

BEN VAUTIER. POSTMAN'S CHOICE. 1973 reissue of a 1966-67 post card printed by Fluxus based on a 1965 work by Ben. This mail art work involved the issues of choice and chance. Ben simply addressed both sides of the post card and left it up to the post man as to which of the two addresses would receive it. It was received by Ken Friedman. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection.

It would be difficult to pinpoint the moment when artists' correspondence became correspondence art. By the end of the late 1950's, the three primary sources of correspondence art were taking shape. In North America, the New York Correspondence School was in its germinal stages in the work of artist Ray Johnson and his loose network of friends and colleagues. In Europe, the group known as the Nouveau Realistes were addressing radical new issues in contemporary art. On both continents, and in Japan, artists who were later to work together under the rubric of Fluxus were testing and beginning to stretch the definitions of art.

Correspondence art is an elusive art form, far more variegated by its very nature than, say, painting. Where a painting always involves paint and a support surface, correspondence art can appear as any one of dozens of media transmitted through the mail. While the vast majority of correspondence art or mail art activities take place in the mail, today's new forms of electronic communication blur the edges of that forum. In the 1960's, when correspondence art first began to blossom, most artists found the postal service to be the most readily available — and least expensive — medium of exchange.

Today's micro-computers with modern facilities offer anyone computing and communicating power that two decades ago were available only to the largest institutions and corporations, and only a few decades previous weren't available to anyone at any price. Transistors and miniaturized electronics

make it as simple today to record and to send a video-tape as to write a letter. With teletext, interactive cable, mailgrams, electronic mail, electronic computer networking, video, inexpensive audio, and — looming on the horizon — a myriad of new communications techniques, correspondence art is harder to define than ever before.

While these facts establish a sense of perspective, the soul of correspondence art remains communication. Its twin faces are "correspondence art" and "mail art." Here the distinction is between reciprocal or interactive communication — correspondence — and unidirectional or one-way communication, mailed out without any requirement for response.

There are special wrinkles in correspondence art that involve the mails as medium of transmission for purposes other than mail art. The best example of this would be an exhibition of art from Eastern Europe in which the cheapest and safest way of sending art to the United States would be through the mail, though the art works sent would actually be intended as — and only as — photographs, drawings, paintings, or artists' books.

Certain forms of art have become associated with correspondence art and mail art both by virtue of tradition and the ease with which they are mailed. These include post cards, artists' books, printed ephemera, rubber stamps, artists' postage stamps, and posters of various kinds.

The first phase of correspondence art primarily involved individual expression in reciprocal relationships, a natural

outgrowth of artists' correspondence. History and tradition list Ray Johnson as the central figure in this phase of correspondence art. To the degree that he identified, named and himself became identified with the emerging art form, this is true.

Working in the tradition of collage and the *objet trouve*, he was perhaps the first to identify the transaction of art works and notes with colleagues as an art form itself. Through this stroke of inspiration, correspondence art was born. Johnson gave it focus by promulgating the rubric, "The New York Correspondence School of Art."* Thus, by permutation, the world was given the new medium, correspondence art, and its first body of practitioners, The New York Correspondence School (NYCS).

However, correspondence art as such first grew from the work of the European artists identified as the "Nouveaux Realistes," a term coined for them by French critic Pierre Restany. The core issue of the "New Realism," a movement born in the early '50's, was the conception of an art made of real elements, that is, materials taken from the world directly rather than pictorially. The group includes Arman, Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Martial Raysse, Raymond Hains, Daniel Spoerri and Francois Dufrene, and — in some senses — Christo. As one can see, these artists each use a rather direct slice of life. The actual sectioning ranges from the highly tenuous or theoretical projects of Manzoni and Klein to the embedded and

*The name itself was coined by Ed Plunkett, then given its broad use by Johnson.

snared works of Arman and Spoerri, the decollages of Hains and Dufrene and the world-embracing, massively realized projects of Christo.

The issues and ideas that motivated the Nouveaux Realistes also emerged in the Pop Art of the late '50's and early '60's in Britain and the United States, though Pop Art tended to be an art which took the real into its scope emblematically rather than by direct incorporation or manipulation.

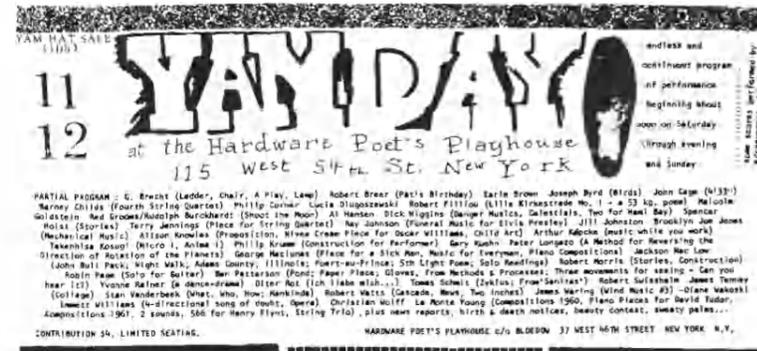
The college sensibility and incorporation of the real are attitudes shared with much later correspondence art. It is in the use of the postal system, of artists' stamps and of the rubber stamp that Nouveaux Realisme made the first gestures toward correspondence art and toward mail art.

Several early key works in these media were created by these artists. Klein's famous Blue Stamp was a postal cause celebre and a bureaucratic scandal after it was successfully mailed and postmarked in the mid-50's. Arman introduced the rubber stamp into contemporary art with his cachets and accumulations of the early and middle years of the decade.† Spoerri not only created ephemeral mailed works and projects, small gazettes and cards, but his involvement with mail art — unlike that of Klein or Arman — continued unabated for over a decade and a half spanning all the phases of correspondence art.

Thus, it can truthfully be said that the first artists involved in mail art were the Nouveaux Realistes. However, it was Ray Johnson and his circle of friends in the New York Correspondence School who gave the first phase its characteristic sensibility and presence.

If the Nouveaux Realistes created paradigms of correspondence art and mailed art as works, it was the New York Correspondence School that took the notion from paradigm to practice. Ranging at times from seventy-five to as many as three hundred people, the NYCS was summoned into being by Ray Johnson but, at its height, existed around him as many intersecting relationships independent of his direct involvements. Many distinguished artists participated in Johnson's whirling vortex of mailings and events, some of whom, such as Richard C, Ed Plunkett, or Dick Higgins and other Fluxus artists became themselves major shapers of the ethos and attitudes of correspondence art.

†Kurt Schwitters had done stamp works as early as 1918 and the Russian Futurists had achieved the distinction of creating the first modern art with rubber stamps a few years previous. However, the medium vanished until Arman resurrected it in his *oeuvre*.



YAM FESTIVAL. ANNOUNCEMENT. 1962. YAM was a multimedia mail and performance art event, which as this announcement indicates brought together a variety of artists, ranging from George Brecht, Robert Watts, Alison Knowles, Dick Higgins, Ray Johnson who were among the well known figures in mail art circles, to sculptor Robert Morris, dancer Yvonne Rainer and composer La Monte Young. What did YAM stand for? Nothing more esoteric than MAY spelled backwards. Ed Plunkett Collection.



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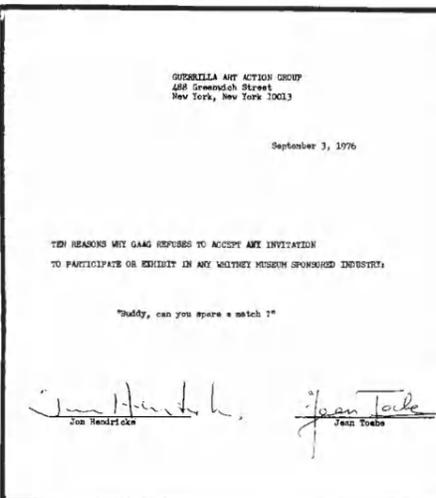
The NYCS relied on direct interaction between correspondents. As a result, the works that one might receive in the early days were highly personal, often highly crafted. Hand-made collages, carefully printed photographs, even framed paintings were fairly common. Odd and lavish objects were not uncommon. Some participants took pride and even a perverse pleasure in sending to one another the most outlandish and possibly unmailable objects or series of projects they could conceive. My fondest memories are of a series of chairs, smaller chairs mailed whole, larger chairs mailed disassembled to fit within postal size limits. The challenge was to mail them unwrapped and visible, persuading postal clerks to accept the items as falling within regulations. This was, of course, a time when postal regulations were far different and substantially more lax than today.

In the '60's, Ray Johnson set the tone for the NYCS. *The Paper Snake*, a book on his work, published by Something Else Press, is a good example of the abundance and flavor of the time. Direct and personal interaction were the salient qualities and greatest pleasures of the NYCS and the era of the '60's. The first phase of correspondence art was also characterized by a trenchant sense of privacy. These were private letters and activities, exchanges among friends. An attitude that only members need apply prevailed. Johnson himself issued numerous lovely, dense printed collages in which he specifically used the names of "members" of the NYCS, occasionally adding or dropping names. These seemed to point inward to a closed circle. This is not to say that it was bad: it's simply the way it was. In the first phase of correspondence art, the paradigm blossomed, flourished and found most of its major practitioners. In the second phase, correspondence art turned outward to the world.

It is at this point, during the first phase of the development of correspondence art—but looking toward the second—that it is best to explore the role of Fluxus in the development and dissemination of mail art.

Fluxus germinated in the artistic ferment of the late 1950's. Some of the Fluxus people found each other in John Cage's and Richard Maxfield's classes at The New School. Others met through George Maciunas' publications or committees or the early festivals, and in the moving feasts of the era, such as the ongoing series of events at Yoko Ono's

loft on Chambers Street. By 1962, Fluxus was fairly well formed and named. A few individuals from Europe and America, such as the Czech artist Milan Knizak, Joseph Beuys the German artist, Geoff Hendricks or I, came into the group slightly later, with members of the initial cast of characters coming and going through about 1966.



GUERRILLA ART ACTION GROUP (GAAG) Letter. 1976. GAAG used the mails as a means of expressing opinion on political issues both inside and outside the art world. Jon Hendricks Collection.

Fluxus has always been a rather unlikely movement: sprightly, hard to pin down, a bit Zen-like in its reluctance to be described, it is hardly a movement at all. One may rather call it a rubric, a forum, an elusive philosophy made real by the fact that real artists engaged one another and the world in real acts under the name Fluxus. The edges of Fluxus have never been particularly crisp or brutal. So it is that Fluxus shares Daniel Spoerri with the Nouveaux Réalistes; Christo has occasionally floated into Fluxus, though he has about him always a sense that he can never be part of any particular group with which he may share interests. Half a dozen of the most active and charming participants in the NYCS were very active in Fluxus. At times, even Ray Johnson took part in various Fluxus publications and events.

As elusive and unlikely to proselytize as Fluxus seemed, it also had a very public side. Massive festivals, grand publishing programs, extensive tours of performances and concerts, proposals

for social reform and public housing came out of a movement which was as much characterized by these prophetic, even socio-political leanings as by such typically evanescent projects as George Brechts' laconic events.

At first, the Fluxus artists active in the correspondence art world (including many who did not participate in the NYCS) were quite content to create private works. These included mail art pieces by individuals, and marvelous series of publications, post cards, stamps and stationery published by George Maciunas for Fluxus artists including Bob Watts, Robert Filliou, Ben Vautier, Daniel Spoerri, and others among us. There was even a Fluxus Postal Kit prepared in 1966 complete with a Fluxpost cancellation mark, permitting an entire, Fluxus-controlled postal exchange to take place.

By the late '60's, the public opportunities of correspondence art and mail art became manifestly visible. It was then that the prophetic side of Fluxus emerged, establishing the second phase of mail art. Now, for the first time, the correspondence art—in the previous sense that the term has been used here—that reached out to the public, embodied not only correspondence art, but a larger, and admittedly less private, mail art. Through this outreach, the extraordinary latent power for international communication became overt, termed "The Eternal Network" by Robert Filliou. It was at this time that mail art first created, and began to make the real, its potential for social change and for contributing new forms of communication to the world.

Having taken counsel by the bad example of self-congratulatory colleagues, I've come to feel a bit uncomfortable writing about my own work. Whereas I first began writing on art to explain my work, or to explain Fluxus, and therefore, in a sense, felt free to write about myself, I prefer now to write about art to explain issues. In that I have been called on for this article to write about Fluxus, and, in particular, Fluxus' relation to mail art, I have, in part, been called on to write about myself. I beg the reader's pardon for that which may seem boastful. The historical documents are available, and, with the forthcoming appearances of Michael Crane's massive study on mail art, a plethora of documents will be accessible to the public. Where the reader finds me questionable or disagreeable, therefore, I suggest a first hand look at the material to permit each

- 2F/ccc CLOUD SCISSORS, \$1.
- 2F/ccc ICED DICE, Event Prospectus \$3.
- 2F/ccc EXIT & ENTRANCE music on tape, \$2
- 3F-ca PENNANTS from GEORGE BRECHT, \$30 and up; PLANS \$50 and up (bunting, sewn legends, with staff)
SIGNS (oil on canvas, mounted) \$25 and up. Sets of two \$40. available with following legends:
AIR, arrow, set of two; BOTH/NEITHER, BUTTERGUIDE, DANCE, set of two; DAY/NIGHT, DUST, EARTH MEETING, EDGE MEMORY, END, EXIT, set of two; FACT/FICTION, FOOD, FORGET THIS, PROMPT, LIMIT, LISTEN, LOCATION, MEETING, MIDDLE, MIND SHADE, NINE YOURS, MONDAY, NO SMOKING, NO VACANCY, O'CLOCK, QUESTION, RAIN TRICK, RAY, REMEMBER (not available), REMEMBER THIS, RIVER WAZ, ROOM, SILENCE, SMOKE, SOUP, START, surprise signs, set of two: THINK/THOUGHT, TOP, UNIT.
- 3F-cb SUITCASE or TRUNK packed, ready for traveling, \$ 50 and up.
- 3F-cd RELOCATION. score/prospectus, 50¢.

EUROPEAN MAIL-ORDER WAREHOUSE. 1964. This publication of the European Flux Shop is a catalogue with a price list that was meant to be used to order the contents. Available items that would be sent through the mails ranged from "Robert Watts: events in wood box, \$3" to "Alison Knowles: canned bean roll \$6;" "Fluxus-Machine \$5;" "Nam June Paik: exhibits and compositions \$8." The catalogue illustrated here was sent to Robert Watts. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Collection.

to make his or her own determination. That said, I'll write it as I see it.

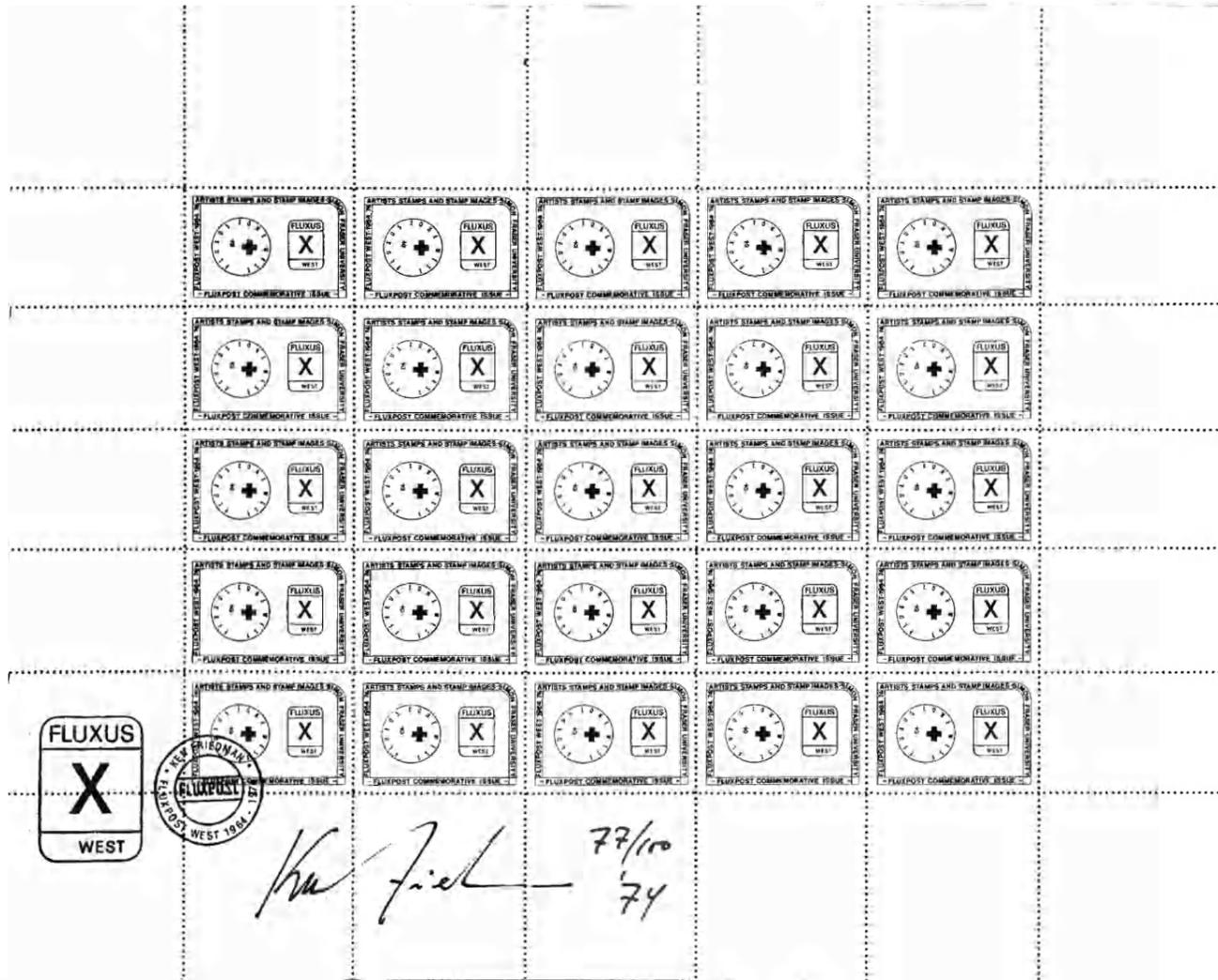
Fluxus was a forum for experimentation. The commitment to experimentation and to research was profound. It was characteristic that Fluxus participants not only asked "Why?" but "How?"—and then they would generally go on to ask "Why not?" and "How else?" A fair number of Fluxus' members came to art from untraditional backgrounds—Spoerri from ballet, Higgins from music and printing, Paik from music and robotics, Filliou from economics, Brecht from natural and biological sciences, and so on. Others, such as Alison Knowles or Wolf Vostell were trained as artists, yet they developed a highly experimental notion of what art could be. Finally, the ringmaster of the Fluxus circus, George Maciunas, was both pragmatic and experimental. As the chief editor and frequent organizer of Fluxus activities, his paradoxical whims, highly refined organizational sensibility and peculiar administrative quirks gave Fluxus its unique flavor and offered Fluxus artists the wide range of philosophical permissions and encouragements that came to characterize the Fluxus ethos.

At first Fluxus artists took part in correspondence art as private individuals. Some were involved in Nouveau Réalisme, some in the New York Correspondence School, some as individual participants on the growing network. By the end of the 1960's, a number of Fluxus people had begun to view mail art as a medium offering unique potentials and challenges. They saw beyond the basic issue of art through the mail, and began to explore the reaches and media of correspondence and mail themselves.

The first major step was taken by Dick Higgins when he established Something Else Press and the *Something Else Press Newsletter*. The Press was an innovative publishing house designed to bring experimental and avant garde work to the public eye in well designed, handsome, durable books. It is by now well known as one of the early sources of much contemporary art. Higgins himself is famed as the essayist who brought the term "intermedia" into current usage. When Higgins wrote his seminal essay on intermedia in 1966, he sought a format to make it widely known. The form he chose was that of the newsletter.

In his newsletter, he created an inexpensive medium for sharing art and art ideas with thousands of readers. It was through his ever-expanding list of read-

ers, book buyers, recipients of the newsletter and the Press' catalogues that Higgins first redefined the mail art network. This is a significant moment in mail art, even though Higgins did not entirely view the newsletter as a mail art format. For the first time, a correspondence artist consciously used the mails as a regular medium of public communication. Even though the newsletter was primarily outbound in its form, there was always a flavor to it that encouraged response and participation, a fact that Higgins' and the Press' voluminous files and archives demonstrate. Higgins' respondents and correspondents moved into the network and into the art world. Staid artists became experimental, and experimental artists came into contact with other experimental artists. Something Else Press, founded as an outgrowth of Fluxus, small, perhaps private in its original conception, became the locus of a vast resonating network of correspondents. It is vital to note the development of a network intended as a forum through which ideas might be exchanged and through which like minds might come into communication. This was a public realization of the idea inchoate in the New York Correspondence School, but never fully realized due to the highly private, personal con-



KEN FRIEDMAN. FLUXPOST COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE. 1974. This sheet of stamps celebrates the 10th anniversary of FLUXPOST stamps. Ken Friedman Collection.

regular, weekly contact with other artists. The *NYCSWB* was published through about 10 or eleven issues at Fluxus West, then passed to Stu Horn, a Philadelphia artist. Horn, already well known as The Northwest Mounted Valise, a longtime friend of Ray Johnson and a talented graphic poet, produced a number of issues for the second volume and then passed the periodical to Bill Gaglione and Tim Mancusi in San Francisco. Gaglione and Mancusi took the idea on, and through their network of friends and correspondents, transformed the *NYCSWB* into an odd—and oddly influential—periodical. Starting with its modest, single-sheet beginnings in 1971, the *NYCSWB* grew to spark the phenomenon in publishing known as

the "Dadazine," a format adopted not only by mail artists, but widely influential for artists books and for publishing in fields as diverse as punk rock and art criticism.

In surveying Fluxus' influence on mail art and correspondence art, the results of a survey reported to be in Mike Crane's forthcoming book is very revealing. Fluxus as a group emerges as the largest single influence, followed by Ray Johnson (2), then by Fluxus artists Ken Friedman (3), Dick Higgins (4), George Brecht (6), Robert Filliou (8), and Ben Vautier (9).

Fluxus approached mail art as an opportunity to experimentation, to communication and to interaction. At the beginning, the Fluxus artists were part

of that primary group of individual participants on a small network: at the end, the trenchant experimentation that Fluxus artists pursued, the paradigms they developed and proved redefined the medium, taking it into its third phase and leading to its present state. Mail art and correspondence art have without doubt grown into a new phase, a fourth phase made possible only by a widening public and a generation of new and vital artists. Fluxus' role in the history of the medium was to create the bridge between private and public states, and to develop the new media that today's artists employ in exploring today's issues.

Before settling down to discuss mail-art's early stirrings on the West Coast and in Canada, I think it only fair to acknowledge Ray Johnson, whose wit, genius and imagination got the whole thing rolling. Got it going, at least, as a recognizable movement, a phenomena. No doubt artists and other creative individuals have always included drawings, collages, photos in their letters to friends and families. I certainly did, and have heard the same from many other artists. And, many still do, without ever entering into exchanges with the "International Mail-Art Network," that has grown out of Johnson's New York Correspondence School.

The first link between Johnson and the West Coast art community was in 1968, when Michael Morris, AKA Marcel Dot/Marcel Idea, from Vancouver, visited NYC. Morris, along with Vincent Trasov (Mr. Peanut) and Gary Lee Nova (Art Rat) were collaborating at the time on Image Bank; their project to collect, classify and archive images from the commercial media. Morris was instrumental in bringing Johnson and his collages to Vancouver in March of '69, as one of the artists exhibiting in the *Concrete Poetry* show at UBC's Fine Arts Gallery.

At this time, address lists were exchanged, and in 1970 Morris, Trasov and Lee Nova began issuing one or two page "Image Request Lists," which gave

name, address and a brief listing of the sorts of imagery each artist would like to receive. For example, Peter Daglish wants palm trees and drag queens; Lee Nova wants telephones and sunglasses, Flakey Rose Hips wants recipes, etc.

In the meantime, American artist Dana Atchley began teaching at the University in Victoria on beautiful, but isolated, Vancouver Island. Cut off from friends and any stimulating art community, he decided to do a project to keep up his contacts with the "outside world." Inspired by Ian Baxter's N.E. Thing Co., which he liked because it created "a good interface with the real world," and gave the artist the anonymity of a corporate identity, Atchley registered himself as A Space Company with the provincial government. Then he bought 250 3-ring binders and sent out invitations to all his friends to participate in a self-publishing project, the *Notebook*. Those invited were to extend the invitation to their friends, and to send 250 copies of up to 10 pages. No work would be rejected, as long as the contributor sent the required 250 pages. By the end of the year (69), there were about 60 contributors, and Atchley set to work, with the help of Eric Metcalfe (Dr. Brute) and Kate Craig, to assemble the 1st edition.

Meanwhile, back in Vancouver, Morris, further inspired in his own mail projects by the response to the *Notebook* project, began working with Trasov and Lee Nova on a massive postcard show. They pooled address lists, including Ray Johnson's and Atchley's. *The First Image Bank Postcard Show*, curated by Alvin Balkind, was exhibited in October 1971 at UBC's Fine Arts Gallery. It then travelled Canada, showing in another 8 or 9 galleries and made its final public appearance in Paris in 1973 as part of the *Trajectoire '73 Show*. Coach House Press in Toronto published an edited set of postcards from the show in 1972, the boxed edition quickly becoming a collector's item.

In 1970 another Vancouver artist, Ed Varney (Mr. Poem) began his mail-art activities under the banner, The Poem Company. His mailings were a small booklet of poems printed on an 8 1/2 x 11" sheet, folded twice and cut to form an 8 pg. booklet. These were sent to about 300 people, friends, artists and poets with whom he was acquainted, asking for a poem or some other response.

In '70-'71, Atchley launched his second notebook project, *A Space Atlas*, with invitations going to the increasing



VILE COVER SERIES: ANNA BANANA, MR. PEANUT, AND HANK BULL AT THE ART RACE. Vancouver Art Gallery, May 1974.

numbers of contacts that came about from the meeting of Atchley, Morris and Lee Nova. This second notebook drew over 120 participants from 7 countries, and in the fall of '71, Atchley, with the aid of a Canada Council grant, left Victoria with his van full of *Space Atlas*, to personally deliver them to the North American contributors. This started him off on a ten-year stint as visiting artist, presenting his *Road Show* to university art departments from Vancouver to Athens, Georgia, and ended his involvement with mail-art.

1971 was a year in which the simultaneous beginnings of many artist publications had the unexpected effect of illuminating a "network." This flurry of publishing made the many isolated individuals and small groups aware of themselves as members of a much larger group, which was soon referred to as the "International Mail-Art Network." These publications stimulated intensified mailing activities by all concerned, and the next two years saw a dramatic increase in the number of people involved and quantity of work being mailed. Aesthetics dropped (more quick-print & xerox "mailers" vs. original drawings and collages) as quantity grew, and by '74 many of the original mailers quit the network in favor of private practise with selected favorites.



VILE COVER SERIES: HOMMAGE TO DUCHAMP BY ANNA BANANA AND BUSTER CLEVELAND. Toronto and New York. August 1978.