Mail Art History
Annotated Bibliography
From the mail art archives of Mimi Holmes

A small handbook that discusses mail art, including its history, archives, mail art tourism, and mail art congress. Articles are short and directed at newcomers to mail art. Includes some images of mail art.

Bassin, Joan. (?) The Mail Species. City, Off the Wall. April, 1979
An article on the history of mail art. It describes what mail art is, noting that not even artists can exactly define it, and some of its history. The practice has a game-like quality, and for many artists, is safe, anonymous, and personal. Mail art includes the spirit of experimentation and exploration of new media. In Europe, mail art tends to be more political. Contemporary mail art practices likely began with Ray Johnson, but has its intellectual roots (maybe) in the Dada movement, which sought to subvert the traditional practices of art at the time. It argues that most mail art is not good.

A manifesto of mail artist Guy Bleus’ perspective of mail art. Alludes to some of the early history of the movement, Fluxus and Nouveau Realisme artists, and muses on the theoretical aspects of it. Describes the paradox of the practice: “The harder on works in the Network, the more answers and mail one gets AND the harder one has to work…!” It harkens back to an “ancient form of barter” and is a “primitive structure.” The artists value the act of exchanging over the items they exchange. Has many good quotes: “A mail-artist is often a disappointed artist. Not disappointed in art, but in the art-industry of the leading galleries and museums.”

Discusses how there is no one authority on the history of mail art. It may have begun in Japan in the 50s, the US in the 60s, or Europe in the 70s. It’s a product of the fact that there’s no one definition of “mail art.” Encourages mail artists to write their own bibliographies and biographies in order to inform the history.

Chambers, Bill. 101 Things You Should Know About Mail Art. Art Papers
A list of (humorous, sarcastic) facts about mail art: “Old mail artists never die, they return to Sender.” Includes images of exemplary mail art. Makes references to current mail artists.

Cohen, Ronny. Art and Letters; Please Mr. Postman Look and See…Is there a work of art in your bag for me?. ArtNews. December 1981.
An article covering the history of mailart, types of it, and important mailart figures, like Ray Johnson. It also covers her personal experiences with individual artists.
She characterized mail artists as those trained in universities and art schools, with strong backgrounds in traditional mediums. Friends and art world professionals may be involved in the practice, but the artists drive the activity. Mail art can be letters, postcards, packages, stamps, collages, copies, newsletters, magazines, catalogues, 2 or 3-dimensional objects.

Cohen discusses many different approaches to mailart and the uses of it. Both visual with verbal, it is often provocative (in form and content), humorous, and critical. Nothing is above scrutiny. It “deals in both the private and the public arena and examines social, political, and economic as well as esthetic issues.” It may also be a way for artists to keep in touch, and connected geographically isolated artists. For some artists, it was a type of rebellion against established art styles or practices. Despite this, it had rules: respond and follow the instructions of the artist.

It began around 1955, but mail and communication were of interest to Futurists and Dadaists as early as WWI. Fluxus and Ray Johnson with his New York Correspondence School proliferated mail art in the 50s and 60s. Johnson would ask people to send mail to others, with the instruction to send something back to Johnson, and so created his network. In the 1970s, mailart changed as small networks grew. Color xeroxes became available and made it possible to respond to more people more quickly. Rebellious young artists latched onto the idea that painting is dead and alternative media like mail art should be explored. Exhibitions of mail art become more common and this time. Further, it was also thriving in Europe, Canada, and Latin America as of the writing of the article.


This writing begins with a broad discussion of the current economic and cultural state of Japan (in the 80s) and how it applies to art in general. Artists trained traditionally in Paris or New York are respected most by the Japanese art institution, and, to Ryosuke, art is out of touch and “too ideal to feel the fun of itself.” Mail art is the antidote to current issues in art. Art is fun and is information. “Mail art network is the most wonderful movement that can solve the various problems of present art and artists; - authority, exchange of information, too notional art, mistaken holiness, and so on.” “Thousands of neurons clung and piled up together are just like [the] mail art network, I think.”

Gajewski, Henryk. Special Delivery. Orthel & Partners Filmprodukties BV

A flier/letter advertising a film, at the time in production, about the international mail art network. It introduces the purpose and principles behind mail art. Includes excellent quotes.


An article on an exhibition of Ray Johnson’s collages, held at the Nassau County Museum of Fine Art, February 19 - April 8, 1984. Briefly discusses his beginning the New York Correspondance [sic] school in the late 1940s. The members are described as friends and acquaintances that exchange words and objects.

Held, Jr. John. The Other Stuff Page. [from unknown mail art show]
This article has a succinct history of mail art, discussing how it began, why it became popular, what it is, and why one should participate. He describes mail art as a movement that grew out of Ray Johnson’s personal correspondence (from the late fifties and early sixties) and Fluxus communications. Johnson practiced by creating a circle of correspondences. Fluxus became a “disparate band,” geographically divided, and so newsletters, performance proposals, and more, sent by George Maciunas, linked them. Robert Filliou called it the “Eternal Network.” It grew because it addressed artists’ concerns: “the democratization of art, escape from the corrupting influences of the gallery and museum, reaction against the judging of art...and the linkage of communication theory and art.” Yet, exhibition on mail art began. Then, democratic meant all could participate without judgement and with documentation. Addresses were shared, allowing for future correspondence.

Held, Jr., John. (What is) Mail Art (anyway)?
This is a letter that (according to Mimi) was originally part of a catalog of mail art. Many mail artists and advocates of mail art have made statements about what mail art is, and this is one of them. He has a general statement about how one might create mail art, as well as an idealistic view of it: Art is about communication. He describes mail art as being about communicating one’s vision and feelings with others, and ends with a statement on why it’s important, touching on the democratic nature of it.

This article, written by Mimi, covers her personal experience with mail art and the timeline of her activity, which began with her appointment as an art teacher in 1984. Secondary to this, the history of mail art is covered. She discusses how her correspondences would begin, for example through sharing addresses at exhibitions, and the various ways one could participate in mail art. Personal correspondences were the most fruitful. She also discusses the accessibility and the often deeply personal nature of mail art. There were “no rules, no rejections,” but she notes how very white and male it was. While one could meet their mail pals in person (a practice known as mail art tourism) and solidify their connection, sometimes it caused them to lose the “magic.”

Iros, Jape. On Mail Art.
A short essay on mail art, including a discussion on what it physically is, its history, and a list of the more famous mail artists of the day. Describes it as “a visual folk song” and the most democratic of the arts. Ray Johnson started the practice mid-sixties, although Iros points out that mail art is relatively unknown, even with established artists. He also describes the tension between art traditionalists and the “blithe, casual” nature of mail art, and is critical of the traditional art world.

Mittendorf, Henning. Mail Art - my dream of freedom and love
A manifesto about mail art by the artist. Describes the theoretical aspects of creating this form of art. Mail art is driven by love on the part of the artist. They strive to be a part of the ecology of humanity by connecting with other parts of the whole (inviting, asking, answering,
and signalizing), attempting to create a “super-socialized group.” They strive to make sense of the world, or reconcile the “irrational and rational...the chaos and the order…” etc. In their attempts, they experience solidarity.

An article describing the upcoming exhibition at the Four Arts Gallery in Tallahassee, FL, January 24 - February 23, 1986. Describes the history of mail art, particularly talking about the debate of when it began, noting that there is no solid date. Has its origins in the reaction to the for-profit galleries and common capitalist practices of the art world, but mail art is nevertheless sold today. Comments on the variety of work in the exhibition, including artists’ books, assemblages, poems, collages, Native American folklore, etc.

Non Cents (Steven Random?). Dada, Mail-art reveal historic(al) parallels from 1913 - 1985
A theoretical discussion of the parallels between Dadaist movement and mail art. It describes a brief history of the genesis of Dadaism, and mail art as a continuation of artists’ dissatisfaction with society and modern life, as well as a response to war. Briefly outlines the history of Ray Johnson’s Correspondance School (in a negative tone) and the reasons other artists participate.

Pittore, Carlo. The N-Tity.
An article/manifesto from an unknown resource describing the past and current state of mail art, including the influence of technological progress on it. It credits science and technology as a threat to human consciousness and human nature, but art as the humanizing force. The meaning of “N-tity” is described, which relates to mail artists’ networks and the greater communication between individuals.

Rejected Mail Art Archive [collective of mail artists]. Entartete Kunst, Vol. 1 No. 1. Spring 1984
The zine(?) and organization were created in response to Ronny Cohen, curator of an upcoming mailart exhibition, rejecting pieces she received for the show. Covers the debate on censorship and is an example of the free, democratic founding principles of the art form. A standard call for mail art exhibitions would be “No fee, no jury” and “All works submitted will be displayed.” This practice appears to have been criticized by “high art” critics as being unimaginative and haphazard. Cohen’s purported attempts at curating elicited a strong negative response from the mail art community. Includes open letters to her, and articles covering a controversial artist panel Cohen moderated after her denounced actions. Finally, it reiterates the principles of mail art as being about opening channels of communication to create person-to-person correspondences, and “the power of the network is in the quality of the direct correspondence, not the quantity.”

Rexroat, Dee Ann. Neither rain nor sleet nor dark of night...will hamper this exhibit. The Cedar Rapids Gazette. Friday, January 12, 1990
This is a short article written on the occasion of a mail art exhibit. Describes mail art as being democratic and a way to get around the hierarchies of the formal art world. It briefly
discusses the issue of how to balance profanity with non-censorship by playing with exhibition practices. For each exhibition, Holmes makes an “informal” exhibition catalog and sends it off to each participant. She keeps the works.

   A publication sent by Lon Spiegelman to Mimi Holmes. On pg. 12 includes an article on “the bullshit with university mailart shows,” referencing a mailart show at the University of Minnesota whose catalog did not include addresses, which is customary for mail art shows.

   A publication sent by Lon Spiegelman to Mimi Holmes. Includes many articles with issues and topics in mail art relevant to the times. Includes a list of other mail art publications on the title info and an article on pg. 14 of The First Family Fun and Games Los Angeles Mailart Congress, which discusses briefly the history of mail art. Page 15 includes an article, “Archives,” which further discusses history as well as how mail art archives begin.

   Article written in Spanish on mail art.

   Newspaper article describing mail art, interviewing Dale Woolery, cataloger of the John Bennet Collection of Mail Art at Washington University. Focuses on the fun aspect, or “let's-mess-with-their-heads” attitude, but argues that under that fun there’s anger at the art establishment. It grew of the conceptualist work like that of Duchamp and May Ray, but Ray Johnson is credited as the founder of the movement. “The story of art in the 20th century is the story of explaining the almost incomprehensible to the mostly uninterested.” Twentieth century artists attempted to create a new visual language to form the people’s art and be less elitist. Yet, they became elitist themselves, and communicating that language became a problem. Johnson and friends sought to solve that with mail art. The difference between art and non-art is context. Growing in the mid-1960s, it experienced some disillusionment in the 70s.

Unknown. Democracy of a form limited only by the post office. Florida Flambeau. January 31, 1986
   A newspaper article printed on the occasion of the exhibition, Four Arts, co-curated by Fran Rutkovsky. Second of two articles about the exhibition. She states that every mail artist has a different reason or goal in participating in mail art. Some test the post system while others “just like to play.” Describes the variety of mail art and includes references to John Bennet, Jack Saunder, and Ruud Janssen.

Unknown. Jean Michel Folon chapter
   Short piece from an unknown book describing Jean Michel Folon as raising the practice of mail art to a new art form, after his art envelopes were collected and titled, “Letters to Giorgio.” It also describes the free, unrestricted nature of mail art.
Unknown. Mail art exhibit to be at Cornell. [Iowa?] Sun, Mount Vernon. December 21, 1989.

This is a short newspaper article on a Mail Art exhibition to be held at Cornell College, Iowa, on January 14, 1989, curated by Mimi Holmes. States mail art as having started around 1960 by Ray Johnson experimenting with the boundaries of the mail service. The first exhibition was held in 1971 at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Unknown. Please Mr. Postman, look and see…The Bradenton Herald. September 21, 1986

An article on what mail art is, describing some of the items artists have sent through the mail. Terry Porter, interviewed for the article, describes US mail art as being mostly for fun, while international artists are often more political and may be jailed for it. Also includes Charles Harwood. It is an alternative form of art that rejects the money-focused, established galleries and museums. Mail art is designed to interact with the postal system. Article ends with a brief history of how the movement began, describing it as having began with Ray Johnson in the early 1950s.

Unknown. Please, Mr. Postman, won't you check…Florida Flambeau. January 24, 1986.

A newspaper article printed on the occasion of the exhibition, Four Arts, co-curated by Fran Rutkovsky. First of two articles about the exhibition. Describes mail art and the nature of the mail art to be included in this show. Emphasizes the humorous, fun nature of the art form. Tone is emphatic and glib.


An article arguing for more mail art activity between US and USSR mail artists. Since the theme of creating a more peaceful world is a common theme with mail artists, it is fitting: “...beyond all of the eccentric artifacts and gift-giving among artists is their belief in a global network community of two-way community exchange” (68). Mail art allows people to connect outside bureaucracy, nationality, and ideology. In fact, the process (started in 1970~) is an artform in itself.

It then discusses the difficulties in mailing art to USSR, and tips for artists wanting to try it. There is evidence of mail art activity within the Soviet Union, but prior to 1986 there doesn’t appear to be much between the countries, partly due to the Cold War. Although, in 1985, Wally Darnell succeeded in putting on the First International Mail Art Show in China, with the government’s permission.

Welch, Chuck. Postfolk Artistamps

An article on artistamps, or stamps created by artists and “postfolk.” It defines postfolk, or Local Post Philatelists, as artists distinct from mail artists, or those who are “largely stamp collectors playing postmaster in some form of official or unorthodox capacity” (pg. 1). They deliver their mail in whatever manner they choose, often where regular mail doesn’t go, and using stamps they create. It describes the general practice and concludes by arguing for the art world to recognize “postfolk artistamps” as legitimate art.
Newspaper article describing mail art through the lens of Mimi. Emphasizes the fact that mail artists push the limits of what one can send through the mail - but also that there has to be an idea behind it. “A populist, non-intimidating way for creators to join an informal network.” Describes mail art as an alternative to art typically shown at galleries and museums. It does not require education to understand. The interaction between artists is important; one may play in ideas or images from another’s work, jokes are carried on, and romances spring up.
101 Things You Should Know About Mail Art, by Bill Chambers, Art Papers
Art and Letters; Please Mr. Postman Look and See...Is there a work of art in you bag for me? by Ronny Cohen, ArtNews, December 1981
Art as Collective Mythology: Mail Art by Guy Bleus [introduction], in A World Bibliography of Mail Art by John Held Jr.
Art by Mail - who needs stuffy galleries? by Debora Wiley, Des Moines Register Monday, January 15, 1990
Arte-Correo: Alternativa Desafiante, in El Pais, Montevideo, September 1984
Brain Cell, Ryosuke Cohen, September 1985
But is it mail?, in The Riverfront Times, April 1-7, 1987
Communication/Alternative Expressions, exhibition catalog, by Jay Murphy, Art Paper, March/April 1986
Dada, Mail-art reveal historic(al) parallels from 1913-1985
Entartete Kunst, Vol. 1 No. 1, Spring 1984
Introduction About Art and Exchange, Guy Bleus
Mail art exhibit to be at Cornell [Iowa?] Sun, Mount Vernon, December 21, 1989
Mail art - my dream of freedom and love, Henning Mittendorf
The Mail Art Species, by Joan Bassin, City, Off the Wall, April 1979
Neither rain nor sleet nor dark of night...will hamper this exhibit by Dee Ann Rexroat, The Cedar Rapids Gazette, Friday, January 12, 1990
The N-tity, by Carlo Pittore
On Mail Art, by Jape Iros
The Other Stuff page, John Held, Jr.
Please Mr. Postman Look and See..., The Bradenton Herald, September 21, 1986
Postfolk Artistamps, by Chuck Welch
Special Delivery Orthel & Partners Filmprodukties BV, by Henryk Gajewski
Spiegelman’s mailart rag, Vol. 1 No. 3, September 1985
Spiegelman’s mailart rag, Vol. 1 No. 2, December 1986
(What is) Mail Art (anyway)? by John Held Jr.