

*IMPULSES TOWARD THE CONGRESS YEAR

JOHN HELD

There has been much excitement generated in the mail art network during 1986 over the concept developed by two Swiss artists, Gunther Ruch and H. R. Fricker, of the Decentralized Worldwide Mail Art Congress. Many mail artists have viewed this as a new development in mail art, one that enlarges the nature of the medium to include the personal contact, as well as correspondence, as an artform. But although the announcement of the Congress concept galvanized the mail art community into concerted action, mail artists have been meeting almost since the start of mail art itself. But there are unique characteristics of the concept developed by Ruch and Fricker, which add a new dimension to the history of the medium.

The original idea held by Ruch and Fricker was to give mail artists a forum to meet and discuss common concerns at a centralized "First International Swiss Mail Art Congress". But this was modified after asking for comments about such a meeting. After receiving responses from 160 mail artists, it was decided that in keeping with the decentralized nature of the medium, the Congress concept would come to include the encouragement of mail artists to meet and discuss common concerns "where two or more people meet to discuss personal experiences and general problems concerning networking". These Congresses would take place between June 1 and October 1, 1986. A form was distributed with items for discussion. This form was to be sent back to the organizers after the Congresses were held for compilation.

H. R. Fricker had been preparing the way for such an exchange with his emphasis on "Tourism". This went beyond the traditional mail art experience to include personal meetings. Fricker was in New York City in February 1984 just prior to the controversial Franklin Furnace debates at the Artists Talk

on Art series, and met with a substantial number of New York artists. He also visited Los Angeles to meet with mail artists there. For each of these meetings, a postage stamp sheet was produced to commemorate the events, an act which tied together both mail art (the postage stamp sheet) and Tourism (the process of personal contact).

This practice of list making, as Fricker had done in his Tourism stamp sheets, harked back to the earliest days of mail art. Ray Johnson, acknowledged as a guiding force in the advent of mail art, became well known for his "bunny lists", correspondance club meetings, and fan clubs. Some correspondance club meetings seem to have been, at the best, half-factual, others appear to have been held. But at the very least, Johnsons' propensity to link individuals together was an initial step in the networking process.

Another example of correspondents meeting each other was the concept developed by Dana Atchley. His assembling project of 1970-1971, A Space Atlas, drew over 120 participants from seven countries. Fired from the Canadian University where he had been teaching, but fueled with a grant from the Canadian Council, he set off in a van to deliver the Space Atlases. This was started a ten-year Road Show, which he titled his presentations of slides and stories about his work.

The story of Istvan Kantor is probably one of the most inspiring stories in mail art. For it is one of the greatest testaments that mail art has the power to effect change. Kantor, living in Hungary, was inspired by a visit from David Zack, one of the first writers on the subject of mail art, to take up the medium. This led to his eventual immigration to North America. Staying with Zack in Portland, Oregon, he was given the name Monty Cantsin in a concept developed by Zack and others to originate a rubric name under which many could participate. Kantor eventually moved to Canada, where the concept of Monty Cantsin was expounded upon.

Perhaps the largest gathering of mail artists has occurred at the Interdada Festivals of 1980 and 1984. Interdada 80 was organized by Steve Caravello and other members of the Bay Area (San Francisco) Dadaists. Many of the activities were centered around the appearance of Cavellini, visiting from Italy. The weekend activities included parades and performance.

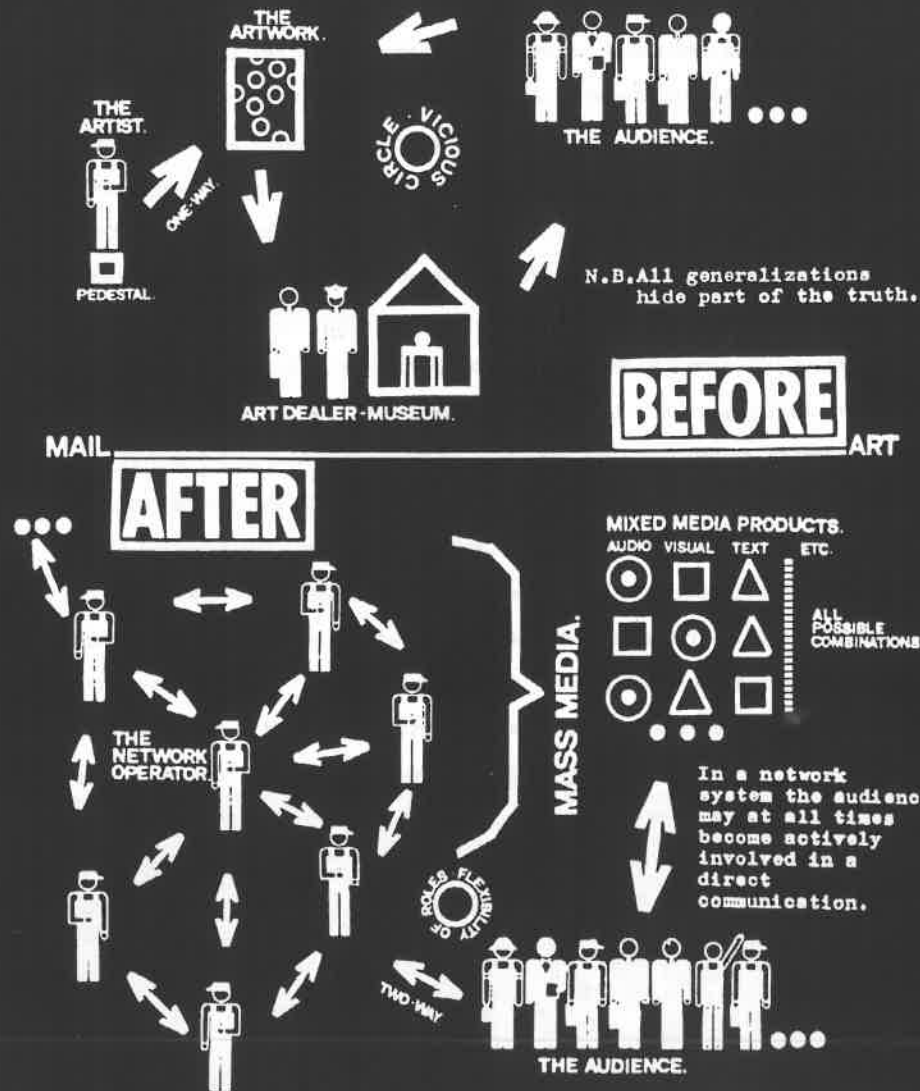
Interdada 84 featured a week of performance, fashion, film and video, a mail art show, poetry readings, and the Only Correspondence Dinner. Cavellini was again on hand, as was Jurgen Olbrich from West Germany. At least 40 to 50 mail artists, mostly from the West Coast, attended.

1984 was also the year of the Cavellini Festival in Belgium, and the Artists Talk on Art series in New York, which featured mail artists Ed Plunkett, Robert Morgan, John Evans, Monty Cantsin, Steve Random, Carlo Pittore, John Held Jr., Cracker Jack Kid, David Cole, J. P. Jacob and E. F. Higgins III, with many others in the audience. This was one of the first large mail art meetings, which encouraged inquiry into the mail art medium.

As the Congress Year approached, many meetings were taking place. In New York City on March 31, 1985, Buster Cleveland, Jim Felter, E. F. Higgins III, Ken Friedman, Carlo Pittore, J. P. Jacob, Jim Klein, Fernand Barbot, Peter R. Meyer (Sweden), Mark Bloch and John Evans were billing their gathering "A Historic Mail Art/Night Exercise Meeting". And in December of 1985, Japanese mail artists Shozo Shimamoto and Ryosuke Cohn visited both Eastern and Western Europe. They met with such mail artists as Steen Moller Rasmussen (Denmark), Ruggero Maggi and Cavellini (Italy), Guy Bleus (Belgium), and Robert Rehfield (East Germany), as well as many others.

Clearly, the time had come when mail artists had grown curious about those that they had been writing. If the start of mail art can be said to begin with the activities of Ray Johnson in the early sixties, then by 1986, mail art was already nearly twenty-five years old. Many correspondents had sustained ten-year

● Notwithstanding the wide range of old and new visual topics covered (e.g. rubber stamp, stamp, postcard, photocopy, audiocassette, etc.) Mail Art is not just another art trend. Mail Art affects firstly the structure of cultural work, the way art and information is produced and circulated. This is an INTRODUCTORY SCHEME to Mail Art tactics.



● Scheme one devised by Vittore Baroni. Send corrections and suggestions.

old relationships through the mail.

Mail art shows have spread the mail art network considerably since 1975. But mail art shows were, and are, impersonal spaces, where personal contact is forsaken for wide distribution. The response to the Mail Art Congress concept may be a reaction to the impersonal nature of the mail art show. Mail artists may have been making contact, but the communicative aspect of the medium was being lost.

Another factor leading toward the impulse to present a Decentralized Worldwide Mail Art Congress is the great number of mail artists engaged in performance art. Performance, unlike correspondence, is a public activity demanding an audience. The performance aspect gives focus to the meetings of mail artists. While mail art remains divorced from the financial aspects of art, performance art can generate funds for the artist. As director of Modern Realism, I found that there was an audience prepared to accept performance and that the artist could be guaranteed at least a modest sum. Because of this, we were able to sponsor mail artists who also performed. Anna Banana, Jurgen Olbrich, Monty Cantsin Kantor, and the Reverend Ivan Stang of the Church of the Sub Genius were encouraged in this fashion. In gatherings of mail artists, the performance aspect gives each artist a chance to express his concerns in front of his peers.

I have attempted to cite some examples of small and large gatherings of mail artists occurring prior to the Congress Year of 1986. Many more have occurred, most, I'm very sure, without my or anyone else's knowledge except for the mail artists who were directly involved. But the Decentralized Worldwide Congresses have given new meaning to these meetings of the past. In the Congress concept, we not only meet, but come together to discuss common concerns of networking. Most meetings of the past stressed the "tourism" aspect of the Congress concept. Discussions about mail art naturally occurred, but they were not the primary focus of the event.

For instance, during the Interdada 84 gathering in San Francisco, mail art was the common ground which brought the participants together. But most of the events did not stress critical inquiry into the nature of mail art. Only an interview conducted on videotape by Carl Loeffler presented critical questions (how did you first begin, who were your major influences, where is mail art going). The thrust of Interdada was the opportunity to meet fellow correspondents.

To my knowledge, the Franklin Furnace controversy of 1984 was the first attempt to discuss mail art in a public setting featuring practising mail artists. Described by some as a "mail art melee": (a confused struggle), the talks suffered from the mistaken impression that mail artists were in agreement, only to find that this was not entirely the case, and in fact, some mail artists thought it wrong to discuss mail art at all.

The Franklin Furnace talks did, however, suggest that there was a need to find some points of common agreement between mail artists. The Congress concept has provided a systematic vehicle to reflect upon the reasons and methods of mail art. Although I have seen some questionnaires circulated through the mail art network to consolidate the opinions of mail artists, the Congresses have become the first major confrontation of mail artists to examine the mail art medium in face-to-face encounters.



*CONGRESS-DOCUMENTATIONS

SPECIAL CONGRESS-DOCUMENTATIONS IN BOOKFORM

THESE BOOKDOCUMENTATIONS WERE MAILED TO CLINCH/

- 1.SOUTHWEST USA REPORT/ 34 PAGES/ JOHN HELD/ USA
- 2.SMILE CONGRESS/ 8 PAGES/ MARK PAWSON/ GB
- 3.MAIL ART CONGRESS VILLORBA/ 28 PAGES/ RUGGERO MAGGI/ I
- 4.DE MEDIA MAIL ART CONGRESS/ 14 PAGES/ JAN DE BOEVER/ B
- 5.MAILARTMEKKAMINDEN/ 8 PAGES/ PETER KOSTERMANN & JO KLAFFKI/ D
- 6.ORTE-WEGE-NOMADEN/ 10 PAGES/ JÖRGEN O.OLBRICH/ D
- 7.LE TIMBRE"BRESIL"/ 10 PAGES/ DANIEL DALIGAND/ F
- 8.NETHERLANDS REPORT/ 6 PAGES/ SONJA VAN DER BURG/ NL
- 9.MAIL ART CONGRESS 86/ 14 PAGES/ D.JARVIS/ GB
- 10.MOLDAU CONGRESS/ 12 PAGES/ MARTIN KRIST/ A
- 11.MA-CONGRESS BRAZIL-FRANCE/ 4 PAGES/ PAULO BRUSCKY/ BR
- 12.TAG DES MÜLLS/ 12 PAGES/ ULLI KATTENSTROTH/ D
- 13.MAIL-ART WORKSHOP/ 28 PAGES/ GRAF HAUFEN/ D
- 14.STAR-LIGHT/ 30 SMALL PAGES/ URSULA PETERS/ USA
- 15.HOJE-HOJA-HOY/ 8 PAGES/ GRACIELA G. MARX/ ARG
- 16.NO BUDGET TOURS/ 32 PAGES/ JO KLAFFKI/ D
- 17.COLLABORATIVE BOOKWORK/ 8 PAGES/ BEN ALLEN & MARK PAWSON/ GB
- 18.INSTITUTIONS IN THE PLACES OF INSTITUTIONS/ 14 PAGES/ RUGGERO MAGGI/ I
- 19.MAIL ART CONGRESS SANTA BARBARA/ 4 SMALL PAGES/ CREATIVE THING/ USA
- 20.INTERNATIONAL MA-SYMPOSIUM/ CA 20 PAGES/ CHUCK STAKE/ CDN
- 21.IT HAPPENS HERE/ 16 PAGES/ KO DE JONGE/ NL
- 22.OPEN WORLD/ 8 PAGES/ DOBRICA KAMPERELIC/ YU
- 23.SIGHTSEEING No 8/ 30 PAGES/ CLINCH No 8, GÜNTHER RUCH/ CH
- 24.PHONE CALL CONGRESS/ CA 20 PAGES/ GÜNTHER RUCH/ CH
- 25.SPIEGELMAN'S MAIL ART RAG/ 4 PAGES DEDICATED TO THE CONGRESS/ USA
- 26.THE NOMAD BOX/ 28 PAGES/ NIAL MONRRO/ GB
- 27.CONGRESS-TALKS/ 6 PAGES/ ANDREW TISMA/ YU
- 28.SHORT NOTES/ 4 PAGES/ MATTY JANKOVSKI/ USA
- 29.ART ON THE MOVE/ 3 KILO-BOOK WITH CASSETTE/ JO KLAFFKI & KOSTERMANN/ D
- 30.NOT(E)/(A)ZIONII/ BOOKLET WITH 2 CASSETTES/ FRANCO BALLABENI/ I

+ 14 CASSETTES FROM DIFFERENT ARTISTES

++ HUNDREDS OF PERSONAL LETTERS/ INCLUDING PHOTOS & STATEMENTS

+++ SOME SHORT ARTICLES IN NEWSPAPERS

LATE ARRIVALS

- 31.RAT-CONGRESS/ COMPUTER-TEXTS/ CA 10 PAGES/ CHARLES FRANCOIS/ B
- 32.MA-MEETINGS/ TEXT & PHOTO DOCUMENTATION/ CA 8 PAGES/ P.R.MEYER/ S
- 33.TORUN-MEETING/ SELFMADE-PHOTO-TEXT BOOKLET/ PAWEL PETASZ/ 6 PAGES PL
- 34.MA-CONGRESS/ AARDVERSION OF LONDON MAC's/ DAVID JARVIS/ 4 PAGES/GB
- 35.MAIL-STREAM/ ZINE-INSET WITH TEXTPAGE ABOUT MAC 86/ CHUCK WELCH/USA

* 40 QUESTIONNAIRE-RETURNS WITH CONCLUSIONS (+ -)
(50 QUESTIONNAIRES WERE MAILED OUT)

*NEWSPAPER-SOURCES

*NEWSPAPERS
ART-REVIEWS

- *ITALY/ ARTE-CULTURA/ 9.11.86/ DOCUMENTO CONCLUSIVO DEL CONGRESSO ITALIANO
- *YUGOSLAVIA/ ISKRA/ 15.5.87/ PRVI MEDUNARODNI DECENTRAZIRANI MAIL-ART KONGRESS
- *GERMANY/ HESS-NIEDERS.ALLGEMEINE/ 19.6.86/ ORTE-WEGE-NOMADEN
- FRANCE/ KANAL/ AUG.86/ MAIL-ART WORLDWIDE CONGRESS
- USA/ FIFTH AVENUE/ SEPT.86/ BUILDING BRIDGES WORLDWIDE
- SWITZERLAND/ FLYER (INSET)/ DEC.86/ THE END OF NETWORKING
- *SWITZERLAND/ BERNER ZEITUNG/ 30.8.86/ WENN DER BRIEFTRÄGER DIE KUNST BRINGT
- *ITALY/ LA TRIBUNA VILLORBA/ 15.8.86/ ARTISTI PER POSTA
- USA/ RUBBERSTAMPADNESS/ APRIL 86/ DECENTRALIZED WORLDWIDE MAIL-ART CONGRESS
- BELGIUM/ TIJDSCHRIFT VAN DE HOERA (DE-MEDIA)/ DEC.86/ FIRST DECENTRALIZED MA-CONGRESS
- USA/ ND-8/ MARCH 87/ SOUTH WEST MAIL ART CONGRESS
- *BELGIUM/ DE HÖRGEN/ 30.8.86/ ZAK IN -ZAK UIT: MAIL-ART
- *SWITZERLAND/ APPENZELER ZEITUNG/30.12.86/ THATS TOURISM KUNST ALS KOMMUNIKATION
- YUGOSLAVIA/ FORUM KÖNYVKIADO (HUNGARIAN JOURNAL)/ OCT.86/ KONGRESSZUSOK ES (FU)TURIZMUSOK
- *GERMANY/ WESTFALENBLATT/ 18.9.86/ MAIL-ART KONGRESS MINDEN
- *GERMANY/ MINDENER TAGBLATT/ 22.9.86/ PER SATELLIT VERBINDUNG NACH TEXAS

...AND DIFFERENT MA-ZINES WITH SHORT CONGRESS-FRAGMENTS:
LE TIMBRE (F)/ ARTE POSTALE (I)/ TAM (NL)/ SPIEGELMAN'S RAG (USA)/ SMILE (D)/
SO-CALLED (NL)/ HOJE-HOJA-HOY (ARG)/ OPEN-WORLD (YU)/ MAM-INFO (B)/ FRENETIK (B)/
AND OTHER ZINES.....

Mail-Art Kongreß Minden

Minden (aun). Minden ein Mekka der Mail-Artisten: vom 19. bis zum 29. September findet in der »Fabrik« an der Königsstraße ein Internationaler Kongreß der Künstler statt, die sich der artifiziiellen Gestaltung von allem, was auf dem Postwege versendet werden kann, verschrieben haben. Mit einbezogen in den Kongreß ist eine Ausstellung der Post-Artisten während des Nordrhein-Westfalen-Festes in Düsseldorf. Damit vertritt der Kreis um den Mindener Künstler Jo Klaffki Minden-Lübbecke in »offizieller Mission«.

*GERMANY/
WESTFALENBLATT/ 18.9.86/

Mit Mail-Artisten aus acht Nationen wird gerechnet. Thema der Zusammenkunft derer, die sich meist durch Briefkontakte schon kennen, wird unter anderem auch sein. »Wie gelingt es Ausstellungen das Spreu vom Weizen zu trennen?« Denn eins der ungeschriebenen Gesetze dieser Richtung, die dem Kunstmarkt und dem Galeriebetrieb nicht wohl gesonnen ist, lautet: »Eine Jury gibt es nicht. Doch wenn jeder Künstler und alles Kunst ist, dann, so Mitorganisator Peter Küstermann, Kulturver-

ein Wolkenstein, können auch sehr viele Produkte »aus zweiter Hand«, ohne erkennbaren Gestaltungswillen. Performances, Graffiti-Aktionen, Videos sollen das Programm abrunden. Am Eröffnungstag des Kongresses wird die Post noch auf andere Weise von ihren Stammkunden profitieren. Dann werden in einer Konferenzschaltung Minden-Dallas (Texas) erste Kongreß-Ergebnisse über den Ozean gefunkt. Dort findet zur selben Zeit ein Mail-Art-Kongreß statt.