection to mail art. John Held Jr. recalls only one art money exhibition in the United States: *Just for the Money* (Patrick T., Oakland, California, 1984), which displayed collages made of art money.¹⁶⁶ Nevertheless, artists who create art money are widespread, with artists from at least fourteen different countries having been noted for their production of art money. In

¹⁶⁵ Watts was also credited for creating the first sheet of artist stamps in the early 1960s for the fictional *Fluxus Post*.

¹⁶⁶ The author's correspondence with John Held, Jr., August 3, 2006.

Denmark, a Bank of International Art Money (BIAM) has been established since 2005. Although this art money bank has no explicit connection with the mail art community, its purpose in creating the art money is the same. The BIAM permits artists from around the world to “make money” and exchange it for art or services available through the BIAM.¹⁶⁷ Approximately 400 artists are registered, nineteen of whom are Canadian.¹⁶⁸ The contents of the bank are available via their website, as well as in the ‘art money outlets’ found across Europe. Art money sold through the BIAM costs twenty Euros a piece, regardless of artist or quality.

Today, art money created by a mail artist is commonly referred to as Fluxus Bucks, an expression coined in 1994, following the successful mail art project of Texan networker Julie Jeffries. Previously known as Julie Paquette, but better known under her pseudonym Ex Posto Facto, Jeffries project consisted of creating a mail art currency that would be sent to other networkers as a mail art piece, a process previously used by mail artists Michael Lumb, J.C. Palmer and Joel Cohen, to name a few. However, Jeffries expended her project to include the trading and collecting of art money for actual money. In 1994, Jeffries’s personal journal explained her intentions: “My idea is that [*Fluxus Bucks*] need to circulate amongst the Mail Art Community. I want artists to carry them in wallets or purses, doodle on them, add their addresses, send them to other artists and then redeem them with me. Or not.”¹⁶⁹ Jeffries’ *Fluxus Bucks* were created by rubber-stamping the image of a fictional banknote onto a rectangular piece of paper. The money

¹⁶⁷ <http://www.art-money.org>, March 14, 2007.

¹⁶⁸ Toby Barratt, Beth Curuthers, Alice Chapiel, David Cochrane, Mary Dolman, Kim Doré, Pascal Dufour, Martin Guderna, Peter Raymond Haskell, Diane Thom Jacobs, Marion Lea Jamieson, Maria King, Penny Linders, Terry Malanchuk, Owen Plummer, Paul Emile Rioux, Marcelle Thomas, Miriam M. V. Tratt, Shawn Westlaken.

¹⁶⁹ Ruud Janssen’s interview with Julie Paquette (TAM Mail-Art Interview Project, 1995)

read: "United Eternal Network One Fluxus Buck" (fig. 20). Directions were added at the bottom of each "buck": "Carry it with you, or pass it along, but once you're done with it please mail it to ex post facto." Like the painter's blank canvas, Jeffries's art money would gain value only after being manipulated by an artist.

In 1996, Ed Varney began creating his own art money, which he also titled *Fluxus Bucks* (fig. 21). At first, Varney's art money was almost identical to that created by Ex Post Facto, with the same United Eternal Network headline and the same value of "one Fluxus buck." Varney's "bucks" were distinct, because they were marked by Ray Johnson's trademark bunny head, stamped at the center of the bill. Varney's *Fluxus Bucks* have evolved over time. Today, they no longer read "United Eternal Network," but "Banque du Fluxus." Instructions are provided on each bill: "This art money is valid only after transformation by an artist. Add to, alter or transform this certificate with your creative input. Make it into Art Money. Then spend it, trade it, give it away or send it with your name and address to Banque du Fluxus ... for exchange and more Fluxus Bucks." Each "buck" is numbered by Varney and sent through the postal service to be modified by a mail artist. Once the changes were made, the artist signed his or her name on the line provided for this purpose. Both the serial number and the artist's signature mark each piece of Varney's art money as unique. To date, Varney has distributed 7000 *Fluxus Bucks* through the network, receiving approximately 500 back with modifications. Although Varney's art money has never been exhibited, he plans to apply to a gallery where he would create a bank machine that would trade *Fluxus Bucks* for money (and vice versa).¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ The author's correspondence with Ed Varney, August 9, 2006.

Artists like Anna Banana, Ed Varney and Sarah Jackson have been instrumental in having mail art exhibited for both the public and the art market to see. Throughout, these artists and the mail art community to which they belong have worked to expand the definitions of “art” and “artist,” challenging the concepts of aesthetic and monetary worth. As the interest in creating democratic and accessible art continued to grow, artists found innovative ways to integrate mail art into new artistic categories, most notably performance and digital art. The following chapter will investigate how, in the midst of this growth, correspondence artists evolved and how the contents of the mail art envelope have been affected by these changes.

Chapter 4 – Networking Without a Reciprocating Partner: Mail Art in the Age of Self Help

Every day, mailboxes are filled with correspondence that, alas, consists mostly of bills and junk mail. While networkers' mail slots are stuffed with these same items, the correspondence artist also expects the daily arrival of mail art. Once the coveted envelope arrives – often easily recognizable as it is covered with personalized artistamps or colorful rubberstamping – it is torn open to display its varied contents.

Worldwide, mail art has taken on different purposes, affecting the choice of items sent. In South America, for example, mail art became a vehicle for political propaganda. Clemente Padin, a networker from Uruguay, was arrested in 1977 when the contents of his missives, which included postcards and short publications, were deemed to defame his country's army.¹⁷¹ A decade later, in Africa, artists such as Ayah Okwabi sent drawings, photographs and letters to spread international awareness of Ghana's lack of housing and nutrition. Okwabi's mail art project led to the exhibition *Africa Arise/Food for the Hungry* (1987) in Ghana.¹⁷² In Canada, however, the network has never had a strong interest in promoting a socio-political agenda, as correspondents used (and use) mail art as a form of parody or as a means of exchange with other artists who shared their passion for art and the post. The closest Canadian networkers came to having a political agenda was during the three-year Art Strike from 1990 to 1993, called by the Praxis Group. The goal of the strike was to convince artists to act in solidarity and stop

¹⁷¹ Crane, *op. cit.*, 150.

¹⁷² Welch, *op. cit.*, 181.

exhibiting in art galleries. The purpose was not to stop creating, but to gain control over the art market and art production.¹⁷³

Yet whatever their country of origin, mail artists have all had to face the arrival of the Internet, a contemporary and faster way of establishing a world wide web. Because of this new technology, the international mail art community has undergone drastic changes, and this can be witnessed when examining the types of mailings exchanged between networkers. Today, it is assumed that “network” refers to an exchange launched by modem rather than by post. Certainly many correspondence artists, such as Guy Bleus in Belgium, Valéry Grancher in France, Chuck Welch in the United States, and Philip Pocock in Canada, have shifted their interest towards electronic mail art – also known as e-mail art – and have given up using stamps and envelopes. Although e-mail art can be considered a branch of mail art, this thesis does not discuss the work of electronic networkers, choosing rather to focus on artists who have remained faithful to mail art’s original support: the postal system. More and more of these artists, including Amy Lam in Canada, Frank Warren in the United States and Henrik Drescher, who divides his time between Canada and China, employ correspondence as a means of creating one-way art rather than an exchange with other participants in the Eternal Network. While Lam and Drescher’s mailing lists consist of non-responding “correspondents,” Warren, in contrast, is the daily recipient of such a large number of letters that it has become virtually impossible for him to respond to them. This interest in working individually rather than

¹⁷³ The Praxis Group often makes use of mail art, because, like mail art itself, its members focus on teamwork and on finding ways to produce art outside official art scenes. Praxis members often sign their work either with the generic names Karen Eliot or Monty Cantsin to stress the importance of the group over the individual. For more about the Art Strike, see Stewart Home’s *Neoism, Plagiarism & Praxis*.

collaboratively is new to the mail art community, and may be representative of our changing times.

Ours is an increasingly individualistic and impersonal world. In an attempt to cope, many people have turned to self help. It comes as no surprise that a similar shift would be visible within the ever-evolving practice of mail art. As a result, the work of some mail artists can be analyzed in self-help terms, viewed as either a therapeutic tool or a parody of this New Age practice. With this in mind, this chapter will focus on Amy Lam's current project, *Up and Down All Year Long* (2006), described by the artist as "a self-help-service,"¹⁷⁴ Frank Warren's *Postsecret* (2004), considered by participants to be a "source of free therapy,"¹⁷⁵ as well as Henrik Drescher's *Postal Séance: A Scientific Investigation into the Possibility of a Postlife Postal Existence* (2004), in which the artist attempted to communicate with the dead.

For this chapter, the use of the term "self help" is not restricted to the treatment of physical or mental problems, but covers a practice in which artists and participants alike employ the postal system to release emotions, explore personal issues or seek answers to philosophical questions. Each of the mail art projects discussed proposes a new method of coping with life's minor or major setbacks. The artists selected offer their audience suggestions as to how to find excitement in a daily routine, how to share a secret, or how to deal with the existence of an afterlife. This chapter will consider correspondence art's link to the self help phenomenon, examining what can be found in envelopes sent by contemporary mail artists such as Lam, Warren and Drescher.

¹⁷⁴ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, August 9, 2006.

¹⁷⁵ Nicole Clayton quoted in Maria Puente's "Blogger Gives Dark Secrets the First-Class Treatment," *USA Today*, March 14, 2006.

MAIL ART AS A SELF-HELP SERVICE

"The bottom line of mail art is the fact that it is a support system for artists around the world."¹⁷⁶

In recent years, a large number of upcoming international artists, such as John Armstrong, Paul Collins, Harriet Russell, Mathew Sawyer and Shizaka Yokomizo, have turned to the post to create or complete art projects.¹⁷⁷ However, although the network's concepts are still in use, the term "mail art" appears to be slowly vanishing from contemporary art vocabulary. Amy Lam, for example, whose current project *Up and Down All Year Long* (also referred to as *U.A.D.A.Y.L.S.S.*¹⁷⁸) can be found in the National Gallery of Canada Archives under the search words "mail art," is unfamiliar with the movement. When questioned about her association with the Eternal Network, Lam answered: "I'm not really sure what mail art is. *U.A.D.A.Y.L.S.S.* relies on the post but I think of it more as a project where I have to do certain things within a certain time period with certain materials and a certainly tiny budget."¹⁷⁹ Lam is not the only artist in this situation. Others – John Armstrong (Toronto) and Paul Collins (Paris), for example – created the work *JIM →* (2002) by using the postal service but without acknowledging their participation in the mail art community. This project consisted of the two artists sending photographs back and forth between Canada and Europe, accompanying them with comments and sketches, and then recording this information in an exhibition

¹⁷⁶ Lon Spiegelman quoted in *Flue: Mail Art Then and Now, Mail Art International Show*, 29.

¹⁷⁷ Recently, the Saidye Bronfman Centre (Montreal) organized the exhibition *Pardon Me* (November 24 to January 22, 2006), which featured photocopies, photography and correspondence by eight artists from England and Canada (Andrew Dadson, Clément de Gaulejac, Jana Leo, Hadley + Maxwell, Mathew Sawyer, Ron Tran and Shizaka Yokomizo). Of the participants, two used or manipulated the postal system to create their projects. Mathew Sawyer, for one, vandalized and photocopied his neighbours' mail. Shizaka Yokomizo sent letters to residents in ground-floor apartments asking them if she could take their pictures from outside their windows.

¹⁷⁸ The "S.S." stands for "Subscription Service."

¹⁷⁹ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, August 9, 2006.

catalogue.¹⁸⁰ Although *JIM* → is mail art (as defined by this thesis), Armstrong and Collins consider themselves to be photographers, not correspondence artists and are interested in corresponding only with each other. Unaware of, or uninterested in, most of the Eternal Network's history, current mail artists such as Amy Lam, John Armstrong and Paul Collins have ignored other correspondence artists and their sets of guidelines. As a result, mail art has evolved from an open community of artistic exchange to an activity within a closed circle. It is amongst these new mail artists that we find those dealing with the practice of self help.

Born in Hong Kong in 1983, Amy Lam emigrated to Vancouver with her family in 1989. After living in southern Ontario for five years, she relocated to Montreal in September 2006 to pursue studies in creative writing at Concordia University. A self-described "writer, performer, small-object-maker," Lam notes that her interest in art developed from her love of writing and wordplay, leading her to construct small three-dimensional objects in which to place her writing. Because "the post is of course language based," the mailing of these objects seemed like a natural direction for her work.¹⁸¹ The concept for *Up and Down All Year Long* emerged after Lam was introduced to Art Metropole's distribution center (Toronto) by artist Sandy Plotnikoff.¹⁸² At Art Metropole she was encouraged to propose the creation of a subscription service in which every month, for the duration of one year (2006), twenty-five people would receive her small objects by mail.

¹⁸⁰ Each of Armstrong and Collins photographs was taken in response to a specific theme: for example mustard pots, keys, cemeteries and cars. The title, *JIM* →, was taken from the very first theme, which referred to the musician Jim Morrison of The Doors. See John Armstrong and Paul Collins' *Jim* → (Toronto & Sudbury: Coach House Books and Art Gallery of Sudbury, 2002).

¹⁸¹ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, September 1, 2006.

¹⁸² Plotnikoff was appointed a lifetime member of Art Metropole in 2002.

Lam's purpose in creating this project was simple: "I think I would enjoy receiving a subscription like that every month, so I offered it."¹⁸³ This is a common motivation for either sending or wanting to receive correspondence, whether it is from a mail artist or a more traditional pen pal. However, Lam's *Up and Down All Year Long* is not a typical mail art project, since the addressees are neither random nor chosen by the artist, as would be the case with correspondence sent by Ray Johnson or Anna Banana. On the contrary, Lam's mail art is sent only to "paying customers," as she refers to her correspondents: the twenty-five individuals who subscribed to her project through the Art Metropole website.¹⁸⁴ Subscribers include friends and neighbours from Ontario, a stranger from Illinois, General Idea's AA Bronson, who lives in New York and Toronto, as well as art institutions such as the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of Ontario.¹⁸⁵ John Held, Jr. comments that although subscription services had been offered before within the mail art movement, "many mail artists, accustomed to exchanging works for free and establishing 'open networks,' see this as a debasement of the process."¹⁸⁶ Lam, who does not take part in the mail art community, explains: "I chose the post, because it would be impossible to hand-deliver twenty-five things to twenty-five strangers who live all over this great continent of ours."¹⁸⁷ The \$24 fee Lam charged guaranteed each subscriber a place on her mailing list.

Lam, who describes her correspondence as having been made "lovingly," sees it as a non-invasive way of making the everyday less mundane. Art Metropole's online database provides a more detailed explanation of the project: "[*Up and Down All Year*

¹⁸³ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, September 1, 2006.

¹⁸⁴ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, August 16, 2006.

¹⁸⁵ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, September 1, 2006.

¹⁸⁶ The author's correspondence with John Held, Jr., October 5, 2006.

¹⁸⁷ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, August 16, 2006.

Long consists of the] monthly mailings of a timely object ... to be enjoyed by you, subscriber, in the comfort of your home. No longer will you have to venture into the wide open to search for new amusements; they will come flying through the air into your arms.”¹⁸⁸ *U.A.D.A.Y.L.S.S.* promises the depositing of a source of amusement into subscribers’ mailboxes every month. These mailings are intended to provide subscribers with advice and give them suggestions as to how to lead a more exciting lives.

During the twelve-month period that lasted “up and down all year long,” subscribers were sent, among many things, the *Matter Transformer*, a miracle sticker that permitted recipients to momentarily transform their least favorite thing into something better by peeling and sticking the tag anywhere or onto anything that needed to be transformed; the homemade cassette *Sleep Tape* to cure them of insomnia; a low-maintenance pet sea sponge to fight loneliness; a book of short statements telling them how to misbehave; the *All-Weather Burger*, a miniature black hamburger topped with a silver bow; and even paper cutouts of icebergs spelling out the different feelings and events experienced by the iceberg, which included watching ships sink, being hungry, crying and celebrating a 5000th birthday (fig. 22).

A popular self-help motto states: “You can do it on your own, but you can’t do it alone.”¹⁸⁹ In a similar vein, Lam’s mailings are of the “do it yourself” type, since they do not require the presence of others to be enjoyed. Yet subscribers cannot do it alone; they depend upon Lam to provide a monthly mailing “helping” them to sleep better, to develop a friendship with an invertebrate, and so on. Because each envelope is addressed to a single recipient, even those sent to large institutions (which are addressed to specific

¹⁸⁸ www.artmetropole.com, December 14, 2006.

¹⁸⁹ Jean-Marie Romeder, *The Self-Help Way: Mutual Aid and Health* (Ottawa & Montreal: Canada Council on Social Development, 1990), 1.

librarians or archivists), Lam is free to adopt a more personal tone in the “imperatives and instructions,” which are addressed to “You... You... You.”¹⁹⁰ This enables her to create “a direct line of communication [between artist and viewer that] isn’t in gallery spaces.”¹⁹¹ Yet as the months went by, each bringing an equally eclectic mailing, some subscribers might have begun to wonder how any of these self help packages were relevant to their lives. By August, mid-way through the project, Lam stated: “I think the self-help isn’t really helpful.”¹⁹² However, she insisted that the correspondence was meant to bring comfort and enjoyment by providing stimulus to the leading of a more exciting life. While the purpose of some mailings was harder to understand, most can certainly be considered a source of comic relief. A case in point was the *All-Weather Burger*, which Lam explained as follows: “Most everyone eats [burgers].... The one that I made for July is a way of using it as a vehicle for something else, getting it to carry some other kind of feeling while relying on its classic burger shape.”¹⁹³ Upon reflection, however, is a self-help service that relies on comfort food so far-fetched?

In this way, Lam approached the subject of self help with playfulness and irony rather than with the genuine goal of helping people live better lives. Thus, she depended on humour rather than therapy, which is not the case for some other mail artists, such as Clemente Padin and Ayah Okwabi, who have used correspondence art to address the socio-political situations specific to their countries. In addition, however, artists such as Lam can be seen as providing self-help at least as much to themselves as to the recipients of their mailings. None the less, as Lam explained: “I do *U.A.D.A.Y.L.S.S.* to keep myself

¹⁹⁰ The author’s correspondence with Amy Lam, August 10, 2006.

¹⁹¹ *Idem.*

¹⁹² *Idem.*

¹⁹³ The author’s correspondence with Amy Lam, September 11, 2006.

busy [and see] what I have been thinking or doing all year. That's partly why I archive on the website, so there is an overview for me, and I can spot patterns."¹⁹⁴ Her mailing for the month of September attested to this. Titled *I'm a Wreck* (the word "wreck" also appeared in the title of the January mailings, *Wreckage of High Adventures in Small Piles*), the package included a miniature copy of the artist's curriculum vitae pasted to the bottom of a sock. Lam explained her intentions on her website: "[The piece is a] pretty obvious admission of 'losing it'," citing other illustrations of mental breakdown, such as "day-planners glued inside loaves of bread, cell-phones attached to shoe heels, mid-term exams embedded in empty coffee cups, [and] so forth."¹⁹⁵ A few days later she wrote, as if asking for confirmation: "You know you are a big mess when you have a tiny copy of your resume stuck in a sock. Yes?"¹⁹⁶ While this may or may not be the case, it is certain that this piece led the artist to two self-helping outcomes. The first, which Lam claimed to be doing, was the personal acknowledgement and outward admission that she was "a wreck." The second is a proactive way of dealing with her problem: by sending a copy of her resume, she cleverly forwarded details concerning her education and work experience to twenty-five people interested in her work, thereby possibly advancing her career. John Held, Jr. claims that "one of [his] firmest convictions is that art can act as an alchemical process – that in the act of producing a material result (i.e., the artwork), the artist is also capable of transforming him or herself."¹⁹⁷ According to this, it appears that through the process of artmaking, artists are, *ipso facto*, performing a form of art therapy for themselves. However, although the idea that artmaking is a therapeutic activity is

¹⁹⁴ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, August 10, 2006.

¹⁹⁵ www.wearepeopletoo.org, December 14, 2006.

¹⁹⁶ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, October 2, 2006.

¹⁹⁷ The author's correspondence with John Held, Jr., October 5, 2006.

certainly widely agreed upon by art educators and art therapists, it seems somewhat reductive to analyze *U.A.D.A.Y.L.S.S.* solely in those terms.

The mail art movement appears to have been affected by the self-help phenomenon internationally. One of the best examples is American Frank Warren's ongoing mail art project, *Postsecret*. It was after going "through a difficult period in his life" that Warren, a salesman by profession, began using mail art as a tool for personal therapy, "figuring that art [was no longer] just for [a] trained elite."¹⁹⁸ Certainly, this has always been one of correspondence art's most appealing characteristics. For one of his projects, Warren traveled across the United States, handing out blank postcards in subway stations, leaving them in art galleries, hiding others in library books, and inviting strangers to mail him their secrets. Warren's postcard project was officially titled *Postsecret* in November 2004 and soon expanded to the creation of a website and a publisher's request that Warren write a book. Still in progress today, the project consists of inviting people to confess their secrets on handmade postcards and send them to Warren's home address in Germantown, Maryland. The nature of the secrets he receives varies widely; they include humorous messages such as, "Yesterday I peed on my ex-boyfriend's front lawn," to more disturbing information, such as: "I used to carry weapons to school but was too afraid to use them." Because it is a common belief that emotions are more easily expressed on paper than in person, many participants may have used *Postsecret* as an alternative to seeking professional help. Participant Nicole Clayton, for example, who sent a postcard describing how she wished her life were different, thought the project was "the best source of free therapy," claiming that the creation of her

¹⁹⁸ Maria Puente, "Blogger Gives Dark Secrets the First-Class Treatment," *USA Today*, March 14, 2006.

postcard offered her a much-needed “moment of self-clarification.”¹⁹⁹ After exposing a secret on the postcard, the sender can “physically let it go into a mailbox [and walk] away feeling lighter.”²⁰⁰ To date, Warren has received an estimated 75,000 postcards. The growing impact of the project has led him to work in connection with the National Hopeline Network, a suicide hotline. Warren’s book, *Postsecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives*, is found in the self-help aisle of bookstores.²⁰¹ The sequel, *My Secret: A Postsecret Book*, was released in October 2006 and a third book, *The Secret Lives of Men and Women: A Postsecret Book*, is expected in early 2007.

Dr. Gail Saltz, psychiatrist, professor at the New York Presbyterian Hospital and author of three self-help books, has said of Warren’s initiative, “He has provided a forum that enables people to feel like they’re sharing or getting a secret off their chests but without any risks.”²⁰² Ten to twenty new mailings are made available weekly on Warren’s website, with 400 published in his 2005 book.²⁰³ There is no doubt that by posting mailings on the Internet, the mail art exchange grows exponentially. Thousands of people who would not have had access to the correspondence (simply because it was not addressed to them), as well as those who have little or no knowledge of the mail art phenomenon, have now been introduced to the foundations of correspondence art and included in the process. Amy Lam, who also chose to make *Up and Down All Year Long* accessible on-line, did so to enable non-subscribers to view her work.²⁰⁴ The creation of

¹⁹⁹ *Idem*.

²⁰⁰ Frank Warren, “Postcards From the Edgy,” *Times Online*, November 6, 2006.

²⁰¹ Frank Warren, *Postsecret: Extraordinary Confessions from Ordinary Lives* (New York: Harper Collins/Regan Books, 2005).

²⁰² Puente, *op. cit.* Dr. Saltz, has also been quoted by the *New York Times*, *New York Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Psychiatric News*, *Town & Country* and *Good Housekeeping*, to name a few. She is also the psychiatric consultant for NBC’s *Today Show*,

²⁰³ <http://postsecret.blogspot.com>, December 14, 2006.

²⁰⁴ www.wearepeopletoo.org, December 14, 2006.

websites becomes the updated version of the mail art magazine, serving almost exactly the same function as did *FILE* and *VILE* in the 1970s. As was the case with General Idea and Anna Banana, only recipients can collect the actual correspondence, though Warren and Lam's websites enable both recipients and non-recipients to view the complete project. As was the case with *U.A.D.A.Y.L.S.S.*, Warren's posting of correspondence on the Internet is a way to see the progress of his project, as well as to advertise other projects he holds to heart that are connected in various ways to the concept of self help.

Thus, the new generation of mail artists, including Frank Warren, Amy Lam, and, as will be seen later in this chapter, Henrik Drescher, profits financially from its mail art activities, something that is most unusual within the Eternal Network community. Also, as has been noted above, none of these artists has chosen to present mail art as an activity of equal exchange between mailing partners. I have already commented on how Warren does invite participants to send him personal correspondence, but also on how the sheer quantity of mail he receives daily makes it unrealistic to think that he could ever respond to it all – and in fact he responds to none of it. The exchange is therefore one-sided. The same goes for Amy Lam, although she, in contrast, very rarely receives mail. While her address is made available on her website, "Strangers are reluctant to send me mail but sometimes I get a postcard. Mostly not, though."²⁰⁵ According to Charles Guignon, who criticized the self-help way in *On Being Authentic* (2004), a fascination with the self has led the world to a "'me, me, me' culture."²⁰⁶ The idea that an individual can be self-sufficient, thus placing self-fulfillment as a first priority in North American culture, has led to an exaggerated need for independence rather than interdependence. Linking mail

²⁰⁵ The author's correspondence with Amy Lam, August 16, 2006.

²⁰⁶ Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic* (London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), x.

art to self-help can help explain why correspondence art has been transformed into a more individualistic activity.

FINDING A DEEPER MEANING TO LIFE AND AFTERLIFE

In June 2003, *Scientific American* revealed that mail and human life are surprisingly similar.²⁰⁷

According to Danish-born Henrik Drescher, his mail art project, *Postal Séance: A Scientific Investigation into the Possibility of a Postlife Postal Existence* (2004), has provided “irrefutable proof ... of the existence of a postal portal connecting us with the dead.”²⁰⁸ The artist spent five years, while he was living in Canada, producing fifty-two postcards, each stamped with fake postage and addressed to cryptic destinations in heaven, limbo and hell. Certainly, the act of writing letters to the dead is not a new phenomenon. This well-documented practice existed even before ancient Egypt. In recent years, it has been employed as a literary genre by poets such as Donald Hall (*Without: Poems*, 1998) and Ted Hughes (*Birthday Letters*, 1998), and is acknowledged by psychologists and within self help circles as a part of the grieving process.²⁰⁹ What is particularly interesting about Drescher’s project is his use of correspondence not only as a method of communication with the dead, but also as a “scientific” tool to “prove” the existence of life after death. Drescher’s ironic use of the term “scientific” to describe his process is an attempt to legitimize his project and bring seriousness to his humorous postcards. While other methods deemed by their practitioners to have scientific properties

²⁰⁷ Charles H. Bennett; Ming Li; Bin Ma, “Chain Letters and Evolutionary Histories,” *Scientific American* (June 2003): 76-81.

²⁰⁸ Henrik Drescher, *Postal Séance: A Scientific Investigation into the Possibility of a Postlife Postal Existence* (Vancouver: Chronicle Books, 2004), 6.

²⁰⁹ For more on these different examples, the reader is invited to see Alan H. Gardiner and Kurt Sethe’s translation of *Egyptian Letters to the Dead: Mainly from the Old and Middle Kingdoms* (London: The Egypt Exploration Society, 1928), and Sandra M. Gilbert’s *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Way We Grieve* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

have been used to demonstrate the presence of an afterlife (photography, Ouija boards, séances, and testimonies from people who have had near death experiences), none before has employed the postal system. Drescher's project is described and is then explored in terms of its relation to self help.

It was by affixing artistamps "specifically designed to pass through the mail to the afterlife" that Drescher claimed to succeed in communicating with the spirit world.²¹⁰ The postcards were addressed to an eclectic assortment of deceased personalities and mythical figures, including Ray Johnson, Charles Lindbergh's murdered baby, Francis Bacon, Anaïs Nin, the secretly dissected Roswell Alien, Albert Einstein and Dolly the Sheep. The completion of Drescher's project resulted in a book of the same title (*Postal Séance*), in which all the postcards are reproduced. This book also provides readers with a foldout map detailing the course of Drescher's mail art, from Earth to the flaming doors of "postal purgatory," and supplies forty-eight artistamps ("postlife postage") for those interested in testing his communication theory.

An illustrator by profession, Drescher has written and illustrated twenty-one books, including *Pat the Beastie: A Pull-and-Poke Book* (1993), a dark and satirical version of Dorothy Kunhardt's bestseller *Pat the Bunny: A Touch-and-Feel Book* (1940). While the majority of Drescher's books are for children, they are surprisingly gruesome, filled as they are with nightmarish drawings. Drescher transposed this dark humour to his postcards for *Postal Séance*. While the postcards make use of this type of imagery, they also include a wider range of material, such as collage, paint, ink and textiles. Every element found on the postcards, be it images, stamps or the address, makes reference to each recipient's previous life on Earth. For example, a postcard addressed to Vlad the

²¹⁰ Drescher, *op. cit.*, 6.

Impaler, the fifteenth-century Romanian prince said to have inspired Bram Stocker's novel *Dracula* (1897), shows the exit of a blood donor clinic with stick-figures running out, their limbs spewing blood (fig. 23). Two artistamps were added to the upper right corner: one with Vlad the Impaler's portrait, the other of a monster. The postcard was addressed to an obscure post-life destination: "Vlad the Impaler / Head nurse / Blood donation tent / Helliwood." Some postcards, like those sent to Dolly the Sheep, were more light-hearted. All of these contributed to making Drescher's book an experience at once unsettling and appealing, dark and humorous. Dolly was the only correspondent to receive two postcards (cloned!), each made of a grey, white and red wool sock (fig. 24). Both had stamps made of white cotton. The first was addressed to "Dolly in stem cell biotech limbo / Frozen," while the other read, "Dolly grazing in the pastures of animal souls."

Drescher scheduled a date for his postcards to be sent simultaneously from Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Japan, Italy, New Zealand, the United States and Spain, "to ensure that the letters entered the postlife portal by the most scientifically impartial method."²¹¹ On each postcard, the artist's return address was barely perceptible, scribbled in a bottom corner. Thus, it comes as no surprise to learn that 87% of the correspondence was never returned to Drescher. This statistic led the artist to claim that he had succeeded in proving the existence of an afterlife, because the unreturned mail must have reached its destinations. Interestingly, it was noted that Rome was the best place to communicate with the dead (thanks to the pope, perhaps), with a "success rate" of 100%.²¹² To establish a control group, two postcards were sent to living persons, the twentieth-century

²¹¹ *Idem.*

²¹² *Idem.*

American pinup girl Bettie Page and “a Polish twentieth-century child victim of Nazi Concentration Camp Deportation” conveniently left unnamed both on the postcard and in the book.²¹³ Both postcards were returned, marked by the postal service as having insufficient postage (fig. 25). Drescher wrote that the letters had been rightly returned to him, since “earthly stamps” and “land addresses” were obviously needed when corresponding with the living.²¹⁴

Unfortunately, none of the deceased correspondents replied to confirm the arrival of the postcards, leaving Drescher’s colleagues humorously skeptical of his success. Alan Rapp, for example, who sent postcards from the United States on the artist’s behalf, commented (with more than a little irony): “[How] do we know [the postcards] don’t just sit in some vast hub ... never actually delivered?”²¹⁵ Quite fittingly, these letters are known as “dead letters,” and are forwarded to what used to be the Dead Letter Office. Today, the latter has been renamed the Undeliverable Mail Office. There, employees attempt to redirect missives. If a proper location is impossible to determine, the correspondence will be auctioned or destroyed. Perhaps it is through this destruction process, ultimately leading the correspondence to its “death,” that Drescher can hope that his postcards will successfully reach the spirit world.

Why take the time to write a letter to someone who is dead? Sandra M. Gilbert offers an explanation in *Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Way We Grieve* (2006): “To those who are innocent of death’s plausibility, to those who haven’t been radically bereaved, the hypothesis that one might speak or write to the dead is absurd.... But for the mourner the letter to a virtual world beyond the grave is earnest, insistent, and

²¹³ Bettie Page was living in Los Angeles and the Polish child, in Canada.

²¹⁴ Drescher, *op. cit.*, 46.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

desperate for news of what the Victorians quaintly called the 'beyond.'"²¹⁶ While none of Drescher's fifty-two correspondents replied to his ornate postcards, receiving posthumous letters has certainly long been an all too common occurrence for the families of soldiers overseas. It is also a fantasy explored at length both on the Internet and in literature. One example is French author Alexandre Jardin's works *Le zibial* (1997) and *Le zèbre* (1988). In both novels, the protagonist succeeds in sending his lover correspondence from beyond the grave. The notion that the afterlife is a "virtual" space has an even deeper meaning in this age of online communication. This comparison is not lost on Gilbert, who asks: "And in a century? E-mail *to* the dead? E-mail *from* the dead, whose shadowy faces might appear on our computer screens, who might even, eventually, set up their own Web sites?"²¹⁷ What if, Gilbert asks, writing postcards and letters to the dead, as did Drescher, becomes an outdated method of communication, as is becoming the case with regard to postal correspondence between the living? What if technology makes it possible to send electronic mail to heaven and hell? While Gilbert imagines these events occurring only in the next century, and thus when present generations are long dead, it appears that certain websites are ahead of their time, permitting people to write e-mails and to then program the sending dates. This action can potentially lead to the arrival of a message after the sender's death. Websites such as *The Dead Letter Office* (thedeadletter.com) are more explicit in their purpose, which is to provide a "storage space for wisdom, regret and guidance."²¹⁸ The site gives interested parties the opportunity to write letters that will be read only after the senders have passed away. The letters can say anything: "Although I've always known I was mortal, when death came, it still was a surprise.... Does anyone

²¹⁶ Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 81.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

²¹⁸ www.thedeadletter.com, December 14, 2006.

remember me now?” reads one. “Stop looking. Elvis is here,” reads another. But once a letter is submitted, it will be lost amongst the others in the database. With no catalogue or filing system, the only way to retrieve a letter is through the permanent electronic address provided to the author by the “office.” The site suggests that “[you] print the address out, fold it up and keep it in your wallet, never telling anyone your Dead Letter exists – until the day you die.”²¹⁹ Whether these authors keep their letters lost in cyberspace or reveal their existence to loved ones, the purpose is for self help.

“What can you as an artist do that seems relevant and meaningful?” asked American mail artist Kynaston McShine, in 1970. Describing the materials used in a correspondence art exhibition, McShine continued: “[They are] considerably varied, and also spirited.”²²⁰ After reading Drescher’s claim that mail art can help determine the existence of life after death, the term “spirited” takes on a deeper meaning. Since the emergence of the mail art movement, correspondence artists have had high hopes of creating an art that would reach beyond art institutions. Now with Henrik Drescher’s project, mail artists can even claim to be capable of reaching beyond life on Earth.

That the terms “mail art,” “correspondence art” and “Eternal network” (another phrase to which Drescher’s art gives new meaning) are fading from contemporary vocabulary has not slowed down the movement; *au contraire*, it has permitted new artists to manipulate postal art. Since the goal of the movement has always been one of inclusiveness, it has been more than welcoming of artists whether or not they are formally associated with the mail art community. The mail art by Amy Lam, Frank Warren and Henrick Drescher can be read as a commentary about contemporary attitudes

²¹⁹ *Idem*.

²²⁰ Kynaston McShine, in Michael Crane’s *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity*, 117.

and society's growing interest in self help. The result, especially in work produced by Lam and Drescher, tends to read as a parody of the self-help phenomenon, with little pretension to serious self help or paranormal investigation. For Warren, however, the art produced in the context of his project is clearly therapeutic, viewed by artist and participants alike as capable of healing or restoring mental health.

From its arrival in Canada in 1968 to the present, mail art has pushed both the limits of artmaking and the role of the artist. Mail art has evolved from collage work, to a series of magazines and archives. It has also evolved from being impossible to exhibit to being marketable, from being the work of a tight-knit artistic community to having an individualistic focus. Now, the movement has branched out to incorporate aspects of self-help. Mail art's forty-year history in Canada has demonstrated the medium's capacity to adapt. The end of mail art is nowhere in sight.

Conclusion

To demonstrate the emergence and spread of mail art, this thesis has focused primarily on Ray Johnson, Image Bank, General Idea, Anna Banana, Ed Varney, Sarah Jackson, Amy Lam, Frank Warren and Henrik Drescher. Yet to narrow down the mail art community to such a small number of artists has meant that several networkers and their specific interests were left insufficiently researched. Indeed, there remain many avenues for scholarly endeavors; avenues that I have been unable to explore because of the need to abide by regulations regarding thesis length.

One such issue involves links between mail art and performance art. Chapter 1 emphasized Ray Johnson's influence on the mail art movement. By changing the word correspondence to *correspondance*, Johnson affirmed his strong interest in performance art. Since the Eternal Network focuses more on the process than on results, should mail art be considered a form of performance? Several artists such as Anna Banana (Chapter 2) and La Toan Vinh have emphasized mail art's link with performance art. Researchers are encouraged to take particular note of Toan Vinh's work. The Montreal-based artist repeatedly unites correspondence with performance and recitations, as with *The Mail Art and Performance Tribute to Ray Johnson*, presented at the Observatoire 4 gallery and Stratheart Centre Multiculturel (Montreal) in 1996.

Another phenomenon that merits future analysis is Artist Trading Cards (ATC). While this thesis introduced the network's interest in exchanging collages, letters and stamps, British Columbia mail artists Kevin Godsoe (also known as Art Monument), Don Mabie (also known as Chuck Stake) and Dale Roberts specialize in the creation of Artist Trading Cards, a phenomenon that originated in Switzerland in 1997. ATCs are small in

size, sharing their dimensions with traditional sports trading cards, yet they can be created by using any type of material. These cards are traded amongst artists by mail or in person and follow many of mail art's exhibition and exchange guidelines addressed in Chapter 3. In early 2006, Ontario artists Ronna Mogelon and Susan Valyi published the first ATC periodical, *ATC Quarterly: An Artist Trading Card Journal*, in response to the growing number of artists involved in this type of exchange. To date, the magazine has published five issues.

Chapter 4 mentioned the network's growing interest in electronic mail art. Certainly the use of computers has greatly influenced correspondence art. Instead of using scissors and glue, artists now make collages by using computer programmes such as Photoshop. With hand-written letters replaced by e-mail, correspondents are increasingly posting on the Internet to advertise mail art exhibitions and make calls for submissions. Why pay for stamps when it is possible to communicate for free – let alone much faster – using computer technology? Indeed, the Internet, with its art-related networks, sites and chatrooms, seems to be a direct outgrowth of the mail art practice that existed before the age of the home computer. But since e-mail does not employ the postal system, should it even be considered mail art? This is a rich topic, only briefly addressed in Chuck Welch's *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*,²²¹ and also touched upon only lightly in this thesis. Much more information is available online, with artists such as Guy Bleus dedicated to the spread of this medium. Still, little is known about the artists who practice electronic mail art and about their impact within the more traditional mail art community.

²²¹ Chuck Welch, *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology* (Toronto: University of Calgary Press, 1995).

As a mail artist, my journeys to the post office did not go unnoticed by Canada Post personnel. I was repeatedly questioned about the purpose of my *Snail Project* and asked to provide formal proof of its art status with a letter from Concordia University's VAV Gallery. My postbox was searched as a result of my receiving of a large number of "suspicious mailings" and some letters were confiscated and eventually destroyed by the Undeliverable Mail Office. Harriet Russell, an English networker, had a rather different experience, as she writes in *Envelopes: A Puzzling Journey Through the Royal Mail*: "I always got the impression that [the postmen] rather enjoyed working out the puzzles.... I was amazed at their perseverance and willingness to involve themselves [in my work]." ²²² Although correspondence artists cannot complete their projects without the help of the postal service, never has mail art been studied from the post office's point of view, and this is another subject for exploration by future writers on mail art. The closest contact that has been made with the post office was during the filming of the documentary *How to Draw A Bunny*, ²²³ for which a postman was interviewed following Ray Johnson's death.

To find out more about the Eternal Network and the community's concerns and interests, it is best to contact an active mail artist. If Guy Bleus (Chapter 1) was correct in saying that there are as many histories associated with mail art as there are artists who join its community, then there exist boundless opportunities for further research. Art historians and artists are encouraged to continue exploring the mail art movement by re-examining its history through the work of different artists and themes not addressed in

²²² Harriet Russell, *Envelopes: A Puzzling Journey Through the Royal Mail* (New York: Random House, 2005), 4.

²²³ Andrew Moore and John Walter, *How to Draw a Bunny* (Toronto: Moticos Motion Picture/Elevator Picture Production, 2000), 90 minutes.

detail in this thesis. This area of study continues to evolve, with the constant emergence of new themes and perspectives. Included here, therefore, is a short list of artists and addresses intended to facilitate entrance into a mail art circle. With mail art's emphasis on reciprocity and exchange, novice correspondents will find that the posting of only one letter inevitably leads to a new contact, a new idea or a new missive in the mail. The journey has begun; welcome to the world of mail art.

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- _____. Correspondence with the author, June 12, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, June 13, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, June 14, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, June 16, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, June 22, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, July 8, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, August 2, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, August 3, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, August 4, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, August 7, 2006.
- _____. Correspondence with the author, August 23, 2006.
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Figure 1.
Umberto Boccioni, *The City Rises* [*La città che sale*], 1910.

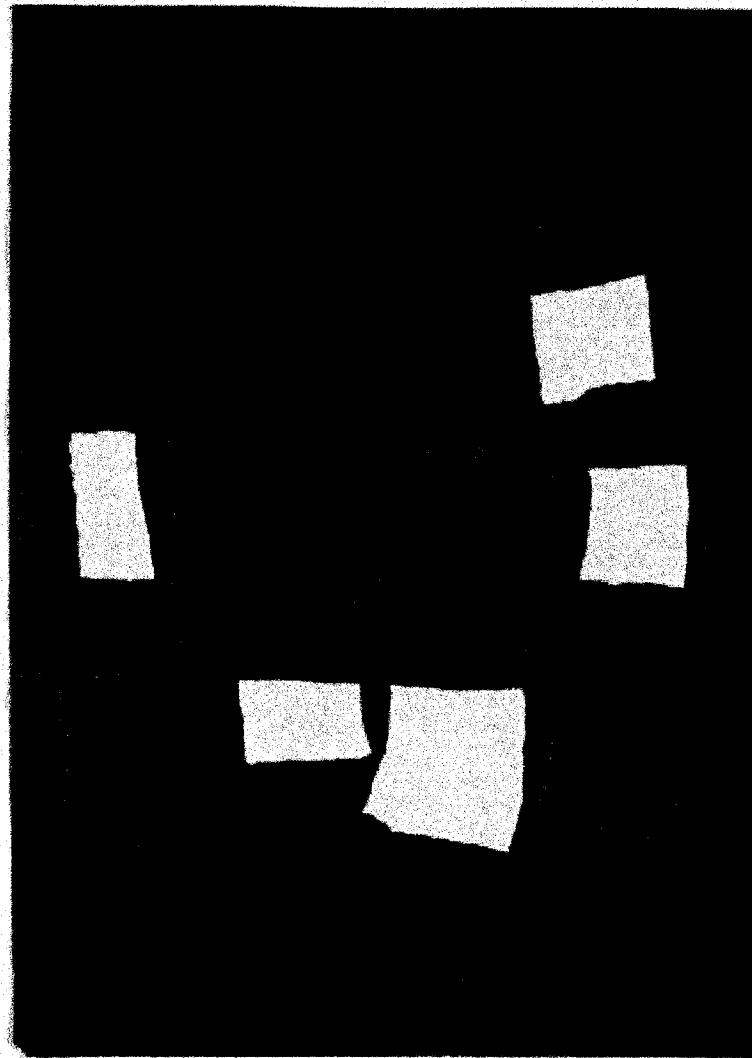


Figure 2.

Hans Arp, *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*, 1916-17.

-toir. De sangsue, à la fois, la
-vins qu'avant cinq illeçons et
-aussi quelques associations avec q
-entre petites bêtes; il faut co
-supar de filles afin d'en décoll
-ner toute responsabilité. Après
-seux photos, entre hésitation de
-vant vingt figures était compréh
-ensible; mais la pire association
-seconde notes porte-bouteux sans
-accepter interdiction aux lieux; j
-ouvent ne pas épouser son volon
-re opticien plutôt que supporter
-leurs absents des dédicaces, des
-rises la coupe de combat surco
-ures puis il les décollait. "Quand
-ant, avec des fils, pour tout dire
-er, indigne de la coupe surco
-ria à l'occasion pour tout dire
-re, par exemple, des larmes de
-Dien suit et nous avons besoin, q
-moie à acheter, mais dans un
-délégation. "Même dans un tel
-ple, nous sommes en danger, de se
-toute pour les profits, devant la
-squelle et, par précaution à prop
-sa, elle défend des profits, sans q
-ver qu'il est défendu de com
-laxité, sept ou huit personnes
-vent quelques conséquences, mais
-tenant appointies; ne pas oubli
-er, entre parenthèses, que dans le
-sacroust, puis avec sainte acrob
-able occasion, reviennent quatre
-sols leurs fautes liées; qu'il
-surs, et la férocité débouche de
-rière son propre tapis. On des
-sils j'ai vu cette cinquantaine
-t les piles la ou plusieurs fem
-lent, acceptent quelques caisses
-le porteur. D'abord, piquait on
-lignes sur bouteilles, malgré la
-ur importante les sont ébranlé
-tise? Les ligules algues, après
-reuses l'incalifiables, va en j
-distancer la vallée par le bord
-suffit. Nous sommes actuellement
-surs des yeux, voyez quel danger

-ment, après avoir fini votre qu
-se. N'oubliez que le fait d'été
-indire aux boutons l'un des entre
-se parait (sans si, lui, tourne a
-toute) faire calculer les boutons
-enlèves. Reste à choisir: de la
-sages, fortes, extensibles défait
-ions tresses par trois filets a
-sés, ou bien, la seule enveloppe
-pour éto-ndre. Avez vous accepté
-des manchettes Pouvez vous prendre
-un fil? Peut-être devriez vous a
-tendez son pilote, en être ten
-pu sa difficulté; Avez vous choi
-on la, impossible ajouter une tu
-sibles laisses. Sur trente viad
-rantes postes deux actuels veul
-ent être, courants divinement,
-riment toute représentation hors
-leur sphère. Pendant ces heures, pou
-rquel comment, livrera-t-on a
-de d'écarter autrement dit: nous
-refroidissent lorsque nous nous p
-lissent, sans ferrière, pendant

partie, des maintenant par grande
-quantité, pourront faire valoir la
-e d'un oblong qui, sans être une
-un triangle et contourner celui
-e de grolots, va remonter. Deux
-sols seulement, tout devra vendre
-le laire, quand il facilite la
-surs de l'industrie; mais, comme q
-sils, les boutons puis seuls des
-surs, mais nombreux, ne
-surs, on est obligé d'entourer
-pluieurs grandes horloges pour
-obtenir un tiroir à bas âge. Co
-clusion: après sainte efforts
-en vue du poigne, quel dommage!
-tous les coureurs sont partis e
-t signifient rien. Aucune desan
-de ne s'attelle l'ignorant ou so
-id teneur; toutefois, étant don
-sues quelques cages, c'est une
-profonde lecture qu'indiquent t
-outes celles ailleurs. Faut-il, v
-ous surs saque et s'était t
-rouver la quelle prononciation

Figure 3.

Marcel Duchamp, *Rendez-vous du dimanche 6 février 1916 à 1h 3/4 après-midi, 1916.*

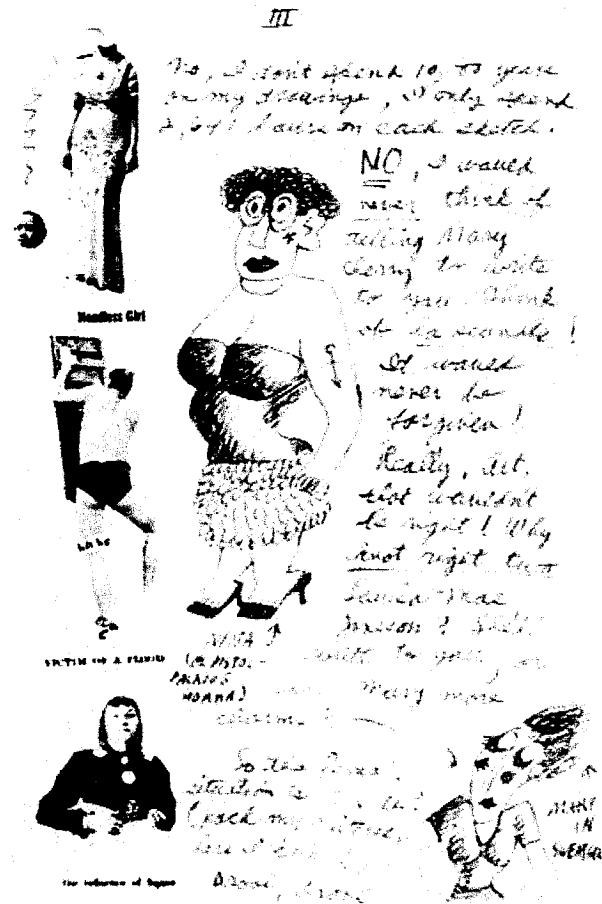


Figure 4.
Ray Johnson, letter sent to Arthur Secunda, 1943.

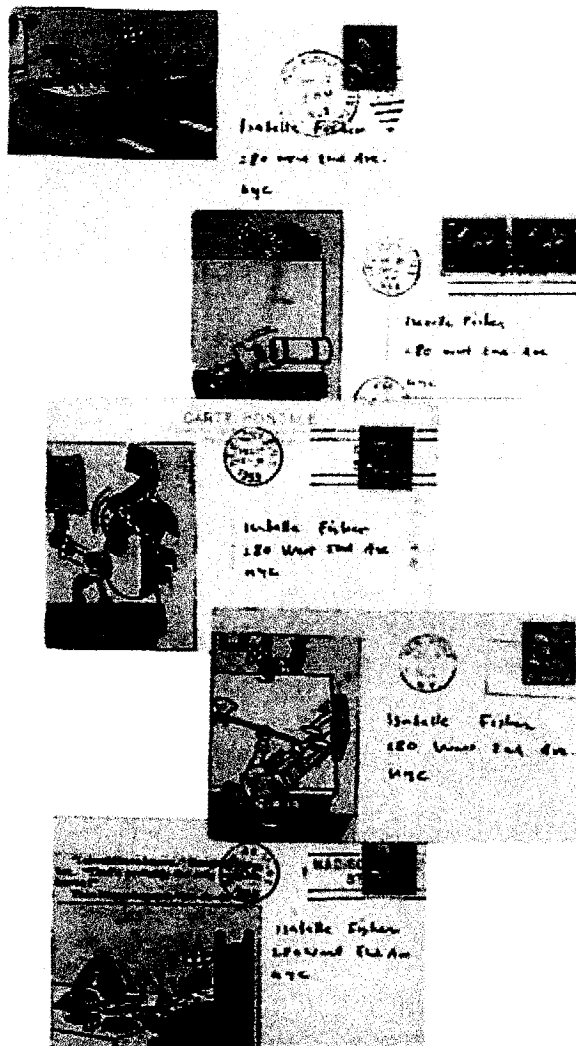


Figure 5.
Ray Johnson, postcards sent to Isabelle Fisher, 1953-55.

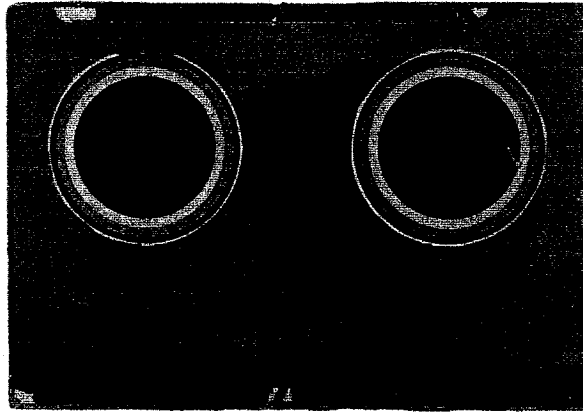


Figure 6.
Ray Johnson, *Untitled (The Luckies)*, ca. 1958-60.

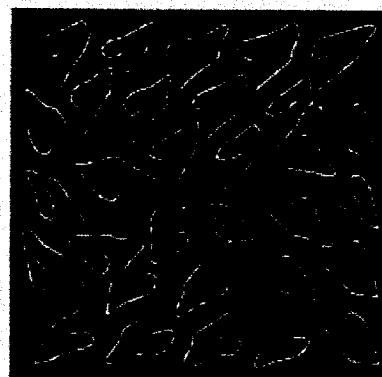


Figure 7.
Ray Johnson, correspondence sent to William S. Wilson, 1973.

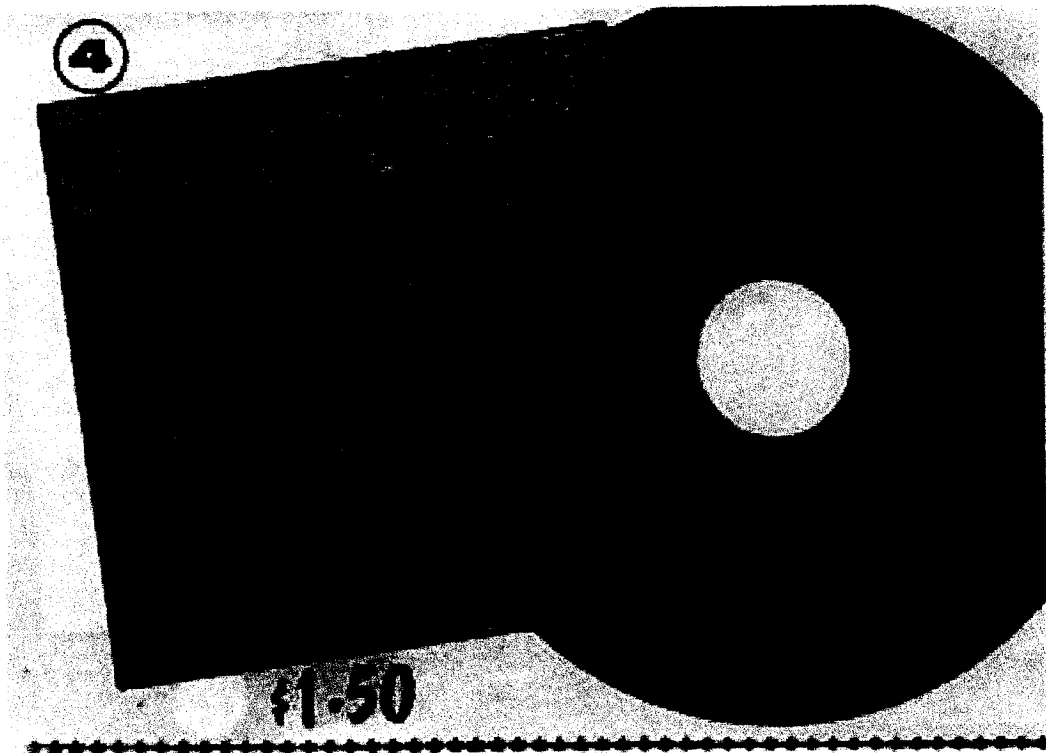


Figure 8.
Ray Johnson, correspondence sent to William S. Wilson, 1964.

Dear
Whitney
Museum,
i hate
you.
Love,
Ray
Johnson

Figure 9.

Ray Johnson, "Dear Whitney Museum, I hate you. Love, Ray Johnson," undated.



Figure 10.
File Magazine, April 15th, 1972



Figure 11.
VILE International, January, 1974.

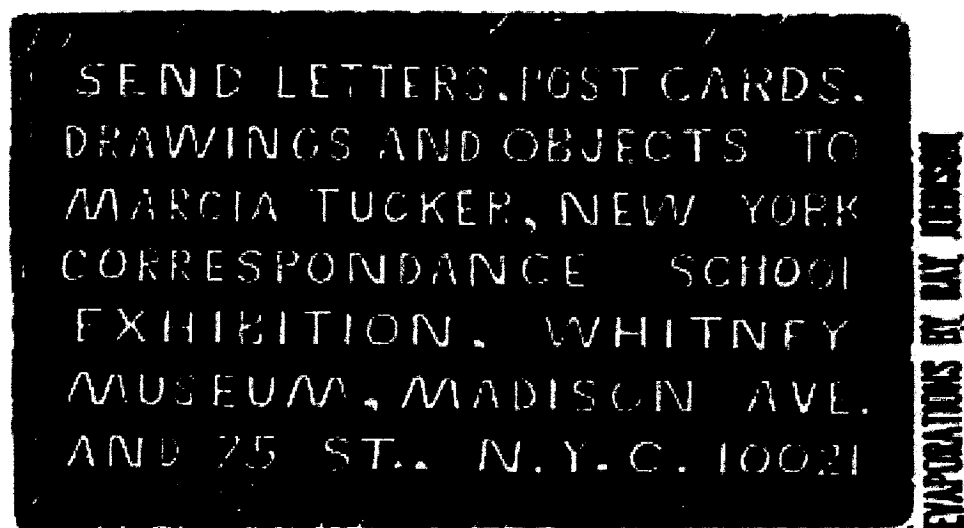


Figure 12.

Ray Johnson, "Send letters, post cards, drawings and objects to Marcia Turner, New York Correspondance School Exhibition," 1970.

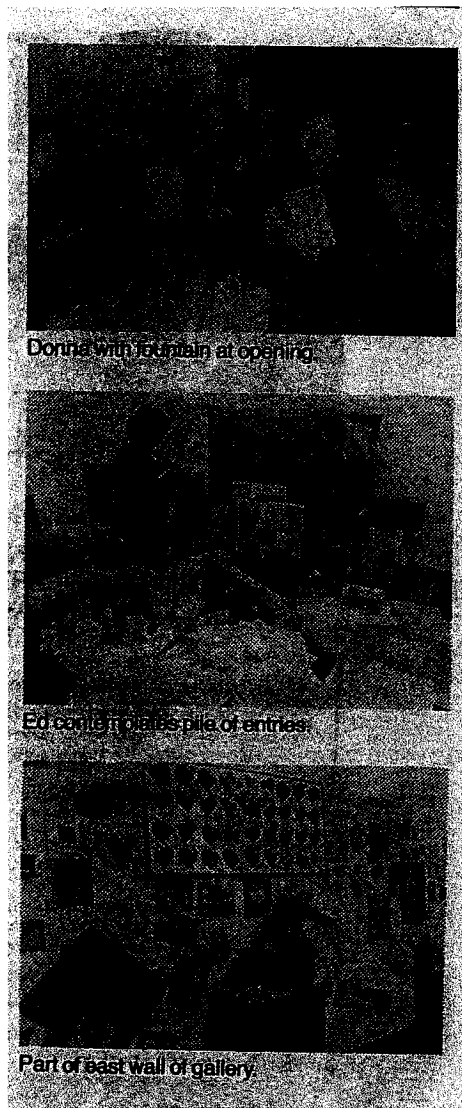


Figure 13.

Ed Varney and Donna Hagerman, *First Vancouver International Heartbreak Hotel Valentine's Day Sweetheart Mail Art Show* (Pitt International Galleries, Vancouver, 1985).



Figure 14.
Art Travels, Mail Art Festival, View from the Grand Hall of the Museum of Civilization
(Gatineau).

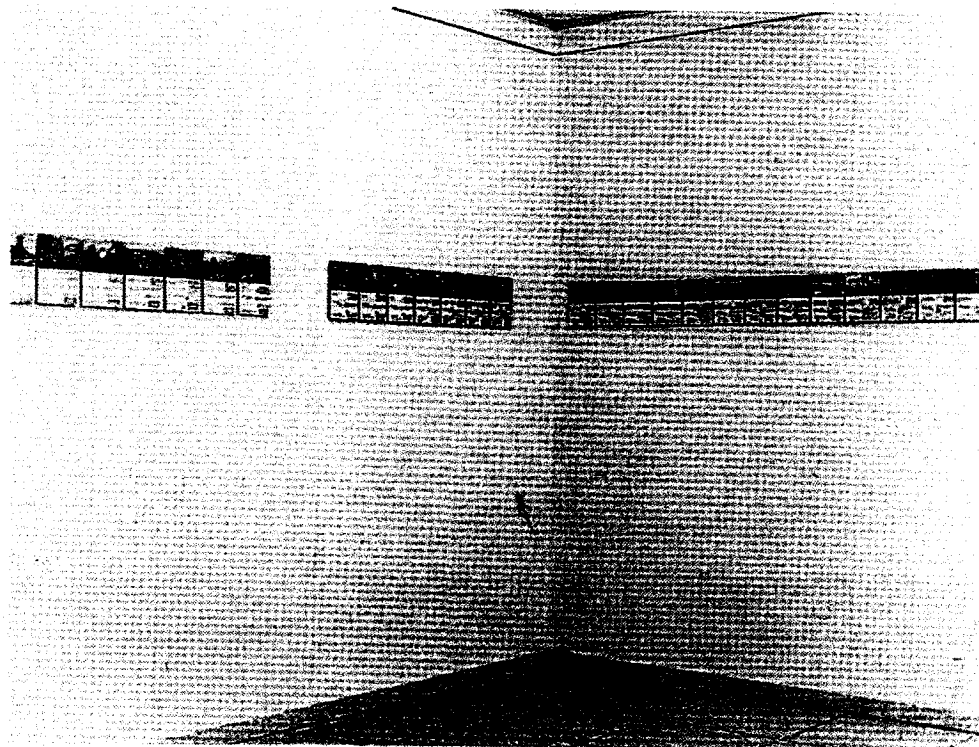
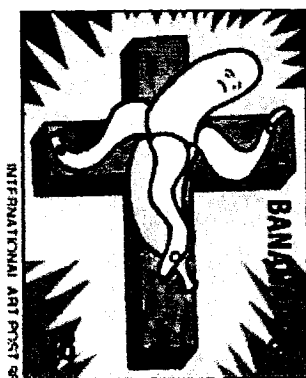


Figure 15.
On Kawara, I Got Up, 1968.



Printed in Canada by Banana Productions
POB 2460, Sechell, BC Canada V0N 3A0

December 6 1998-
January 6 1999

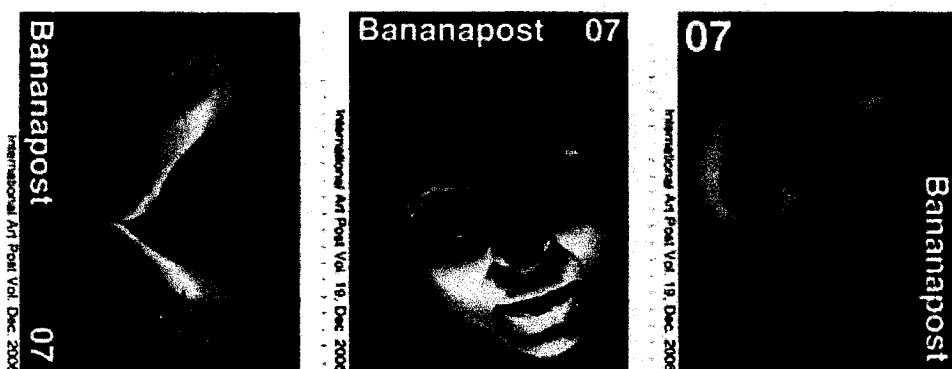


Figure 16.
Artistamps by Anna Banana, 1998; 2006.

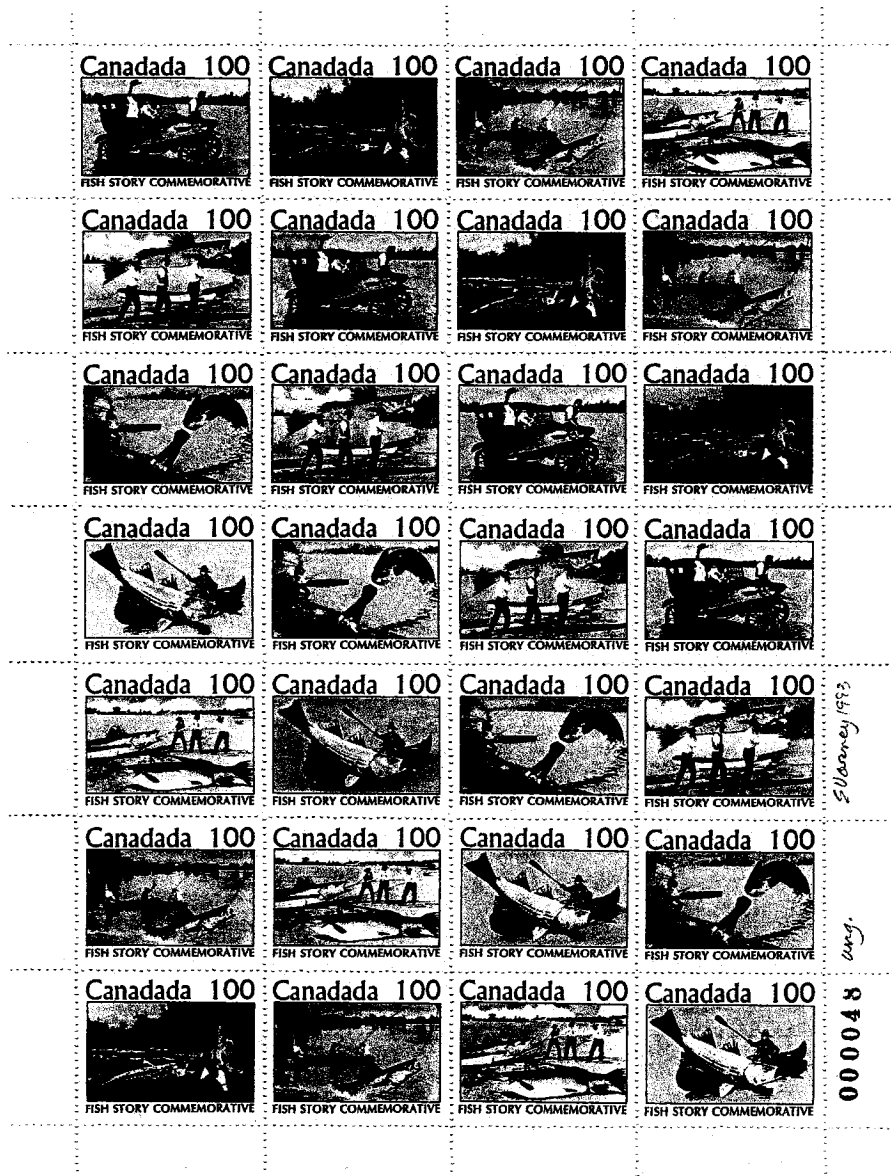


Figure 17.
Artistamps by Ed Varney, 1993.

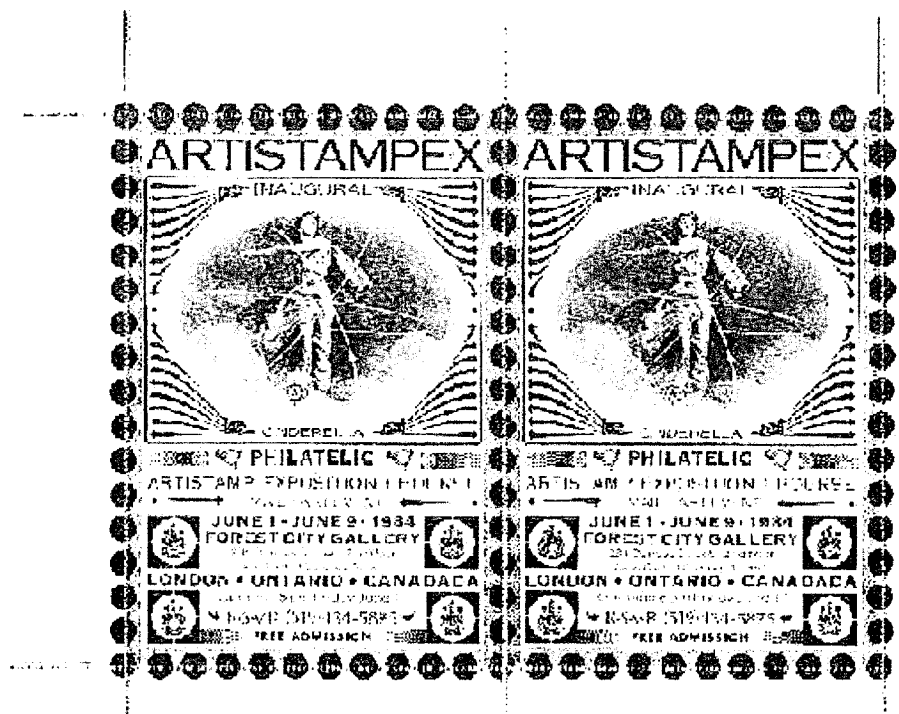


Figure 18.
Michael Bidner, invitation to *Artistampex*, 1984.

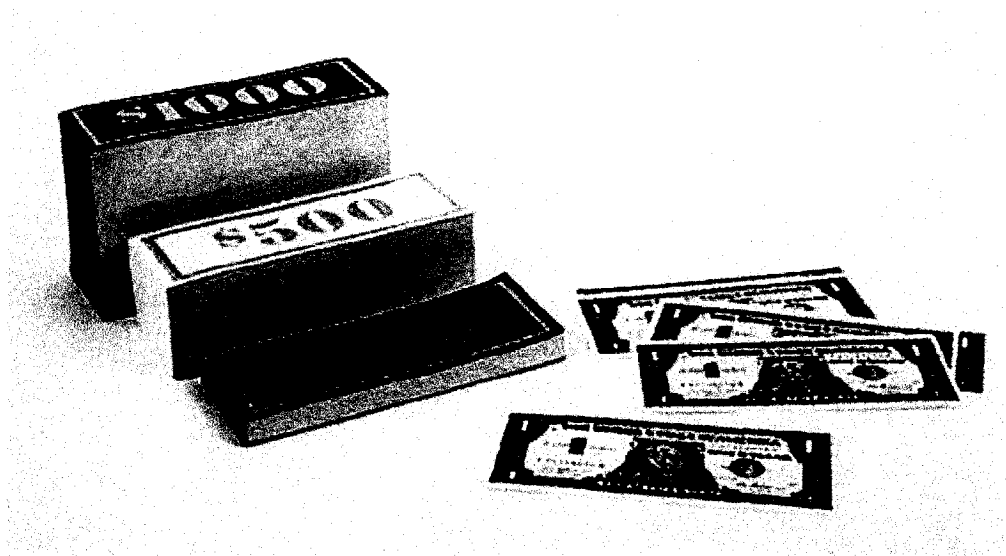
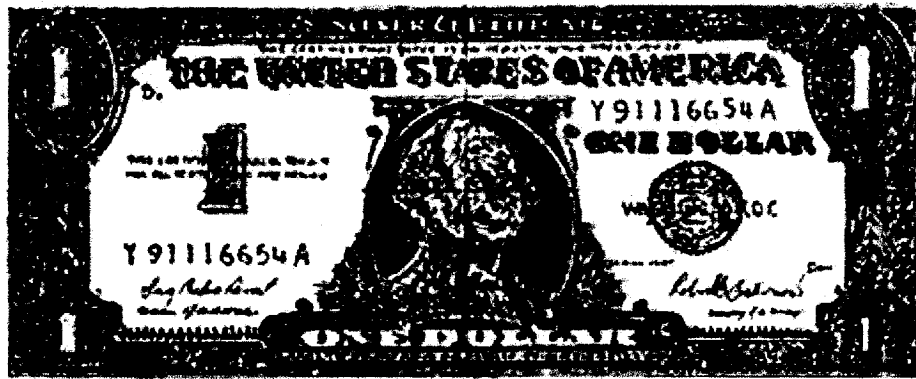


Figure 19.
Robert Watts, *Dollar Bill*, 1962; *Dollar Bills Books*, 1987.

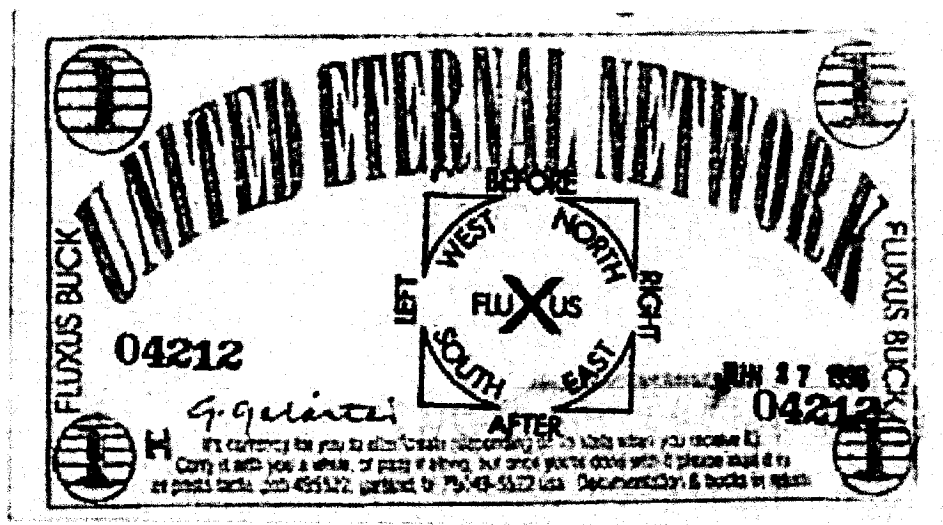


Figure 20.
 Julie Jeffries, *Fluxus Bucks*, 1994.

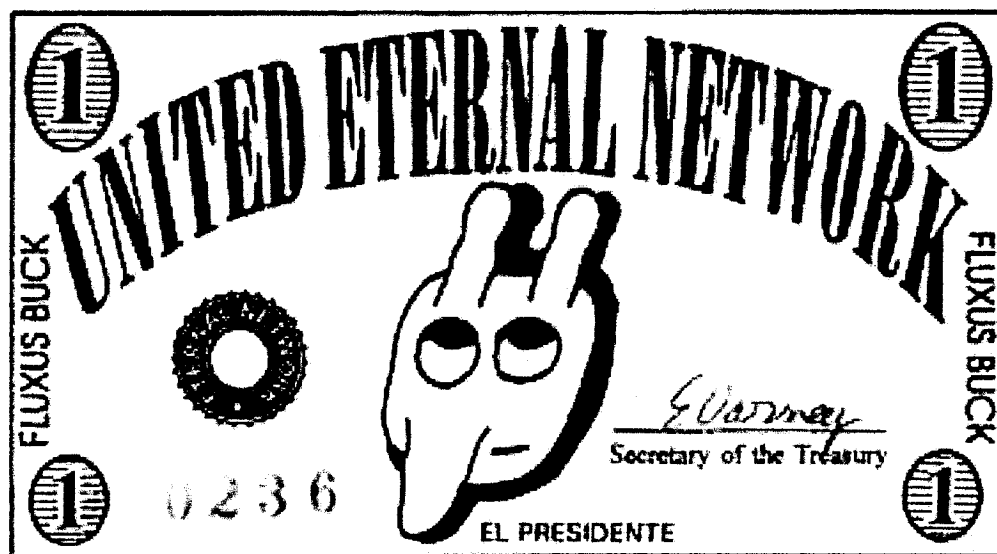


Figure 21.
Ed Varney, *Fluxus Bucks*, 1996.

MATTER TRANSFORMER

IN 2006, I WAS ASKED TO MAKE A VIDEO FOR THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART'S "MATTER TRANSFORMER" EXHIBITION. I WAS GIVEN A BUDGET OF \$10,000 AND A DEADLINE OF TWO WEEKS. I HAD TO CREATE A VIDEO THAT WOULD BE SHOWN IN THE MUSEUM'S GALLERY AND WOULD BE AVAILABLE ON THE MUSEUM'S WEBSITE. I HAD TO ALSO CREATE A VIDEO THAT WOULD BE AVAILABLE ON THE MUSEUM'S WEBSITE.

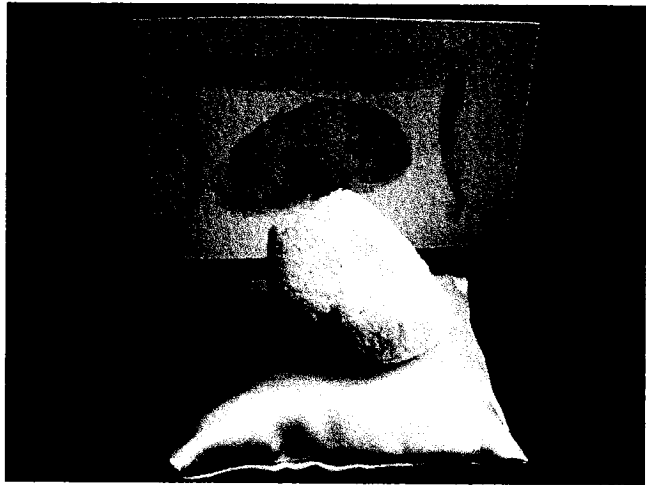
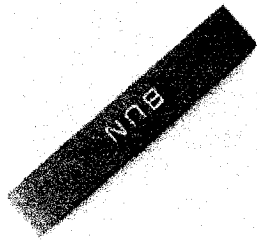


Figure 22.

Amy Lam, (from left to right) *Matter Transformer* (February 2006); *My Pet Sea Sponge* (April 2006); *Sleep Tape* (March 2006).

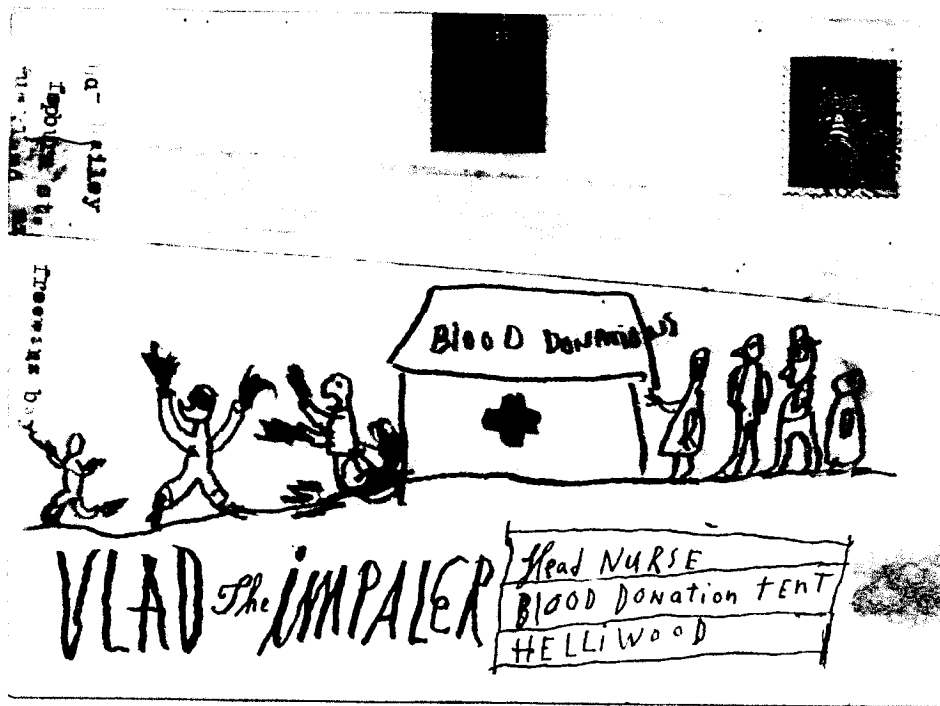


Figure 23.
Henrik Drescher, postcard to Vlad the Impaler, 2004.

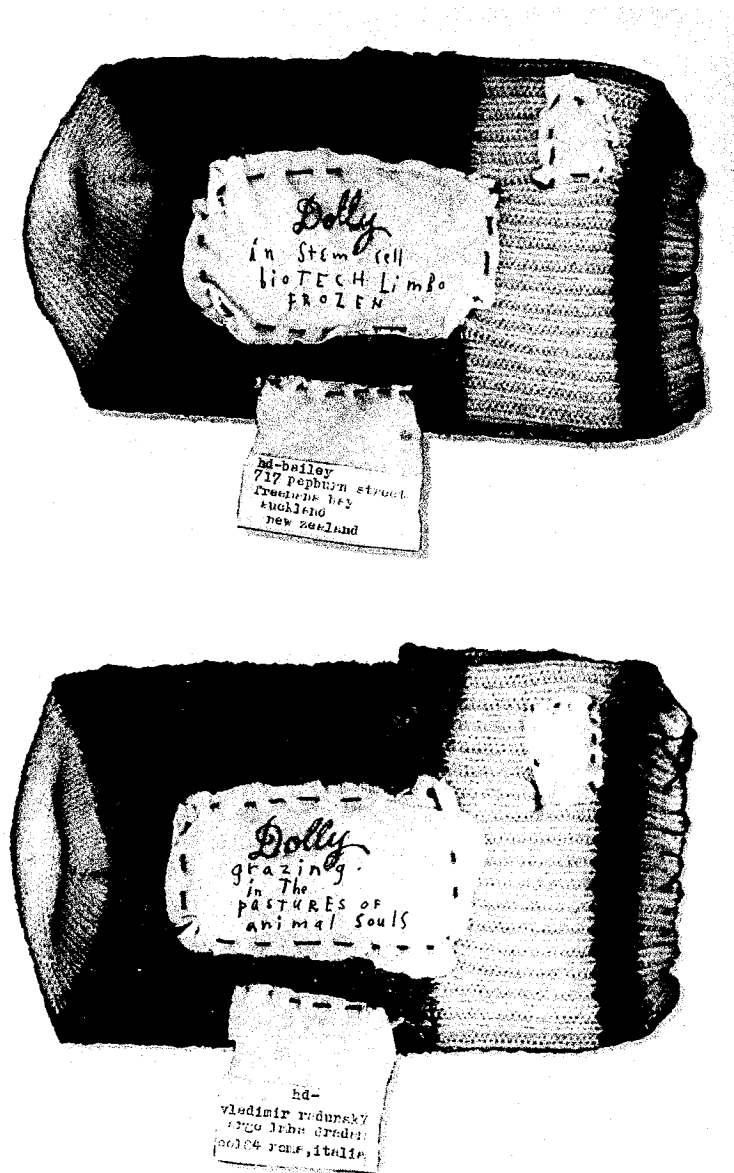


Figure 24.
Henrik Drescher, two postcards to Dolly the Sheep, 2004.

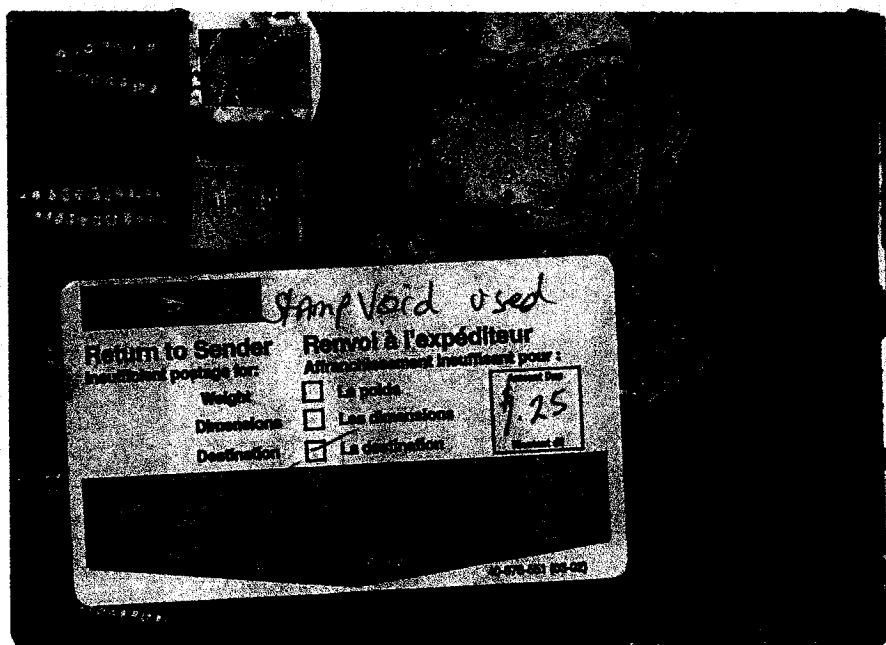


Figure 25.
Henrik Drescher, postcard to Betty Page, 2004.

APPENDIX I

CANADIAN MAIL ART MAGAZINES:

- Ace Comix*. Tim Robertson, Joe Acme, 1979.
- Art Communication Edition*. Super Vision Publication, 1977.
- Artistamp News*. Anna Banana, 1991.
- Artistamp Supplement*. Michael Bidner, 1983.
- Banana Rag*. Anna Banana, 1981.
- Edition*. Rick Hambleton/Intermedia Press, 1978.
- File*. AA Bronson, J. Zontal, F. Partz/General Idea, 1972.
- Havoc*. John Lucas, 1992.
- Images and Information (Sort of Magazine)*. Don Mabie/Chuck Stake, 1975.
- Industrial Sabotage*. Curvd H and Z/J.W. Curry, 1987.
- K.S.* Gerald Jupiter-Larsen, 1981.
- Mondo Hunkamooga*. Proper Tales Press, 1983.
- Nilmag*. Gerald Jupiter-Larsen, 1982.
- OF*. Gerald Jupiter-Larsen, 1979.
- The Poem Company*. Ed Varney, Henry Rappaport, 1970.
- Push-Machinery*. Daniel Bradley, 1986.
- Scarabeus*. Ladislav Guderna, 1978.
- The Single Eye*. Allan Clark, 1989.
- Smart Police*. Michael Devoni, 1985.
- (Smile) imMortalLIES*. Monty Cantsin/Istvan Kantor, 1985.
- (Smile) Start*. Monty Cantsin/Istvan Kantor, 1986.
- The Soo Thing Devo Dada*. Michael Devoni, 1985.
- Vile*. Anna Banana, 1974.

CANADIAN MAIL ART ARCHIVES:

ART METROPOLE
788 King Street West
Toronto, Ontario

National Gallery of Canada (Art Metropole Collection)
380 Sussex Drive
Ottawa, Ontario

MORRIS/TRASOV ARCHIVE
Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia
1956, Main Mall (Vancouver, BC)

NATIONAL POSTAL MUSEUM
100 Laurier Street
PO box 3100, Station B
Gatineau, Québec

PRIVATE MAIL ART COLLECTIONS IN CANADA:

ARTISTAMPS OF THE WORLD
Rosemary Gahlinger-Beaune
Box 553
Lucan, Ontario
N0M 2I0

BANANA MAIL ART ARCHIVE
Anna Banana
287, East 26th Avenue
Vancouver, BC
V5V 2H2

FIVE/CINQ ARCHIVES
James Warren Felter
2707, Rosebery Avenue
West Vancouver, BC
V7V 3A3

MUSEO INTERNATIONALE DE NEU ART
Ed Varney
2268, West 45th Avenue
Vancouver, BC
V6M 2J3