

I am still alive

Mail Art

AN ARTISBOOK PUBLICATION ON MAIL ART

**ART =
BOOK**



van Bijleveltstichting

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Henk Woudsma

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Introduction

The ARTisBOOK foundation aims to showcase the richness and scope of the artist's book and to make it accessible to the public. ARTisBOOK focuses on the artist book as a concept. Books, graphic works and posters, bulletins, mail art, blog-art, artist texts, object books, postal messages, magazines, invitation cards, and performed lectures are all part of ARTisBOOK's research domain.

Now in this time of a global pandemic we live in a moment where most of our activities, relationships and interactions are online, the phenomenon of Mail Art has become an important means of expression and is gaining more attention for communicating with the outside world. Mail Art brings the practice of artists outside of their studio.

In November and December 2020, for example, Eleni Tsompanidou (1993) used Mail Art during her residency at the ARTisBOOK. Tsompanidou used Mail Art as the starting point for her project *A Miroloi of Life*. She started sending letters about grief, with the intention that others would respond to them, thus setting up a correspondence. In her letters, Tsompanidou created a stimulating environment from which everyone could draw inspiration. By sending art through the mail everyone could participate and the conditions of the museums and other institutions were avoided.

In this publication we will explore the vast world of Mail Art in a historical context. By looking into Mail Art's history, by going into its characteristics and by taking a closer look at some artists working within this field, we will learn different ways of doing and working with Mail Art.

Mail Art emerged in the early 1960s and expresses itself in multiple forms. It's not just letters and envelopes, but also postcards, photographs, graphics, texts (for many the occasion for creating and publishing 'visual poetry'), magazines, (artists') books, slides, videotapes and even gramophone records and sound tapes. Usually elements of the postage or shipping process are integrated into the artwork: homemade stamps and stamps are also part of Mail Art. In addition to mail, the telephone, telex, fax or internet were also used for transmission.

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Ulises Carrión, postcard of Other Books and So Archive (Bloemgracht 121), n.d.

Definition

It is not easy to define the word "Mail Art" because it is used in different ways. Its different meanings are usually obvious to mail artists, but not to outsiders. Mail Art can mean:

- a. A product. A Mail Art work: e.g, a sent copy-artwork, an artists' book or artistamp; i.e., an artifact.
- b. A process.the Mail Art activity: e.g., in 'doing Mail Art'.
- c. A structure. an international network of thousands of artists, an art movement based on art exchange; also called the Mail Art Network. One organized Mail Art communication network does not exist. Every mail artist has his own mailing-list, which comprises his circuit. When someone is talking about 'THE' Mail Art Network, he is talking about all those (overlapping) circuits together.
- d. A new medium. Mail art uses communication media as art media.
- e. An expansion of the term "mail". Mail Art is not limited to postal mail, but other communication media are also used, e.g. telegram, telex, telefax, telephony, computer networking, teletext, electronic mail, communication via radio, television, walkie-talkie, balloons, etc.
- f. An expansion of the term "art." By some, Mail Art was considered a new cultural strategy, supported by the democratic idea that everyone can give and receive art.
- g. Any combination of the above.

Mail Art is an experiment by visual artists, as well as performers, writers and poets, who demonstratively shirked the prevailing conventions of the art establishment. The practitioners of Mail Art emphasize its collective and communicative character. Mail Art is considered to be a-commercial and multicultural and has no prescribed aesthetics and no selection committees; therefore, anyone can participate in Mail Art. Mail artists seek a democratic art model where sender and receiver can be equal.

Mail Art originated as a reaction to the common beliefs that 'art can only be bought by people with capital' and 'art can only be exhibited in museums or galleries'. The mailbox is then the most beautiful gallery. A mail artist shuns the official art world and arranges everything himself. Ideas such as 'anyone can be an artist' and 'art should be able to be practiced by anyone' form the basis of this Mail Art. An unwritten law of Mail Art was therefore that the mail pieces should be realized with simple techniques, so that everyone could participate cheaply and immediately. Often a mail artist would select a certain topic as a starting point, to which others from the network of sometimes thousands of artists and non-artists were invited to respond.

Mail Art is therefore an alternative art circuit, in which direct communication and the exchange of (visual) information between artists are central. This also means that only those who work in this circuit are informed about the various projects and activities.



Artists' Postage Stamps and Cancellation Stamps (cat.), Stempelplaats, Amsterdam, 1979

Examples

Mail Art is an art form between multiple parties. In principle, just about any technique, material or method can be used within Mail Art, as long as a work is sent (integrally or in parts). The required material in itself is thus unimportant. A few examples:

- Mail Art postcards: these can be either unica or multiple postcards designed by the mail-artist or (de)collages on postcard format. The focus can be of many kinds, e.g. with the emphasis on personal experiences or on political events.
- Mail Art-paper: art paper (handmade etc.) intended for the production of e.g. stationery and/or envelopes.

- Copy Art: photocopy art, xerography or Xerox Mail Art. Copy Art provides a quick method of obtaining color or black and white multiples.
- Artists' books: books made by artists. The book becomes the medium, like the canvas for the painter. There is a wide range of book objects: copy art books, accordion books, transparent books, chapbooks, folkbooks, notebooks, flipbooks, hole books, marbled books, braided books, concrete books, sketchbooks, performance books, recycling books, etc. The fact that artist's books are easy (and relatively cheap) to send by mail has contributed greatly to the current development of the Mail Art Network.
- Graffiti Mail Art: graffiti Mail Art is a contradiction, if we understand the term graffiti as 'the art of wall scrawling', 'city art' or 'mural communication'. Graffiti Mail Art are photographs of graffiti, scribbles on paper, postcards, etc.
- Mail Art and Semi Mail Art magazines: there are an awful lot of small-press magazines of various kinds in the Mail Art network.
- Poetry/Literature: Mail Art is not limited to the field of plastic arts. Mail Art poetry (concrete, visual, visceral, sonorous, etc.) and literature differ from traditional poetry and literature primarily in the method of distribution.
- Audio and Video Mail Art (zie Poetry/Literature)
- Mail Art Order Book Shops: usually specializing in books and artists' books, e.g. Printed Matter in New York.
- Mail Art Archives / Mailing Lists: as a result of intense correspondence and/or the realization of a Mail Art project/show/publication, some mail-artists have an archive.
- Mail Art performances: performances realized through the Mail Art Network.
- Mail Art project/show: exhibitions of Mail Art, where the organizer sends invitations through the Network, which may or may not be linked to a particular theme or project. In fact, there is only a concrete Mail Art 'policy' regarding the Mail Art exhibitions, namely 1) no participation fee, 2) no jury, 3) no refusal or selection (all works are exhibited), 4) documentation, catalog or list of participants is sent to all artists.
- Stamp Art: rubber stamp art or stamping art, along with artists' stamps, is very typical of Mail Art. It involves making and using stamps yourself, in addition to recycling existing stamps. They can be made from rubber, dycril, metal, wood, clay, etc. Mail artists use stamps in their work or for stamp art magazines. These magazines are usually conceived as assemblages: each participating artist sends e.g. 200 (depending on the edition) approximately identical self-stamped copies to a publisher. The latter assembles the 200 issues. The number of pages of the magazine will depend on the number of participants.
- Artists' stamps: Stamps serve as advance payment of postage. Artists' stamps do not have this function and are therefore not a means of payment. They serve as an intrinsic means of communication between artists on the Mail Art circuit.

An interesting resource is the online Mail Art Chro-No-Logy, which includes a chronology of the international Mail Art network with works, project documents, correspondence and other publications:

<https://www.artpool.hu/MailArt/chrono/introduction.html>



Hendrik Werkman, The Next Call, 1923

History

At the beginning of this century, Futurism, Dada, Bauhaus, Surrealism, etc. already used the mail for artistic purposes. Influenced by the free typography of the Futurists and Dadaists, for example, the Dutch artist Hendrik Werkman (1882-1945) experimented with mail art, producing his magazine *The Next Call* with his own hand press in a small edition from 1923. He sent it all over the world from Groningen, where he lived, trying to get in touch with other artists. This was an early example of Mail Art, which was of great importance to the development of new forms of typography.

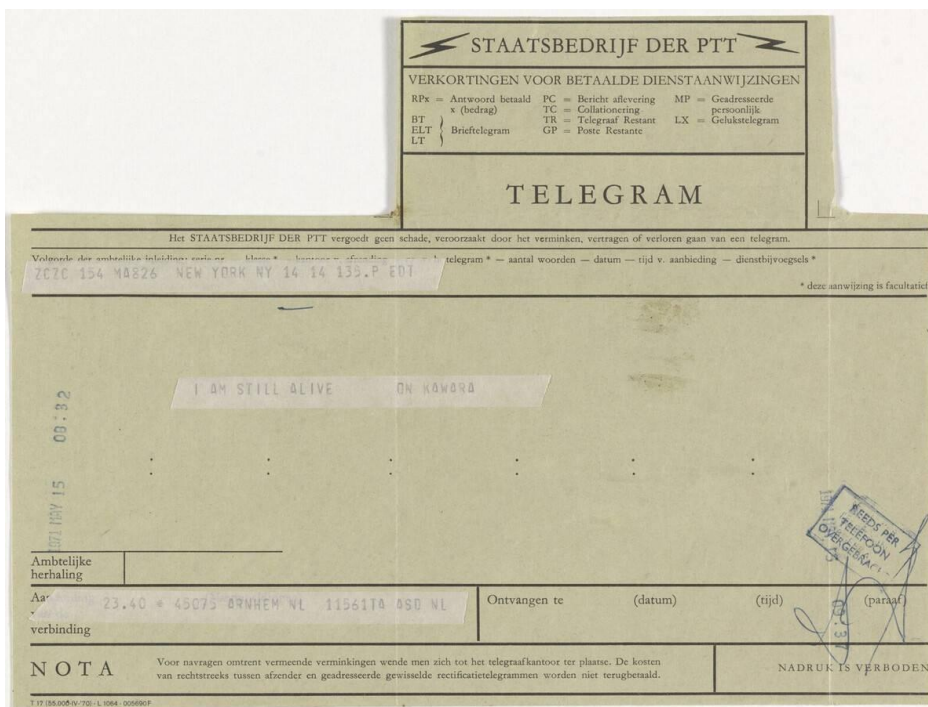
After the Second World War, the many networks of communication and cooperative groups of artists around the world were created through the American Ray Johnson (1927-1995), who founded the 'New York Correspondence School of Art' in 1962, giving this form of art its first organized basis. He sends pieces of his collages to other artists, to non-artists & friends. They returned their own responses. Some people from this group came in contact with other networks (of visual poets etc..). This way the first Mail Art network originated.

In the 1960s, Mail Art was strongly tied to the Fluxus movement, started by the musician and designer George Maciunas (1928-1978). He believed that the world should be purified of all art practiced by professional artists. In its place should come an ebb and flow, an interaction between everyday life and art, understandable to everyone. In this sense, Mail Art - postal transmission and all that goes with it - is a thing that is understandable to everyone, but has its own artistic freedoms. From this Fluxus atmosphere, but also from visual poetry, Mail Art has gradually developed and become a global enterprise with many exhibitions and biennials.



herman de vries, postal message, 1976

One artist who got involved with Mail Art very early in the Netherlands was herman de vries (1931). The *postal messages* by de vries from the 1960s are an extension of his 'random objectivations'. The envelopes are randomly pasted with stamps, according to a random chance principle. de vries sent these little works to acquaintances. It is difficult to say how many postal messages de vries made in the 1960s, but there were probably no more than a few dozen. de vries's postal messages from the sixties are one-way traffic: an 'artistic' response was not part of the intention. This is also true of the *postal messages* with artifacts from nature sent from the late 1970s.



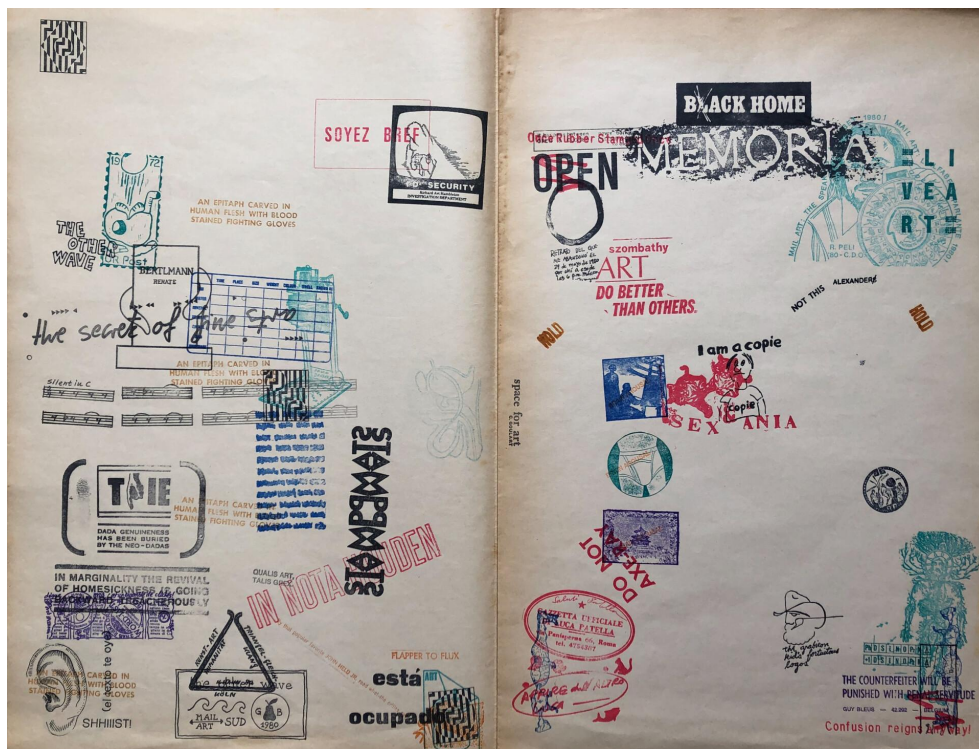
On Kawara, I am still alive, Kröller-Müller Otterlo, 1971

Mail Art as an art movement did not emerge until the 1970s. The Mail Art Network emerged from the interactions of the various smaller correspondence networks of Fluxus (a.o. Ben Vautier, Yoko Ono, George Brecht, Willem de Ridder), Nouveau Réalisme (a.o. Arman, Jean Tinguely, Yves Klein, Martial Raysse, Piero Manzoni, Daniel Spoerri), Concept Art (a.o. Carl Andre, Marinus Boezem, Stanley Brouwn, Daniel Buren, Gilbert & George, Jan Dibbets, On Kawara), Arte Povera (a.o. Giovanni Anselmo, Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Eva Hesse, Mario Merz, Giuseppe Penone), Poesia Visiva (a.o. G.J. de Rook, Paul de Vree), etc. supplemented by a manifest stream of young artists. For example, artists organized their own Mail Art projects with exhibitions of them and issued their own publications to handle their own distribution.

Another example is the serie *I Am Still Alive* by conceptual artists On Kawara (1933-2014, which began with three telegrams that he sent in 1969. . They read, in succession: *I am not going to commit suicide don't worry; I am not going to commit suicide worry; and I am going to sleep forget it.* These telegrams, each sent three days apart, get as close to "an expression of interiority-and a narrative arc-as Kawara will ever get." Just over a month later, Kawara sent another telegram to someone else, which reads, *I am still alive.* He sent nearly nine hundred telegrams of this kind to dozens of friends and acquaintances for more than three decades.

Although Fluxus and Mail Art peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, Mail Art continued to evolve in the years that followed and its practitioners made grateful use of new technologies. Many mail artists explored new communication media and distribution channels. In the 1970s, they investigated artistic frameworks for radio programming, live streaming, and cable television. In the 1980s, they turned to the Internet and new media. They saw not only the opportunity but also the need to appropriate these new information and communication technologies. By experimenting with new media, these artists had a tool to help determine the impact of technological developments on society.

Through Mail Art, artists explored the effects and possibilities of an unlimited network. They aspired to create a sanctuary that reached beyond national borders. The ideal of independence and unboundedness could best be realized by building a global artist community that transcended national barriers. Artists saw a particular challenge in sending mail pieces to and from countries with strict government censorship in order to provoke repressive government authorities.



Ulises Carrión, the stampa newspaper, 1980

Featured: Ulises Carrión

An artist who has significantly contributed to the development of Mail Art is the Mexican artist Ulises Carrión (1941-1989). His work also provides a nice representative picture of the possibilities of Mail Art.

Carrión was both a collector and a maker of Mail Art. The books that Carrión had acquired for his bookstore Other Books and So in Amsterdam formed the starting point for the archive that he compiled over the years, which also included new phenomena such as photocopying or Mail Art. Carrión actively participated in the Mail Art movement. His postal art network would soon grow into a movement for which the word "mail" was more important than the word "art". In his 1978 text *From Bookworks to Mail Art*, Carrión analyzes the functioning of the system that had developed, as well as the relationships between Mail Art and the artist's book. During the 'I am' event in Warsaw in 1978, the artist Carrión delivered an essay entitled *Mail Art and the Big Monster*. This influential essay delineates the principles and goals of mail art, its evolution, and classifies it according to its formal characteristics and modes of circulation. More radically, it brings to light the fact that, up until that moment, mail art depended on the postal system, and was thus able to 'knock at the doors of the big monster.'

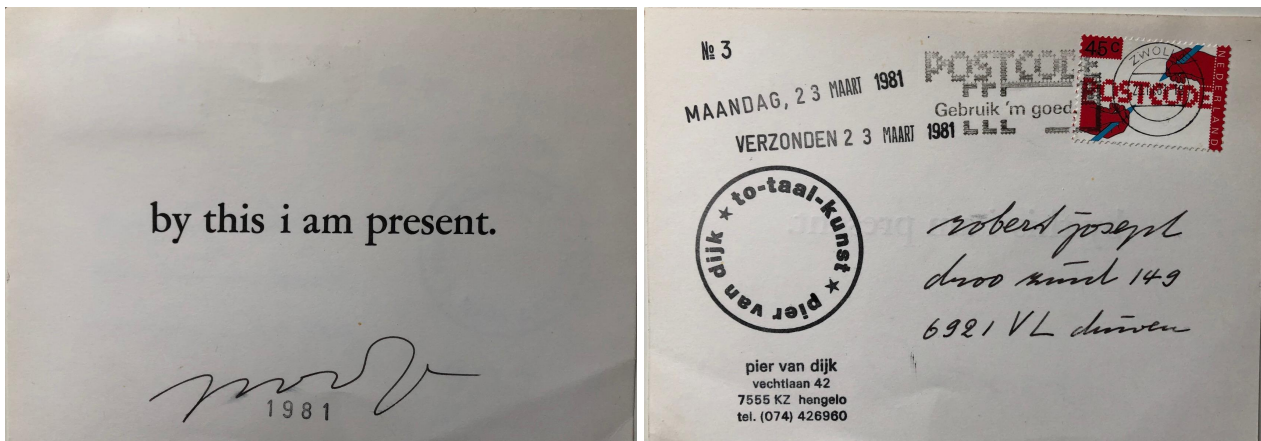
It was not unusual for mail artists to set up an alternative postal operator, complete with stamps, files, office and other administrative matters, focusing exclusively on the field of Mail Art. Such an alternative circuit was also created by Carrión in 1978 with his E.A.M.I.S., letters that stand for *Erratic Art Mail International System*, a fake institute that had messages delivered by everyone except the postal service. Carrión's messengers were his friends, who, when they visited him, received the request to bring a Mail Art piece to, for example, Japan. The best part was when that friend had to go to New York, because the bigger the detours and the longer it took to deliver the letter the better. That friend then had to give the letter to someone else in New York, someone who was going to Moscow. There the letter had to be given to someone who was not going to Japan either. The question of whether the letter would ever reach its destination was of little importance here.

In 1980, Carrión sent an invitation to friends to participate in his project *The Stampa Newspaper* with the intention of publishing an 8-page newspaper. They were asked to send a design of their own stamp along with the page Carrión had sent and to indicate on this page where the stamp could be printed. The option was also offered to send the stamp itself so that Carrión could make his own print. One page went to 30 artists. The individual contributions were exhibited together with the final result at the Stempelplaats in Amsterdam. The documentation of the project was included in the publication, the 6 post-art projects.

For more information about Carrión:

<https://www.artisbook.nl/activiteiten/actueel/digitale-tentoonstelling-ulises-carrion>

Other artists who have been involved with Mail Art in the Netherlands include Bart Boumans, Sjoerd Buisman, Hans Clavin, Raul Marroquin, G.J. de Rook, Jan Dibbets, Michael Gibbs, Harry Hoogstraten, Hetty Huisman, Ko de Jonge, Piet Franzen, Pier van Dijk/Robert Joseph, Hervé Fisher, Aart van Barneveld, Rod Summers, Albert van der Weide, Arno Arts, Afzet (Sonja van der Burg and Margot van Oosten) and many others.



Pier van Dijk, postal message, 1981

This publication was compiled from texts from the following sources:

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Ulises Carrión, Second Thoughts, VOID Distributors, 1980

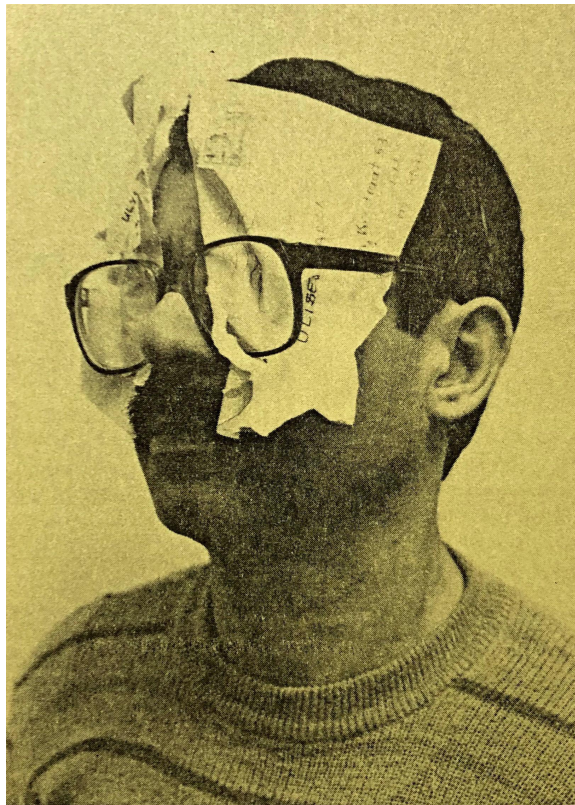
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Ulises Carrión, Seeing Mail, Amsterdam, 1981