ETERNAL NETWORK

CHAPTER 17

THE MAIL ART–INTERNET LINK
PROPOSING A 1995 NETWORKER TELENETLINK
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What is Telenetlink?

"Tele" is a Greek word for "far off," "at a distance." Netlink is terminology meaning "to interconnect networks," especially communication networks that are perceived to be distant. Artists impart attitudes, values, and sensibilities in their shared communication with others. Aesthetic sensibilities, when coupled with social hierarchy and economic inequality, create media boundaries, "netclubs." Mail art networking attempts to soar above these distances, to fly beyond all media boundaries—to telenetlink!

Mail art is communication that travels a physical/ spiritual distance between senders and recipients. For nearly forty years mail artists have been enjoying interactive mail characterized by free, open, often spirited visual/ textual correspon*dances*. Mail artists have worked hard to abolish copyrights through dispersed authorship. In the distant, parallel world of high technology, telecommunication artists often work in the same collaborative fabric interwoven with mail art. But e-mail artists network online in a simulated, textual, paperless world. No wonder there are mail artists who prefer the tangible, tactile, handcrafted encounter of pen, pencil, collage, paint, and handmade paper.

It is true that some postal artists are suspicious of art and technology. They view telecommunications as hasty, simulated, impersonal interaction lacking in privacy. These mail artists find the time-lag of postal delivery a desirable quality. Conversely, there are telecommunication artists who view mail artists as unskilled in aesthetic differentiation, hopelessly lost in a slow, antiquated, and expensive postal bureaucracy. Distances widen between these communication forms, especially by the stilted influences of normative art standards. Such attitudes obscure the notion that art communication is an intermedia concept.

The Artist As Networker

Distance between mail art and electronic art is sometimes more imagined than real. The notion that mail artists are hostile to high technology is one common misconception. Experimentation with mass-media technology hastened the evolution of mail art long before the advent of telecommunications technology. Mail artists experimented with electrostatic (copier art) technology in the 1960s and in the late 1980s embraced the technology of telefacsimile. Throughout the 1980s mail artists matured into networkers who reached for an inter-cultural transformation of information.

Mail art networkers experience the form and content of the information age. They dare to apply values that will nurture a larger global society. It comes as no surprise that pioneering telecommunication artists like Judy Malloy, Carl Eugene Loeffler, and Fred Truck were all active mail artists during the early 1970s before they moved towards telecommunications art. Time has obscured the fact that many idealistic, democratic values of early mail art were carried forth in the development of today's on-line telecommunications community.

Networkers use both telecommunications and mail art as tools rather than boundaries. These intermedia networkers embrace immediate, direct concepts of exchange that sometimes lead to real-time, face-to-face conferences. Networkers are equally comfortable using the postal mailstream to meet vicariously as "tourists." The hallmark of both mail and telecommunications art resides in attitudes of creative freedom, collaboration, and independence outside mainstream art systems. Telenetlink is a forum created to celebrate this interactive spirit between mail art and telecommunications artists.

Evolution of the Telenetlink Project

The international Telenetlink evolved in June 1991 as an interactive part of Reflux Network Project, an artists' telecommunication system created by Brazilian artist Dr. Artur Matuck. Reflux Network Project was an ambitious, progressive experiment that interconnected 24 on-site nodes located in university art departments, art research sites, and private internet addresses. Through Reflux, the Networker Telenetlink became mail art's first active on-line connection with the world of Internet.

Telenetlink became an active component of mail art's Decentralized World-Wide Networker Congresses, 1992 (NC92). Throughout 1992 the Telenetlink Project functioned as the only continuously active on-line mail art resource in which the role of the networker was actively discussed. An international community of mail art and "Internet-workers" were introduced to each other before and during the NC92 Telenetlink. Telenetlink's e-mailart addresses were first actively exchanged in an international scale by Reed Altemus (Cumberland, Maine) and me. This list has grown exponentially through mail art magazine e-mail lists from Ashley Parker Owen's *Global Mail*. (now

on-line with her CompuServe address), Mark Corroto's *Face* and by Telenetlink's continued e-mail connections to Internet, *ArtCom*, *Post Modern Culture Electronic Journal*, and numerous other on-line sources.

Some mail artists claim that the 250 sessions of Networker Congresses in 1992 were carbon copies of the smaller 1986 Mail Art Congresses. But NC92 differed from the 1986 Mail Art Congresses in a major context. Participants in the 1992 Networker Congresses were challenged to inter-act with other marginal networks parallel to mail art; to build, expand, introduce, alert, and interconnect underground network cultures. These objectives were underscored when the Networker Telenetlink bridged the telecommunications art community and the mail art culture. I chose Internet as the focal point for understanding the role of the networker. Why Internet? Because it is the world's largest information superhighway that is moving art towards new communication concepts.

The Mail Art–Internet Link

Internet is a parallel world to mail art, but Telenetlink envisioned mail art as e-mailart; an effective global tool for electronically altering art images, building network interaction, assembling large numbers of people for on-line conferences and creative workshops. Already, Internet is a moving, virtual world of over 12 million people networking from an estimated 1.7 million computers in over 135 nations including the former Soviet Union. Internet was paid for and created in 1972 by the U.S. Defense Department's ARPAnet, built to survive a Soviet missle attack on the U.S. Today nobody (yet!) governs Internet save its individual member networks. Anybody from senior citizens to average working people can play "keypal" with the establishment or underground network cultures.

Figure 78. Crackerjack Kid, *Fax Trauma*, U.S.A., 1992. Collage.

Internet relays over 900 on-line newsgroup networks with subjects ranging from books and fishing to alternative sex. Telenetlink made connections with Internet's Usenet Newsgroups when NC92 invitations and updates were circulated via alt.artcom, rec.arts.fine, and the Well. Through these connections hundreds of networker congress messages were exchanged on-line. Decentralized and fit for global congress conferences, Internet was the conference table where mail artists and telecommunication artists were introduced to each other. Global e-mailart was birthed on Internet.

Clearly, more discussion, strategies and Internet-action are welcome in the Networker Telenetlink 1995. Increasing network interaction is an important first step. In 1991 there were roughly two or three dozen mail artists with PCs and modems, mostly Americans, who could access one another through information superhighways like Internet, Bitnet, CompuServe and America Online. In 1994 the Telenetlink 1995 organized mail art FAXcilitators and many on-line connections to Internet organized by Telenetlink operators like Dorothy Harris (America Online, artoposto@aol.com), Jonathan Giles (New York City's BBS Echo, gilestv@echonyc), Honoria, (Internet, honoria@ccwf.cc.utexas.edu), Bandes Dessinee (Internet, bdnee@bronze.lcs.mit.edu), and many others.

Telenetlinks, Outernets & Electronic Bulletin Boards

Between late 1991 and 1993 an on-line community of rubber stampers often discussed rubber stamp art and listed mail art shows over the commercial Prodigy network. Prodigy networker Dorothy Harris, a.k.a. "Arto Posto," was active in organizing the first on-line mail art course for beginners. Unfortunately, interaction on Prodigy was limited to American participants who had no access to the larger global Internet system. Eventually, access to Internet was made possible by Prodigy in November 1993. By that time Prodigy's rates had increased, causing most rubber stampers to quit the network.

The same form of "CorrespondencE-mail" exchanges found on Prodigy were predated by three Mail Art BBS' organized by Mark Block (US), Charles Francois (Belgium), and Ruud Janssen (the Netherlands). These BBS "outernets" each had its own set of services and protocols for initiating on-line dialogue, remote login, file transfer, and message posting. Like Prodigy, however, access to mail art BBSs remains costly and cumbersome.

Mail art Bulletin Board Services are host-operated netlinks akin to private mail art correspon*dancing*—anybody can cut in, but you have to follow your partner's lead if you want to be in their dance. "Outermail" BBSs are

capable of establishing e-mail gateways to the Internet. Mail art BBSs will likely follow in this direction as the advantages of Internet become more evident. At present, however, only electronic mail "gateways" can move messages between "outernets" and Internet—a limitation that will surely change as a global matrix evolves.

Since 1991, Telenetlink continues to nurture a deep, transpersonal, inter-cultural community of networkers who explore both high and low technology. Strategies for the dispersal of Telenetlink have been widespread and include the March 1994 mailings by Swiss Networker Hans Ruedi Fricker. Thousands of copies of the Telenetlink proposal were distributed in *ND Magazine,* Issue No. 18, and in the September 1993 issue of Crackerjack Kid's *Netshaker Zine.*

Netshaker On-Line, became Internet's first mail art cyberspace electronic magazine on January 1, 1994 when Crackerjack Kid organized a group of Telenetlink facilitators who forwarded *Netshaker On-Line* to Prodigy, CompuServe, and America Online subscribers. Issued bi-monthly, *Netshaker On-Line* is accessible by contacting Crackerjack Kid at CathrynL.Welch@dartmouth.edu or by mailing inquiries to P.O. Box 978, Hanover, NH 03755. A hard copy version of *Netshaker* is available by writing to *Netshaker*, P.O. Box 978, Hanover, NH.

Other active discussions of Telenetlink occurred in public congresses during 1994. Free Dogs & Humans Values, an Italian festival of alternative creativity, convened at several sites in and around Florence, Italy from May 5–15, 1994. Organized by Gianni Broi and Ennio Pauluzzi, the Free Dog sessions included Gianni Broi's reading of the Telenetlink proposal and widespread distribution of the text in Italy and Europe.

Reid Wood of Oberlin, Ohio has organized a 1995 Telenetlink Fax Project entitled *Eye re:CALL*. Participants include mail artists and cybespace artists alike; John Fowler,

Karl Joung, John Held, Ashley Parker Owens, Greg Little, Wayne Draznin, Artoposto, Rafael Courtoisie, Guy Bleus, Ruggero Maggi, Jean-Francois Robic, and the author, among many others.

The Networker Telenetlink remains an open proposal to all interested parties. Embracing the possibility of enlarging network community, developing e-mailart as an expressive on-line medium, and discussing new roles are necessary and welcome. Please help by dispersing this message by mail or e-mail. Translation of this invitation into other languages is also desirable.

NETWORKER TELENETLINK 1995: THE OPEN PROPOSAL

THE MAIL ART CONGRESS BODY LEFT IN 1992/A SPIRIT NETWORKS NOW/THE SPIRIT LIVES IN EVERYONE/WE MET-A-NETWORK INFANT/A MEDIA-CHILD WAS BORN/TELENETLINK IS ITS NAME/IT LIVES IN NETLAND NOW/THE FUTURE OF THE NETWORKER IS TELENETLINKED/MAIL ART IS EMAILART/FAXMAIL ART/EMBRACE THE CHILD/ TELENETLINK IN '95!

OPEN OBJECTIVES

Objectives for a Networker Telenetlink Year in 1995 are open for discussion through 1994. Possibilities? Embrace the telematic medium and explore its parameters, develop a local/global community, exchange cultural communications, interconnect the parallel network worlds of mail art and telematic art through Internet, CompuServe, America Online, Bitnet, and other connected e-mail gateways, place networker archives on-line, experiment with telematic technology, participate as a FAXcilitator, exhibit, interact in public and private forums, merge media: mail and e-mail, and enact networker ideals envisioned for the millennium.