



Figure 101. Richard Kostelanetz, Cover of *A Critical (Ninth) Assembling*, U.S.A., 1979. An assembling of camera-ready critical commentary on experimental literature around the world.



CHAPTER 27

ASSEMBLING IN THE MAIL ART SPIRIT

Richard Kostelanetz

From my point of view, I scarcely thought of myself as participating in mail art, as commonly defined, though certain ideas that I've advocated over the past quarter century have influenced the climate. The principal idea was that aspiring artists and writers should not wait for the standard institutions of accreditation, whether publishers or galleries, to "take on" their work. They should publish/exhibit themselves, forming their own institutions if necessary, if their work would be circulated. I remember, when I was beginning my writing career, hearing conventionally ambitious writers say that they would "give" their work only to "the big six publishers." To the best of my recollection, none of those self-deceived wise guys are visible today. Where they went I cannot tell you; they simply disappeared and are, in professional terms, dead. In this respect, I supported mail art as an alternative to the gallery system. More important, in 1970 I joined a similarly situated colleague (who has since disappeared) in founding *Assembling* which would extend the alternative-distribution principle into collective self-publication.

What we did was invite artists and writers who were known to be doing otherwise unpublishable work to send a thousand copies of up to four pages (8 1/2" x 11") of whatever they wanted to include, which we assembled in alphabetical order, returning two bound copies to each contributor, ideally selling off the rest to defray collation and administrative costs. As I wrote in the preface to the initial *Assembling*:

As young writers of stylistically 'different' poetry and prose, we faced not only the inevitable objections to our precocity, but also the equally inevitable resistances to our wayward literary purposes. And so we wanted an institution that would publish alternative work by imaginative artists who genuinely believed in what they did. Since rejections often came with the excuse, particularly from editors pretending to sympathy, that "our printer can't handle this," it seemed best to overcome this obstacle by direct action—by becoming one's own publisher, which is more practicable in this era of easily accessible photographic reproduction processes; for the oldest truth is that, when other demands are more pressing, the writer must do more than just write.

While there is no doubt that artists and writers should ultimately be paid for what they do, there are times when every one of us feels that it would be worth a few dollars and a little effort to put into public print something that otherwise could not be placed. Indeed, such self-publication could stand as a fundamental test of creative seriousness—not just in pre-Gorby Russia, whose censorship was familiar, but in the United States as well. A further assumption I made at the time was that, in part because of the increasing number of aspiring young people entering every art, there would be a need in all the arts for "alternative institutions" simply to cope with the growing populace. (I still think this the most important cultural development of the 1970s, though disappointed in the policies and attitudes of those institutions that have survived.)

We advised our invited contributors to put their names on the faces of their work, as we ran no table of contents, and to center their contributions to the right, leaving at least



Figure 102. J. Nebraska Gifford, Photo collage of Richard Kostelanetz. Photograph © 1980 J. Nebraska Gifford.

an inch on the left-hand margin, because *Assembling* promised to collate the contents alphabetically (thereby avoiding invidious distinctions of placement). Since all copyrights, which are the literary form of “property,” were returned to the contributors, *Assembling* could make no money from subsequent republication. And once the thousand bound copies were gone, it would be impossible for us (or anyone else) to “reprint” the entire issue. For over a decade *Assemblings* were beautiful and thick (with one running to over 370 pages), with a wide variety of alternative artist/writers publishing at their best, unfettered by editorial authority.

We abrogated editorial authority not because we were rudderless or lazy (though we never agonized over whether something or someone would be “appropriate to our pages”), but because we wanted a compositional structure radically different from the restrictive, self-serving nature of traditional editorial processes. We wanted a genuine participatory democracy that successfully redistributed both initiative and responsibility. The only control left to us was the invitation itself, so that just as unfamiliar would-be collaborators were asked to show us examples of their work before receiving an invitation, so a few previous contributors were not invited again. The almost paradoxical reason was

not that we thought their work “no good,” whatever that might be, or that we wanted to impose a particular style or taste, but that their work was insufficiently unconventional, which is to say that it did not need *Assembling*. We were obliged, in principle, to keep the medium committed to alternative, “otherwise unpublishable,” imaginative work—a domain that was, to be sure, elastically defined.

We discovered that *Assembling* imposed a different creative psychology upon its artists and writers. A prospective contributor to a conventional magazine tries to blend into a circumscribed style and subject matter of that journal; he or she wants his or her work “to fit,” to please the editorial authorities. By contrast, a contributor to *Assembling* knew that, since “rejection” is not a worry, he or she was free to create something that will stand out. Rather than attempting to blend his or her work into the rest of the book, each contributor could compete, as aggressively as he or she wanted (and could afford), in technology and imagination; contributor freedom became, we found, a license to excel.

The resulting *Assemblings* confirmed our initial polemical point — both the book itself and its contents were unlike anything seen before. It also provided a radically different reading experience. Whereas most periodicals are designed to create uniform, uninterrupted reading, *Assembling* offers continual surprises from page to page— one contribution must be read, the next looked at; one is easily understood, another far more difficult. Furthermore, whereas most magazines come with an editorial imprimatur that implicitly suggests to readers that the material is good and thus worthy of attention, *Assembling* suggests only that its material is “otherwise unpublishable” and thus that the reader must decide how “good” any contribution is. Most readers will agree with our general assessment that, though

some contributions are extraordinary, much of it is junk. However, the editors are no more sure than any other reader which is which.

However, getting support for what we did was almost impossible, more than one granting agency scandalizing itself in the process. Since *Assembling* was much larger than other magazines, publishers who often doubled as grants-judges were envious; and the fact that our contributors paid to appear in our pages didn’t make them feel any better. Since we refused conventional editorial authority, *Assembling* was also different in ways that power-seeking personalities found unacceptable.

Though *Assembling* itself is not mentioned in any critical history of American literary magazines (other than my own) and recent similarly structured magazines never acknowledge its pioneering example, I was pleased to notice on p. 477 of Mike Crane and Mary Stofflet’s *Correspondence Art* (San Francisco, 1984) the results of a survey measuring which publications were most significant and had greatest influence. *Assembling* scored high in several categories.

The second failure of our dream has been the last step. We weren’t able to sell off the excess as easily as hoped for; and rather than destroy those copies—an unforgivable sin, given how much effort the contributors made—I have personally moved them through several storage places over the past dozen years, hoping (no, praying) that someday some dealer would take these off my hands, or that individual issues would finally sell out. All our copies of *Fourth Assembling* (1973) got lost somewhere, so I can’t even offer complete sets. What I can guarantee is that anyone picking up *Assembling* will find not only a model in the mail art spirit, but an alternative reading experience.