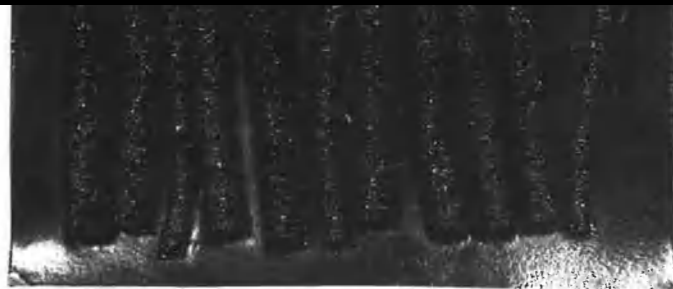
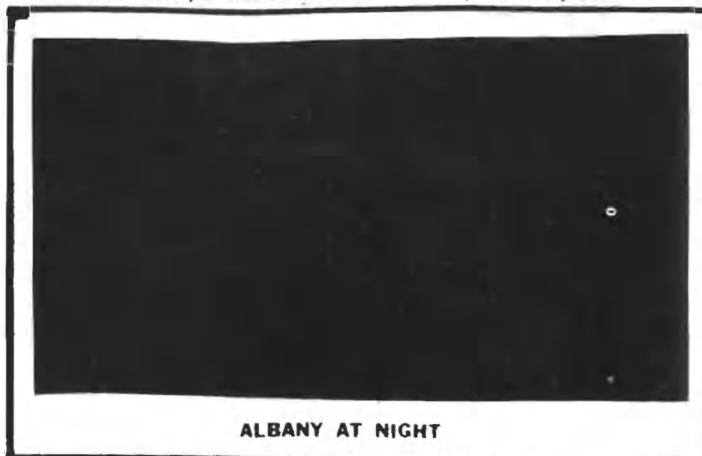
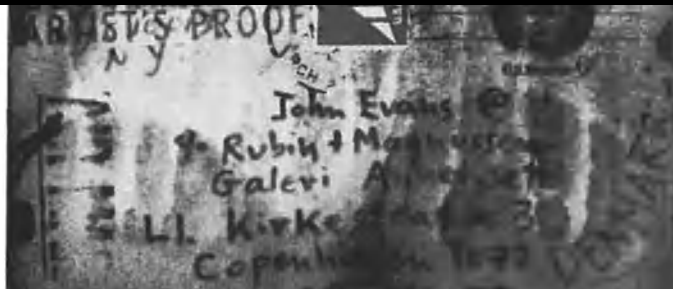


# ILLEGAL MAIL ART (a poetical essay) by Valery Oisteanu

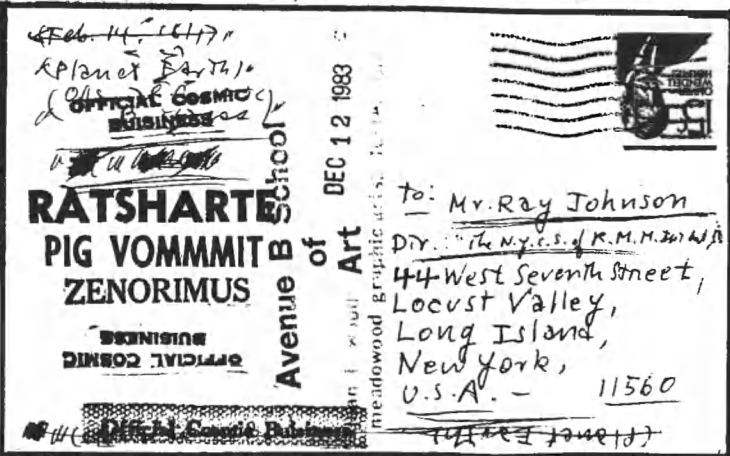


ALBERT M. FINE. COLLAGE POST CARD, 1971. Mailed to John Evans. Albert M. Fine is considered the quintessential mail artist's mail artist by many practitioners in the field. Works such as this example are valued for their expressive power.



ALBANY AT NIGHT

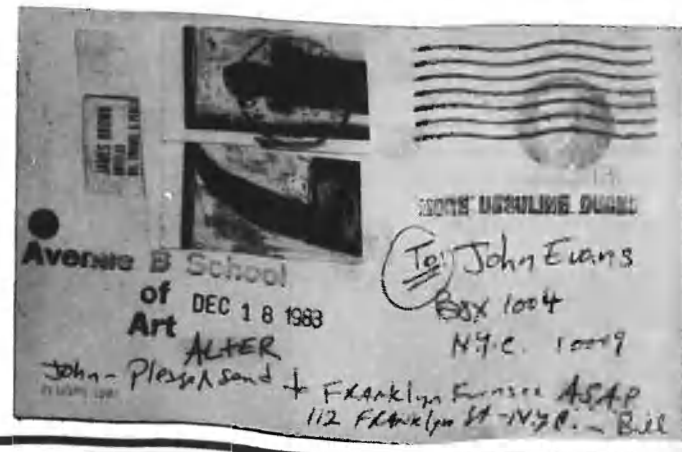
ALBERT M. FINE. ALBANY AT NIGHT. No date. Mailed to Ray Johnson who mailed it to John Evans. John Evans collection.



MAY WILSON. COLLAGE POST CARD. 1969. May Wilson, who is one of the most celebrated members of NYCS used the rubber stamp Greta Garbage as a signature. John Evans collection.



JOHN EVANS. PASS-ALONG MAIL PIECE. 1983. Mailed to Franklin Furnace Mail Art Show. The rubber stamps MOREURSULINE DUCKS and AVENUE B SCHOOL OF ART are messages found frequently in John Evans' mail art.



Growing up behind the iron curtain makes even the most elementary letter a tool of subversion. Correspondence with Westerners is tightly censored and controlled. The letters have a lengthy two week delay to allow snooping KGB gents to x-ray, xerox and translate all mail. The only way to communicate with the outside world of freedom is to code everything. The art of metaphorizing, coding and visual messages became a tool of a new form of communication. Thus mail-art became an instrument of freedom, and the perfection of dadaist metaphors and the sophistication of conceptual messages. The mail artist will try the impossible by taking the letter to the heights of subversive art. One of my first creations was collective poems or "exquisite corpse" (from the surrealist tradition) through a collaboration of 40 artists from the Eastern



RAY JOHNSON DEVOURING MAIL ART. 1979. Photo by Valery Oisteanu.

European countries. Several letters reached West Berlin and there they were reassembled line by line by my late friend, photographer Martin Roth, and Andrei Eyestone who came to the rescue in the late 1960's to Bucharest, Romania. After years of planning and three unsuccessful attempts, I finally escaped to Rome, thanks to mail art. During the late 1960's mail-art contained illegal visa rubber stamps, false official stamps, and even fake passports page by page.

When I reached New York in the early 1970's and met Ray Johnson at a "Paloma Picasso-fan club" meeting, only then did mail-art regain its innocence. Ray introduced me to a vast network of ex-New York correspondence school members. In a very short time the underground organization PASS-Poets and Artists Surreal Society, flourished into an international membership club, that established the new link between



MAY WILSON IN HER STUDIO IN CHELSEA. Photo by courtesy Valery Gallery.

the mail artists from Russia and Eastern Europe, and the exotic regions of India, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. (Ed. note: On April 5, 1972 Ray sent a letter announcing the death of NYCS to the New York Times.)

Although Ray Johnson proclaimed NYCS dead, by burning huge trashbags of mail art, in Locust Valley, the art and the desire were very much alive. Personally, only in the past ten years, I participated in over 100 mail art shows from the first New York postcard show at NYU, to the rebellious shows in front of MOMA, to the mail art mask show at New Zealand University; from the Last Correspondence Show at CSU in Sacramento to the National Cremation of Mail Art at the University of Wisconsin. But the most outstanding events were still the ones organized by the granddaddy of collective insanity, Rayjo. His events dated from 1955 — in 1955 he had already 200 people on his mailing list — included Buddha University meetings, Nothing Events, Decca Dance, and culminated with the Mail Art Show at the Whitney Museum of Art. Currently a big retrospective of this genius is being organized at Nassau County Museum.

I was very fortunate to curate some of the memorials dedicated to Art and Artists gathered around Ray Johnson. For example the "Grandma Moses's of the Underground" at the Buecker and Harp-sichords in Soho and several "Ray Johnson-fan club" international mail art shows. All of them were a pretext for a

reunion of the Legends of the Avant Garde headed by octogenarians, dadaists, and surrealists like May Wilson, Lil Picard, Sari Dienes, and Charles Henri Ford, Ed Plunkett, Ray Johnson and Cavellini. Beside its historic and esthetic value mail art proves also to be revolutionary. The illegal connection with Romania, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Poland continues until today. Unfortunately we must use private and unofficial messengers and sometimes even diplomatic briefcases or black market "mules" to smuggle correspondence art, antique books and underground writings. For example, the show on Dadaism and Surrealism from Romania, presented in 1980 at Franklin Furnace, featured over 100 artifacts and books smuggled out of Romania over a 12 year period simply because the government banned these books and was holding them under lock and key. With the help of courageous mail artists: "1906-manifestos" written by Tristan Tzara arrived in this country. Valuable drawings by Marcel Janco, Brancusi, and Victor Brauner were shown for the first time ever thanks to anonymous heroes. Thus mail art becomes a force of defiance, resistance, and experimentation. The most common technique to cover the trail of a secret mail art message is re-mailing it using Ed Plunkett's slogan, "please zen to." The receiver just adds his or her contribution to the message, rubber stamping it, collaging it, and finally re-posting it to the next mail connection.



CHARLES HENRI FORD. 1979. Photo-Portrait by Valery Oisteanu.

Another form of testing the freedom of mail is creating unconventional mail objects: AM Fine sends a smashed soda can with a postage stamp attached to it; a Dutch artists sent fake drugs (white powder in a plastic envelope) to his parents; an American rubber stamp reads "report obscene mail to your postmaster"; a Japanese artist uses self made post stamps... all of which defied sanctimonious institutions.



The hardest hit are the art agents, dealers, and the galleries, simply because mail art evades taxation, percentages, resales, appraisals, and other forms of artist exploitation. Correspondence art is still the freest form of exchange of ideas and collaboration, the most liberal and democratic art trading from artist to artist. Every mail artist is also a lucky and rich collector. And all thanks to Ray Johnson to whom I dedicate this poem manifesto.

**SEND NO ORDINARY LETTERS**

*Only for Ray Jo  
Send snakes of paper combs  
and hats  
Send May Wilson on glitter stilts  
Zen Joseph Cornell — collage —  
rubbage  
And make art silhouette and  
Moticos  
Correspon-dance of disorganized  
scraps  
We are the united nations of  
trans Avant Garde  
Above all galleries and museums  
Just shadows pen-pals epistolary  
intercourse  
A coincidence of probability to  
feed Babar  
Only for Ray Jo, we sing cha-cha  
ump, ump pa pa, Duchamp  
Duchamp is a dump, but Ray is  
no dead  
Just absent, he is asparagus,  
spaghetti, blue eyes club  
He is a ghost of Kool-Mail-Art  
He serenades on his omelet harp  
Ruth Ford, Paloma Picasso,  
Shelley Duvall, and Yoko Ono  
He paints Gertrude Stein with  
asbestos lunch  
And performs nothing-happen-  
ings with pink matches  
He drinks pink tea with Kafka  
Till it evaporates random like  
poetry.*



COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON  
**MAGRITTE**

GALERIE ALEXANDRE IOLAS

COLLAGE BY RAY JOHNSON.  
late 1960s. Ray Johnson, in a  
direct and droll move, has super-  
imposed his own features over  
Magritte's man with a bowler hat.  
John Willenbecher collection.

Contemporary Arts Forum  
7 W. De La Guerra  
Santa Barbara, California 93101  
U.S.A.

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Postman Richard Burus at the opening. "All the mail art for The Magic Show was a welcome and enjoyable addition to the mail I usually deliver. I thought that the exhibition was terrific."

The Magic Show will be on exhibit at Lang Art Gallery, Scripps College, Claremont, California, from November 13 to December 11, 1983. The opening reception will be Sunday, November 13, 2 to 5 p.m.



**THE MAGIC SHOW**  
An International Mail Art Exhibition  
Dec. 19, 1982 - Jan. 21, 1983

Santa Barbara  
Contemporary Arts Forum  
California, U.S.A.

Catalogues of two of the many mail art shows in which Valery Oisteanu has participated. Valery Oisteanu Collection.

