

Notes On Correspondence Art

by Ken Friedman

Two decades and several years have passed since correspondence art and mail art were first introduced as contemporary art media. In those twenty-some years, this art form has become a rich and fascinating phenomenon; one that is interfaced to many other art forms, peopled by artists of stature both great and small and one which now possesses its own history.

The artists engaged in correspondence art have generally been well-known for their work in other media, their correspondence pieces relating to a host of other forms including process art, sociopolitical art, conceptual art, film, photography, collage, painting, bookmaking, printmaking, sculpture, performance and more. However, there are also a number of significant correspondence artists whose main engagement in the arts has been through this art form.

Correspondence art is a genre identified by several terms, all of which have different meanings and reveal various aspects of the correspondence art activity. Mail art, communications art, postal art are commonly used terms for the general activity. Junk mail, rubber stamp art, artists' stamps, zines and others are terms for more specific varieties of this artistic expression.

At first, correspondence art was an intimate art form practiced by a relatively small circle of friends who exchanged art works and ideas through personal correspondence. The form began to crystallize and become an independent medium in the correspondence projects of artists associated with the Fluxus group, the Nouveaux Realistes and the New York Correspondence School, as well as through the work of the lettristes, the concretists and others.

As the medium began to take shape, it became amenable to exhibition. The first exhibitions were invitational shows to which the early artists of this form were invited, most notably, Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School at the Whitney Museum in 1970 and the Correspondence Art section of the VII Biennial of Paris in 1971, organized by Jean-Marc Poinot. These were followed by experimental shows which sought to involve a larger public, starting with Ken Friedman's "One-Year One-Man Show" at the Oakland Museum in 1972, which began intimately and grew outward into the major public invitation "Work in Progress" at the Henry Gallery in 1972. Later, the "Omaha Flow Systems" international exhibition at the Joslyn Art Museum in 1973 outlined some dozens of experimental meth-

odologies appropriate to the gathering and display of correspondence art on all levels from local to world-wide. These experimental methodologies have been applied in over 200 such exhibitions in museums and galleries around the world since that time.

It is impossible to list the many interesting and important correspondence artists and their projects. Individuals from all continents have played roles in the evolution of the medium through their own works and through the projects they have developed. They range from extraordinarily famous artists to artists known only to a small following of loyal friends and collectors. What unites them all is that they are joined in what Robert Filliou has termed "The Eternal Network."

The genius of correspondence art has been its freedom and its use of "correspondences" in the binding together and bridging of ideas, media, objects and persons who correspond or relate to one another. It is an art of delight and of revelation, an art of process and of persons. The work done in the medium ranges from serious to frivolous, from lush to austere, from banal to beautiful, from experimental to redundant, from highly traditional forms and ideas to the most innovative and unheard-of. In fact, there is a great

deal of the same spirit in correspondence art which can be found in people who set out to break into the *Guinness Book of Records*. At the same time, much of the sense of showmanship is rooted in clear ideas about democracy, art as a human activity and concerns which can only be called spiritual.

The openness and freedom of correspondence art permits a wide range of style and occasions an equally wide range of quality. Just as much correspondence art is created with grace and spirit, even more is done in the sometimes deliberately trashy style that characterizes so much art today. One is reminded, of course, that more bad paintings than good are painted, more bad sculpture than good executed. Why should it be any different with a new medium now reaching its prime?

One of the most surprising aspects of correspondence art, however, is the lack of serious scholarship done on the medium. It is rare that an art movement as widely exhibited and publicly visible, as deeply interwoven into so many aspects of contemporary art as correspondence art has been, should attract so little critical interest. This recent art form is a superb key to many of the ideas and transformations visible throughout the art world today. The lack of mean-



Stuffed envelope
with calling cards
Takao Kurioka
Osaka, Japan

ingful scholarship in this area can only mean that the field is ripe — ready for fresh and significant discourse. The fact that so many correspondence artists are better-known for other aspects of their work offers an opportunity for enriched perspectives on a more intimate, and sometimes more revealing, side of their work and persona. Because correspondence art is a field in which many extraordinarily different kinds of people participate, it is a medium which has permitted and encouraged cross-fertilization of many fields. Through the study of correspondence art, an alert scholar could trace frequently undetected influences which pass the normal boundaries of scholarship and criticism. Correspondence art incorporates many identifiably different styles and schools which present an intellectual challenge all the more inviting for the previous neglect.

It seemed to many a few years ago that correspondence art had essentially peaked and gone into a decline. Many of the best and most interesting artists had either withdrawn quietly from the scene or publicly disengaged, as typified by Robert Cumming's well-known broadside against the exchange of his highly polished pieces in return for trashy, rapid offset throwaways. But the wide acceptance of the

correspondence methodology for use in other areas of the arts proves that more than a few major constituencies of the art world continue to be fertilized by the medium — among them museums, art periodicals and galleries, the institutions which provided some of the first motivations for the development of the medium.

The motivations of the correspondence artists are many. They have notably included a desire to transcend the often rigid boundaries of art world activity and a desire to open art world support systems to new talent. By developing strong new methods to expand those boundaries, and to bring some forms of support to artists whose work might otherwise go unseen, correspondence art has made itself an integral part of the art world. While at least some of those artists engaged in correspondence art have rejected the larger art world, the continuing philosophy of action through interaction, and change through evolution seems to have sustained the continued growth and renewed importance of correspondence art.

Correspondence art remains a fresh and lively framework for the individual artist. Granted, it is an arena for stupidity as well as brilliance; but the form

offers interesting and ever-changing perspectives. Its intermedial, interdisciplinary, ambiguous nature make this art form difficult to define. Its refusal to fit convenient, conventional theories of art-making keeps correspondence art lively and viable. Its present vitality indicates that correspondence art is an art form appropriate to the contemporary moment.