

# **Postal History and Network Art**

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Postal history scholarship fuels understanding of important cultural changes. Artists who utilize global networked technologies are increasingly historicizing postal history in network art through the work of New York artist Ray Johnson (1927-1995), known as the father of mail art. New media arts scholars historicize the mails as a global network technology preceding and concurrent with the telegraph, radio (wireless), television, computers, and virtual worlds. Disparate disciplines of art history, history of technology, media theory and cultural heritage combine to locate postal history as an ideational principle of new media arts, specifically in network art.

Network art uses any type of network as a primary aesthetic element and is often referred to by its contemporary meme, net.art. Although net.art tends to refer to Internet related art, its broader definition provides art historical context; the term “network art” is used here. Examples of network art can be traced through the recent scholarship on new media art. One cultural investigation considered canonical in new media art is *Electronic Café-84* by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz. The work is described as follows:

“The mailbox-project Electronic Café was set up by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz in 1984 on the occasion of the Olympic Games in Los Angeles. In six different city neighborhoods were media Cafés in which the local residents were linked up by a teleconference system and a mailbox. This ‘gallery without walls’ in which pictures and stories could be exchanged, was meant to bring together in dialogue the residents of the ethnically diverse neighborhoods.”<sup>1</sup>

*Electronic Café-84* used the polarization of official and non-official Olympic activities as a foil with which to activate cultural discourse within the host city. Both class and ethnic diversity were key factors in shaping the work. The work used experimental technology, refined and understandable to new users.

“The project, commissioned by the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art as an official event of the Olympic Arts Festival, constructed a seven-week shared network among five family-owned restaurants in the Korean, Hispanic, African, and beach communities of the less glamorous regions of Celebrity City, areas that would otherwise remain untouched by the Olympics.”<sup>2</sup>

The output of the work was a powerful statement on the idealism of the Olympics versus the ethnically conflicted tensions in the city. The artists themselves describe the unique cultural interaction:

“Ana Coria: A lot of people from Central America over in the Boil Heights would input, people who were totally separated from their culture, some who’d been tortured and what not, lost people, they put in poems about people they loved and photographs and the community - it was basically the community image.

Kit Galloway: Gang members in East L.A. - they had their own wall, “This’ll be our wall - you don’t put your stuff on our wall” and gangs were showing their secret handshakes to gang members in other parts of the city.”<sup>3</sup>

*Electronic Café-84* mirrored the ideal of a multi-ethnic and international community.

Framing *Electronic Café-84* in the context of the Cold War at its height to its eventual dramatic conclusion in Europe in 1989 and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 is significant. At a minimum, it heralded the beginning of an age when computer

mediated communications, email, and Internet would become possible, popularized, and commonplace.

Scholarship in network art reveals evidence of robust political activities on a global scale beyond the Internet and computer mediated communications and with parallel and similar consequences. The nexus between postal history and network art has been established by art historians.

“Particularly interesting . . . is that a type of art developed from the Fluxus movement which can be considered a precursor to many telecommunications and Internet projects: mail art. The Correspondence School of Art which was founded in 1962 by Ray Johnson has dedicated itself to art representation and distribution through the letter post.”<sup>4</sup>

Ray Johnson’s was pioneering experimentation with network media in an age when media arts (film, video, performance, multimedia, and computers) were considered avant garde.

The early mail art network used experimental media:

“Johnson created radical experimental media works that helped lay the foundation of network art. Johnson’s ‘school’ became the seed of the international mail art movement. This postal network developed by artists explored nontraditional media.”<sup>4</sup>

More importantly, mail artists began to use the letter post in a new and unique way: as a medium and a distribution network. The influence of Fluxus on the both the early evolution of mail art and intermedia is well documented today. However postal history artifacts of the early Mail Art Network remain a fertile territory better known to art historians than

scholars of postal history. Early mail artists such as Ray Johnson considered the mailbox to be the museum, raising the value of correspondence and mailed objects as objects of art. Johnson and his contemporaries conceptually redefined the mails both as a medium and as distribution channel for art. This conceptual anti-establishment gesture within the art world has many parallels with other media arts of the 1960s-1970s. New mail art networks often directly reference Fluxus, and the culture of the early mail art networks. [Figure 1].



*Figure 1. Contemporary mail art piece with references to Fluxus, early mail art network, and artistamps.*

Renewed interest in mail art networks despite and largely due to widely available Internet media is another case for further study. Mail art in the contemporary scene recodifies the past to be contemporaneous with the present and it provides an alternative strategy for dialogic activity. It is now the case that Internet networks are the new normal, and postal history studies are a uniquely alternative path to make a statement about our fascination with networking and connectivity.

A second important link exists between mail art and the political realm: artistamps.

Artistamps or cinderellas can be thought of as the symbolic refinements of anti-establishment mail art. Artistamps represent political potential, and formalize non-traditional cultural discourse. Artistamps are often direct parodies of postage stamps, but they can also be fantastic fictions or simply irreverent. Thus artistamps can function as overt political commentary, as casual references to cultural discourse, or as symbolic of imagined states. Direct metaphors of imaginary worlds in the conceptual sense can be invoked. From J.R.R. Tolkien's "Middle Earth" to Lewis Carroll's "Wonderland" to the Star Trek universe, escapist fantasy worlds have long held the literary and artistic imagination. The logic of these constructed fictional worlds reveal interdependent systems, politics, and economics, bringing the reader into a cohesive understandable milieu. The format and formalism of artistamps mirrors the technical formalism of postal history technical scholarship. There is now a cinderella division on major stamp shows in the United States, providing a path for further postal history study in this area especially in connection with early mail art networks.

Postal history scholarship recognizes formal qualities that categorize geographic, and cultural factors as well as technological means. A direct relationship is drawn between postal history and contemporary art history as metanarratives of the modern and postmodern industrial and information ages, respectively:

"Technology is connected in a specific way with what is called progress and thus, also with power. At present, computers and their networks are the focus of attention. Both the individual machine for processing storing and sending data and its transnational connections are systems for calculating. They are still systems in

the mechanical tradition although they operate with sophisticated electronics and programs. For a hallmark of mechanical systems is that the processes they run must be capable of formalization – it is immaterial whether these are digital or analogue.

Art, too, has various dimensions that can be formalized.”<sup>6</sup>

Postal history and network art can be thought of as a powerful hybrid, or mixtum compositum, an emergent form in interdisciplinary new media art:

“Media art is a strange mixtum compositum. On the one side, the compound noun denoted two things that are very close, rather obviously so. All art requires media for it to be perceived by others. On the other hand, media art has been developed over recent decades to describe a specific concept of cultural praxis. From this perspective, the mixtum compositum contains two elements that are far apart and strives to fuse the different worlds into one.”<sup>7</sup>

In investigations of postal history as in new media arts scholarship, cultural discourse in global networked environments forms an interdisciplinary basis for historiography within the social public sphere. The case in point is revealed by recent scholarship in mail art and the special case of Eastern Europe.

Recent scholarship on mail art points to mail art in the 1970s and 1980s as having a “special function for Eastern Europe,”<sup>8</sup>. In Poland, USSR, Hungary and elsewhere behind the Iron Curtain, the conditions for creative communication outside official channels was very different than in the West, but nonetheless, mail art carried with it international ideals regarding freedom of speech, human rights and democracy:

“the Mail Art Network was based on the principle of self-organization and had the ability to create alternatives - which corresponded to the widely shared notion of democracy among its participants. It is thus not surprising that in the U.S., Canada and Western Europe, Mail Art became a mass phenomenon and a countercultural form of expression.”<sup>9</sup>

Artists themselves have spoken out about the conditions in Eastern Europe. “Under communist rule all duplicating and printing were strictly controlled and not available for public and private usage.”<sup>10</sup> This would have been the exact opposite of the conditions for cultural discourse experienced by participants in Los Angeles in *Electronic Café-84*, but can be reinterpreted in the contemporary context of global networks. As to the social effectiveness of mail art networks in Eastern Europe, their psychological impact was felt: “It was very exciting to suddenly have a chance to participate in a world in which the Iron Curtain did not exist.”<sup>11</sup> The specific mail art correspondence between Ray Johnson and György Galantai in Hungary and in the United States brought ideas on networks and political art as postmodern aesthetic subjects to Eastern Europe in this period.<sup>12</sup>

Postal history helps frame technology history and is inherently interpreted through the global context of world history. Postal historians use these contexts as culturally significant backdrops to investigations of postal artifacts. As with network art, postal history studies can create social sculpture and bring global cultural attitudes into relief.

Footnotes:

1 Baumgartel, T. "Net Art: On the History of Artistic Work with Telecommunications Media." In *Net\_Condition*, eds. P. Weibel and T. Druckrey. MIT Press, 1999.

2 Chandler, A. "Animating the Social: Mobile Image/Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz." In *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*. Eds. A. Chandler and N. Neumark. MIT Press, 2005.

3 Chandler, "Animating the Social".

4 Baumgartel, "Net Art."

5 Kac, E. *Telepresence and Bio Art*. University of Michigan Press, 2005.

6 Zielinski, S. *Deep Time of the Media*, MIT Press, 2006.

7 Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media*.

8 Röder, K. *Topology and Functionality of the Mail Art Network and Its Specific Significance for Eastern Europe between 1960 and 1989*, trans. T. Oster, Salon Verlag, 2008.

9 Röder, *Topology and Functionality of the Mail Art Network and Its Specific Significance for Eastern Europe between 1960 and 1989*.

10 Patesz, P. "Mail Art in Poland." In *Eternal Networks*, ed. C. Welch. University of Calgary Press, 1995.

11 Patesz, "Mail Art in Poland."

12 Röder, *Topology and Functionality of the Mail Art Network and Its Specific Significance for Eastern Europe between 1960 and 1989*.