



THE FUTURE OF MAIL ART

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In this constantly shrinking universe, the mail artist has found a way to communicate through the international postal system, a system that up to now has remained constant and basically similar in most countries, except for an occasional upstart strike, delay, or transitional mode. At that time, mail delivery in certain countries has lagged or been stopped due to political situations that were unforeseen.

The growth and development of new communication devices such as e-mail and fax machines may change the way we all communicate. It may not be a hand-delivered situation anymore, but one that is instantaneous and electronic. As a result, the visual document that has been used to communicate through the normal channels may evolve into a less hand-made but more forthright message.

Yet, can we change the original intent of mail art, or at least that which has evolved into a creative spirit crossing all barriers and creating new bridges of understanding? This kind of global connectedness has created a type of familial community, global and creative, which communicates in all spheres—expressive, cognitive and practical.

In the past decade, much has transpired in the mail art world that gives cause to question a great deal of this positive feeling for the future. Are artists, indeed, networking, or is mail art just another form of the self-interest which characterized much of the Eighties? Or are there two groups of mail artists: those who do it for self-aggrandizement or fun and those who are serious artists who find their medium, correspondence art, an ideal form of process aesthetics, encouraging effective, purposeful, inclusive networking strategies?

I maintain that the great surge of activity in the 1970s and early 1980s, the energy that was provoked by political

social, and aesthetic issues, made mail art a serious endeavor for many artists, one that gave freedom to those who were otherwise shackled by economic or political concerns and allowed them to pursue their aesthetic concerns. Mail art became a vehicle for free expression of global concerns: the environment, repression by some governments, the women's movement, travel, free speech, etc. Mail art created new friends, formulated bridges of understanding, broke down language barriers, and sometimes even developed great events such as InterDada '80 in California and later mail art congresses throughout the world.

But postage rates have increased to such an extent that it becomes too expensive to do a great deal of mail art. Mail artists are now very selective and send mail art to a few select shows. One would have hoped that the quality of mail art would increase as the quantity decreased, but that is not always the case.

The art market has made some long-standing mail artists conscious of the worth of their archives. Highly developed and organized, the archives of some mail artists are often found in obscure museums and institutions, which have taken them as a courtesy rather than a commitment. We'll be seeing many more institutions seeking mail art archives for their own collections.

Strategies have changed, and a new group of mail artists with no sense of the history that has gone before use new technologies as well. Armed with computers, computer graphics, fax machines, videotapes and videodiscs, mail art will indeed change in the 1990s. Those of us who have added to the paper revolution will either change our ways, or succumb electronically to the year 2000 and all that it may hold. Whatever happens, the past has been prologue to creative networks, new friendships, international understanding, and a heightened sense of what freedom really means. May we keep the walls down and the networks *open!*