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Mail Art and 'The Eternal Network'

Say your cousin, the one who's always been a bit weird, affixes sufficient postage to one of her favorite sneakers and sends it to you through the postal system. Is that mail art? Say you get a letter from a stranger, and the envelope is decorated with painted and rubber-stamped images surrounding the intricate calligraphy forming your name and address. Is that mail art? Say you post a notice asking people to send you postcards or envelopes that they've embellished however their muses suggest, and then you exhibit the responses at a gallery and send documentation of the whole project to each participant. Say no more: It's all mail art. And for some people, it's a habit.

Who are these people? Well, you could name some names: Clemente Padin of Uruguay, Ryosuke Cohen of Japan, Nicole Peyrafite of France, Chuck Welch (aka the Crackerjack Kid) of the U.S. - artistic do-it-yourselfers own to the point of minor celebrity, at least in the meager yet sprawling confines of the Eternal Network, where their creations continue to enliven the world's postal systems. Or you could attempt a composite sketch and describe a much larger group of folks possessed of generous amounts of whimsy, a few rubber stamps, and much glue, a possibly advanced but more often rudimentary grasp of design, and - just maybe - an awful lot of free time on their hands.

Or you could send ever-intrepid cultural reporter Ada Calhoun into the urban wilds to capture examples of mail artists right here in River City...

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Honoria

Many will recognize Honoria's name from her cyberopera project Honoria in Cyberspazio. "I chose that name because I wanted to have the word 'honor' in my name," she says. The cyber project, an online opera about the Internet, came out of her instructional technology studies at UT's Department of Education. She's still there, and "having a ball" doing her Ph.D. dissertation on the impact of the Internet on mail art.

Originally from Miami, Honoria has been in Austin for more than 20 years. A consummate letter writer, Honoria joined a California-based pen pal club called the Letter Exchange. (It has since folded.) Through that group, she got into a fervent exchange with a man in Atlanta, Ga. At one point, they got obsessed with fish and kept sending each other more and more elaborate mail art on the topic. Honoria recalls sending the man a collage made for an ad for an "Effish-iancy Apartment." Then at some point along about 1988, her correspondent suggested that she send something to a man in Japan whose address he had. The man was mail art pioneer Ryosuke Cohen, and when Honoria sent him something, she got back a "Braincell," a weekly collage project and one of the longest-running mail art projects.

Honoria became very excited by the international list of mail artists that was attached and was delighted to have found so many others who liked corresponding. It was, Honoria says, almost "kinky," and she started writing to several mail artists in Japan and Italy, primarily sending out watercolored and collaged postcards. Since then, she has amassed many walls-full of art from around the world. Two of her favorite correspondents are a couple of Italian railroad workers who are also performance artists. While she oohs and aahs over the works, Honoria admits this selfless gift-giving between artists ensures that "the art is worthless. It's a bunch of postcards, and the fact is that nobody's going to buy it." But Honoria treasures her collection and believes that a mail artist's work may be measured by what he or she collects, putting her pretty high up the chain.

Asked what makes her so prone to mail artistry, Honoria says "I don't think life is a drag. I think life is fun. That's why mail art [also called 'the Eternal Network'] is the best network for me."

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Diana Garcia

"Mail art is about exchanging ideas with anyone, and finding other people on the margins," says fourth-grade teacher/Girl Robots drummer Diana Garcia. "For me, it was a lot about being a misfit and finding other people who were misfits to exchange ideas with."

Garcia defines mail art as "any kind of artistic expression that could be sent to someone else through the mail." The "envelope collage" is Garcia's forte, but Garcia is probably best known for her zine Bad News Bingo. The first issue (circa more than 15 years ago) was, in Garcia's words, "really punk rock, just about being really bored and punk and stupid and young."

Hailing from San Antonio, Garcia came to
Austin in 1980 to go to UT. For a while, she performed with PeACH, the Performance Art Church. Then one day she was hanging out at Waterloo Records checking out MDU. Then she performed with PeACH, the Performance Art Church. Then one day she was hanging out at Waterloo Records checking out MDU. Then she performed with PeACH, the Performance Art Church.

Garcia started writing to Dallas mail art guru John Held, Jr., and her list of correspondents blossomed from there. Garcia says she has learned a lot from Held and Plunket about mail art, specifically how much it is, really, a joke, and subversive in a way because it’s going through the U.S. Postal Service. Garcia remembers one laminated dollar bill with stamps being delivered despite the rules against sending money through the mail. She likes puns, like the letter she got that was a fan (“fan mail”).

More symbolically, Garcia likes to work with junk mail and trash. When she gets a credit card solicitation, she will cut it up, turn it into mail art, and send it back out into the world. This keeps her, she says, from being merely a passive recipient of advertising. She considers herself a folk artist because she makes things out of trash, for example, glittery little dioramas from sardine cans and bottle cap robots. Garcia has never studied art formally (she majored in English literature, minored in French literature), and she likes mail art because there is no criticism, no theory. Her big dream is to make a junk sculpture-shrine in her backyard.

Garcia’s current mail art show, running through March 25 at the Bouldin Creek Coffee House on South First Street, is based on gardens. The Secret Garden is one of her favorite children’s books, and she reads it to the kids in her class every year. “The little girl, the main character, is not loved,” says Garcia, “and then she learns to love herself and how to tend the garden.” Garcia based an issue of the magazine, Nunquam, on the theme of gardens. Everyone, says Garcia, needs to relax and walk around in a garden. That sentiment seems to have struck a chord in the mail art community. Garcia’s call for entries was answered with a small tidal wave of decorated postcards and envelopes about gardens.

Josh Ronsen

Like Garcia, Josh Ronsen was turned on to mail art through ND Magazine, for which he now edits the mail art listings. Ronsen, who describes himself as “kind of a shy person,” likes mail art because “you don’t need to have gone to school or be in a club, you just have to produce interesting stuff.” Since he is a musician, Ronsen’s “interesting stuff” will sometimes be a piece of taped music he has made. If the receiver were to take the time to splice that piece of tape into a cassette, he or she would hear Ronsen’s music.

Ronsen did one project by e-mail in which he asked everyone to write back the first words that were spoken to them after they received his e-mail. He compiled the response and made postcards of ant photographs, with the culled phrases coming out of the ants’ mouths. One example: “Where is my communication folder?” Digitally prone, one of Ronsen’s favorite pieces is a postcard made from a corrupted file that he opened in Photoshop.

“Serendipity” plays a huge part in mail art, says Ronsen. To take one international example, Ronsen sent a postcard of a house with ants stamped across it to a man in France whose address had been found. That man had, oddly, just been researching a show he’d heard about that took place in a house and was about ants. Ronsen and the Frenchman became fast friends and correspondents, as well they might given their eerie meeting.

Ronsen is partial to “assembly zines,” for which a group of people send in 50 or so copies of a small piece and all the pieces get assembled into a series of 50 boxes that get mailed out to the original contributors, but he is currently working on a text-based project. Ronsen pulled 39 words from the Lawrence Durrell novel Nunquam. The call is for people to make a short text using those words. The list includes “salubrious,” “minatory,” “sissu,” and “crepitation.” He has already received several responses, ranging in length from several lines to multiple pages.

Ronsen acknowledges that the mail art culture is “insular,” because it is impossible to be a passive participant. If you don’t send things out, you don’t find out about projects and you don’t get cool stuff. Within the mail art world, says Ronsen, there are heroes — Ray Johnson from New York and John Held, Jr. from Dallas, for example — but mail art has nothing to do with making money. It is, Ronsen says, a “meeting of minds” and anti-commodification by design. It is, says Ronsen, a “free exchange,” mutual gift-giving between artists. Therefore it’s “not cutthroat, like trying to get gallery space or to get a grant or to get your CDs to sell in the store.” Sure, it doesn’t lead to fame and fortune, but if you stay in it long enough eventually “you see some incredible things you can’t see anywhere else.”

Ronsen’s band Brekekekexkoakkoax will be performing Saturday, April 7, at the Sri Atmananda Memorial School on Red River. He is currently seeking submissions for his Durrell project. Write to Josh Ronsen, PO Box 7896, Austin, TX, 78713.
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FORM #110 RANDOM POETRY GENERATOR
by Daniel A. Russell
To Lawrence Ferlinghetti C/O CITY LIGHTS
1562 Grant Avenue San Francisco, CA 94133, the occasion, Allen Ginsberg's death

I was on the beach in '56
saw Jack, read HOWL
On The Road
Herb Caen columns
A Coney Island Of The Mind
became a beatnik
beat poet
one of those angelheaded hipsters
burning for the ancient heavenly connection
wrote to you in '76 from Maine
and you answered.

After that I went back underground
as I had been for 20 years already
until Allen died
I had to wait for his demise
so I could find him
he was
otherwise inaccessible

having become a famous poet/public icon
like Jack and Neal
You too, Mister Lawrence Ferlinghetti
I-called Larry
even Bob Kaufman too
published-adored
where I was forever and always
Mister Nobody from nowhere.
(and I don't care).

Old man
I’ll meet you too when you die
guide you
I’m good at that
which for obvious reasons
I don’t talk much about
(I'm dead but I lived to tell about it)

and obviously I do care
this proves it
consider yourself haunted.

Note: Eight months later City Lights Publishing returned my SASP on which an editor had written a rejection notice revealing the obvious confusion of elitist lit-snobs.
Food pantries see rise in need

Fuel costs pinching Mainers' budgets

By Shawn O'Leary
Of the NEWS Staff

With the high cost of heating oil pinching many a Mainer's wallet, more people are turning to community agencies and nonprofit groups for help with putting food on their tables.

Mark Rae, assistant director of Manna Inc., said Tuesday that the soup kitchen and pantry his agency operates has seen about a 25 percent increase over last year in the number of people seeking nonperishable food items to help feed themselves and/or their families. Much of that increase, Rae said, is due to an influx of people who are struggling to pay both their heating and grocery bills from week to week.

"Basically, people are making a choice between food and heating," Rae said. "Heating help is hard to come by. The demand is so high that the supply isn't available."

See Food, Page A2
An example of the well-known Chuck Taylor model of Converse All Star basketball shoes is displayed at an athletic shoe store in Burlington, Mass., Monday. Sneaker maker Converse Inc. said Monday that it had filed for protection from its creditors under Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy laws and plans a restructuring that would include closing North American plants and shifting production to plants in Asia. (AP Photo by Steven Senne)
Addressing the History of Mail Art

Depending on who your source is, the practice of mail art began in 1916 when Marcel Duchamp sent a series of artsy postcards to his neighbors ... or it really began later, in the 1950s, with American artist Ray Johnson. Johnson had a mailing list of hundreds, including people like Andy Warhol and James Barr of the Museum of Modern Art, and he’d send out collages and hand-stamped letters to all of them. Eventually, a loose network of such postal artists formed, with Johnson at the epicenter, and it came to be known as the New York Correspondence School of Art. This “school” became involved with the Fluxus group — a wide-ranging crew of reactive, Dada-inspired pranksters — and the numbers of its underground ranks swelled. In the autumn of 1970, Johnson and Marcia Tucker organized an exhibit of New York mail art at the Whitney Museum of American Art. There followed an international flourishing of mail art postings and exhibitions, fueled by articles in Art in America and Rolling Stone, until there were more networks and mail art shows than you could shake a rubber stamp at.

A bit of mail art’s handmade glory died with the influx of Xerox technology in the late Seventies, but this advent also introduced the participation of people from the zine and audio cassette cultures. It was a mutual embrace between the art world and the underground, which helped to erase the borders between the two and birthed such movements as Neoism, Art Strike, and the many meetings of the Decentralized Worldwide Networker Congress. There were hundreds of mail artists all over the world — some of them part of large and overlapping networks, some in smaller, isolated groups — and each of them mailing their creations to everybody else. “The most important part of mail art,” writes mail art historian John Held Jr. in his From Moticos to Mail Art: Four Decades of Postal Networking, “has not been in the products which have been created, but the structure of interaction which has evolved.” These days, with e-mail and the Internet, you might think a lot of the impetus has been excised from this ever-changing body of work. And while it’s true that some networking activity may have moved exclusively to cyberspace, it’s also true that the World Wide Web is unbeatable as a convenient source for a much mail art information — including lists of snail-mail addresses and calls-for-entries. This article — which goes online soon after the Chronicle’s paper edition comes out — is a case in point.

— W.A.B.