

Letters to UMBRELLA

Dear Editor:

While I have never seen a "letter to the editor" section in *Umbrella*, I hope you will find space to allow this mail artist the forum to communicate information of mutual interest.

Institutional Cheapism

First, I wish to inform the mail-art network that the administration at Santa Monica College refused to pay the foreign postage on *The Postman Always Rings Twice* catalogues; this responsibility and cost is being absorbed by Don Emery and me. The college did, however, splurge and cover the postage on 350 pieces of domestic mail, which under their permit cost 3½ cents each.

If you can't stand the heat Stay out of the Kitchen

There seems to be a financial epidemic permeating the mail-art network which if not stopped can damage future participation in mail-art shows, turning them into one-way streets of communication, a disease which prompted many correspondence artists to leave the traditional art scene initially. We simply got tired of being bled to death.

As mail artists we spend much time and money contributing our work "free of charge" to various shows. The only thing we expect in exchange is a catalogue "free of charge." This is the "two-way-street" philosophy of correspondence art.

Last year I received several invitations from "Mail Etc., Art" to submit work. I did—to all four locations. The invitation stated that a three-part color offset catalogue would be produced by participating institutions. There was no mention of money. Then, I get a letter stating that if I want a catalogue I should send \$5.95. That really pissed me off.

I wrote Bonnie Donohue, the show's organizer, stating that I didn't charge "Mail, Etc. Art" for my work, that the catalogue fee was not stated up front, and I expect a free catalogue.

A few weeks later I received my "free" catalogue in exchange for the free work which I sent. Also, included was an itemized statement from Bonnie listing the hours of free labor, car trips, postage, etc., which she put in.

I know what she's saying, and I sympathize with her. So, I jokingly listed the time that I spent on "The Postman Always Rings Twice" show catalogue and mailed one to her.

I feel that if a person is going to host a show and retain all of the work submitted it is his or her responsibility and duty to complete the circle of communication.

The disease spreads. Last week I received a card from ZM. Fariello of Alexandria, Tennessee stating, "Thank you for your contribution to the Red Hot Wimmin's Electric Energy Exchange Postal Art Exhibition. Our conference was a stimulating success. Catalogue for the exhibit will soon be available for a \$2.00 fee to cover printing and mailing." They stated their fee up front, and I wrote them with my piece that I don't pay fees. I also sent them a free SMC catalogue and am waiting an exchange to find out where they are at.

What I have to say to would-be curators who want to play mail-art and want everyone else to pay their way is that "If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen."

At least the people putting on the "Zero Panic Art About Energy Exhibition" in Austin, Texas are up front about their one-way street. They at least state that there is a fee of \$1

for the honor of sending them a piece of work. They also need a self-addressed stamped envelope. I sent them a piece anyway, but I'm seriously thinking of boycotting all future shows that have fees attached.

Thank You,
Lon Spiegelman



POSTCARDS FOR SALE, Amsterdam

Dear Judith:

First of all, I am not at all satisfied by all this Mail-Art thing: I just do it because I cannot see anything which comes nearer to my idea of a new role for a different "artist". I think (and I hope!) that also most of the more active mail-artists feel the ambiguity and the frailty of the *Eternal network* as it works now: there is a swarming variety of mail-art shows every month, and thousands of individuals spending money to keep an enormous amount of cards and envelopes circulating in the postal systems of half the countries of the world, but the network lacks completely a clear idea of what they are all doing and why. Of course, there is and should be a great deal of individual opinions and personal aims, but I noticed that hardly ever a mail-artist showed a consistent program for his work in connection with the medium he's operating in and with the work of all the other artists using the same medium. I can find only one example of a satisfying project which really emphasizes the new energies of the network: Cavellini's auto-historification. And you

know Cavellini is much more than a regular mail-artist, but I think he is also a great exploiter of the mail-art world, notwithstanding his concept of it. I feel that Cavellini's work is also important to understand what is going on in the official art world: the crisis of new ideas, the stagnation of the market, the absence of interesting new movements and figures (like Fluxus, Pop art, in the sixties; land art, performance and intermedia/video in the early seventies, etc...) is for me a signal of a big **change** by which artistic structures should operate, if they still want to mean something for the people living in this world now!

I was at the Biennale this year in Venice and I found it awfully uninformative: everything tasted of sterile repetition of things that maybe were stimulating in 1972. I already saw all that stuff in preceding editions of the Biennale, the so-called new "trans-avanguardist" painters (Bonito Oliva's proposal for the eighties) seem to me pretty outdated and not so good even technically, with all their carefully false naive approach. What I want to say is that today's art is a monstrous bureaucratic structure which, like many other big institutions, less and less succeeds in doing its work well: the ego-inflated artist produced expensive fetishes (safe investments?) for an elite of art-freaks, parasites and rich (tax-deductible) buyers. Okay, but these fetishes should be at least intelligent and innovative.

Speaking as a member of the art audience and as a reader of art magazines and a visitor of exhibitions, I find the contemporary outline of art trends desolate and artificial. Art is magic, after all. If art is supposed to serve humanity, it may reach at least a part of it. I am more interested in the musical "new wave" scene or in other extra-artistic expressions than in gallery art: I find it only unexciting and uninteresting.

I think the real importance of mail-art is opening a small hole in the wall of sterile contemporary art, a hole from which you may cast a glance on a future world where again the artist is a living expression of his age, working for better-looking houses, for better public spaces and environments, for a concrete creative contact with his audience through old and new media, magazines, festivals, archives, workshops, open courses, anything yet to be invented and for this more exciting. . .

I read carefully Ken Friedman's review of the *Mail, Etc., Art* catalog (as well as his piece on Cavellini in *Fuse*, July/August 1980). He sure is a clever guy and writes many correct things about mail-art, but like so many other scholars writing about this subject, he is narrow-minded and very limited about the great revolutionary power that is inside the concept of mail-art as a world-wide phenomenon. First of all, the stress in this expression is on a **two-way communication**, that would be enough to determine a radical change in the way of doing and divulging art. I particularly don't like all these mail-art shows, because they spoil mail art of one of its distinctive features and reduce it to just one more-ism in the list. Friedman and many like him are only searching for nice arty products to save from the big mass of trashy envelopes: they will find only a few "worth framing" rubberstamped compositions and maybe some intelligent conceptual pieces and interesting items. Okay, in that way they will **destroy** totally the real new utopic energy of mail-art. And, sadly enough, the mail-artists themselves

will be contented by a small reputation gained as after-Fluxus things, after-Dada or after-something else. I refuse to play this game, as I have refused to play the gallery/critic/merchant game. I am no left-wing dogmatic militant or pure utopian myself, so I don't mind if mail-artists try to sell their works or small editions at a high price, etc., or if they have a double-life in the official art world. I just don't like seeing all this terrible energy (tons of envelopes flying around the globe) wasted in a sort of perpetual masturbation, being exhibited with outdated rituals, hidden and forgotten inside cardboard boxes and drawers. . .

The lack of programs and real coordination among mail-artists generates confusion and ambiguities. So the whole thing maybe will die of exhaustion like a young and strong body without a head, or with hundreds of small lazy heads. On the other hand, as I and Cavellini and maybe someone else believes, mail art may potentially generate **new cultural strategies** for a new world, after the third World War, after the big change that is due to happen inside and outside art. Cavellini is ironically the last of the Great Artists. Friedman is unfair comparing him to Mussolini: GAC knows perfectly well that the world will not stop after his "self-historification" and art will live again under different forms. Friedman completely misunderstood GAC's philosophy. Cavellini is like a divide between the old and the new. If Cavellini makes it to prove himself "the greatest," then the world is ready for the big change. There is no ego-art after the Cavellini ego-exploiting project has proved with the facts that the world is full of fake geniuses and fake heroes.

I think it is not accidental that Bill Gaglione, Anna Banana, Buster Cleveland and other mail-artists recognized the importance of GAC. Anna Banana's projects, by the way, are interestingly oriented towards the real participation of the audience to the happy rite of art (the street-parades, the Banana Olympics): "the spirit of Dada finally realized," as Cavellini told me. I organized my "Badge Show" this year as a parody of traditional exhibitions: I will walk through the streets with all the badges received on white overalls. I just try different approaches to the network: I print the magazine (*Arte Postale*) in 100 copies so I can receive original works and save money, and also produce a more open vehicle of ideas. I want to print also a different magazine with a larger circulation (1000-2000 copies) to involve different kinds of people: to receive grants in Italy is almost impossible so I'll have to wait when I can gather enough money.

I am working completely *alone* here, 500 addresses and all the rest are a big task: I waste a lot of money in printing leaflets and magazines, distributing postcards, original works and all kinds of things. I hope it is not all useless. Sure, I'd like to open an archive. I have thousands of projects I will never realize, but life is also worth living for many other things! . . .

I don't think I am exactly an artist; I don't want to produce better canvases or better visual poems. . . I want to **change something**. I hope you understand .

Ciao,

Vittore Baroni

Vittore Baroni is one of the most dedicated mail-artists in Italy, editor of a monthly magazine called *Arte Postale*. His address is Via Raffaelli 2, 55042 Forte dei Marmi, Italy. He wrote the above in perfect English!