



A STRANGE CRACKER

Al Ackerman

Mail Art Pulp Hero

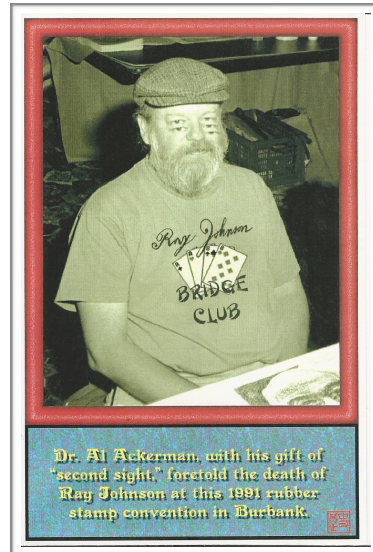
18 Letters to Crackerjack Kid, 1980-1989

Robert Creeley's Eye, Mail Art Blender Death,
The Hebephrenic Cult Hero, Modern Mail
Art, Luddites for Remington Uprights,
Tragic News About My Navel, and other
correspondences.

Strange Letters

The Mail Art Archival Index of Chuck Welch, 1978-2000

Al Ackerman: Mail Art Pulp Hero



Correspondences 1972-1990s

Al “Blaster” Ackerman, poet, writer, and legendary mail artist was born in 1939 in Corpus Christi, Texas. He spent most of his youth reading and writing for pulp magazines, *Weird Tales*, *Trilling Wonder*, *Planet*, and “confession rags.” The famous sci-fi pulp mystery writer, Fredric Brown told Ackerman to “try to be lucky enough to work in a despised medium.” That notorious advice may have been the incentive behind Ackerman’s interest in mail art, or it may have been when Ackerman read Thomas Albright’s 1972 *Rolling Stone* article, “Correspondence Art.”

Ackerman was quoted in his 1990 interview with Dutch mail artist, Ruud Janssen: “To me, the whole mail art thing seemed like an ideal way to realize my long-cherished pulp dream, that is, to do a lot of fundamentally rapid work and use a lot of different pseudonyms and not make a dime.” Ackerman claimed to have attended twelve schools in Texas, Monterey, Mexico, Kyoto, Japan and elsewhere. He also claimed as many pen names and mail art pseudonyms in his lifetime of writing. His quoted interests in an unusual biography submitted to Chaw Mank’s “Let’s Talk About You! Ackerman wrote, My interests are mail, history of science fiction, editing strange personal publications, AE, roadhouse cooking, collecting pulp mags, 14 SECRET MASTERS OF THE WORLD, 1944 big band jazz, Lovecraftiana, EC, Philip K. Dick, beer-drinking, playing Tom Mix radio tapes, lurking and peering, early Valery, Chas Williams, models of Atlantic City, betting on the ponies, staying indoors for days at a time and wearing two-toned shoes.”

Correspondences (18) 1981-1989

Letter 1, May 1981, Subject: Scrub Duds and Detention Study Hall Context: Crackerjack Kid, a high school art instructor between 1974-1984, had been assigned an hour each day to oversee “In House Suspension,” a quiet study room filled with students who violated school rules. Kid kept a visual drawing log filled with contour drawings of various students while they slept, studied, or killed time looking at the ceiling. His rationale was to get to know these “detention” students by asking for various opinions about their infractions and to include their comments below each drawing. A second subject in Ackerman’s letter relates to *Material Metamorphosis*, a mail art project whereby Kid invited artists like Ray Johnson (father of mail art), to deliver their favorite piece of clothing along with a brief note about the significance of their object. All participants were advised that their donation of dearest clothing would be shredded and metamorphosed into sheets of handmade paper stationery.



Claude Balls Stamp
Portrait by Al
Ackerman

Dear Cracker Jack, It’s W. B. Yeats & Basil Rathbone’s Birthday. So it’s a Holiday Day eh? Thanks for your mail, I’ve been going through your packet with pleasure. As a matter of fact Lon (Spiegelman)¹ had already interested me in your ground-up-duds project and I’d got some beautiful old 100% cotton hospital scrubs set aside — so all it’s waiting for now is sufficient \$’s & ¢’s for postage which I should have scraped together before long, if I don’t drink it up first. In the mean time, here’s my most recent self-portrait, at age 17 (CLAUDE BALLS). Years ago I did this sort of thing in hitch school for dance posters etc. and the posters always stayed up just long enough for the vice-principal or dean of girls to tear them down, about an hour. It’s always been like that. Tell your students to keep up the good work + maybe one day they’ll reach this pinnacle, eh? (i.e., pinnacle between whether to buy postage or a bottle).

Letter 2, Robert Creeley’s Eye, October 1, 1981 “C.J., You say Ray Johnson sent an article of apparel for your Project? (Reference to CrackerJack’s *Material Metamorphosis Commonpress Edition*. Good. How many years has it been since I last heard from that crazy bastard? Seven? Eight? I have quite a few good Ray Johnson stories... He once told me that he’d said he wanted to stick his tongue in Robert Creeley’s eye, but he never said

¹ Lon Spiegelman (b. 1941 d. 2002) Lon Spiegelman, a close friend of Al Ackerman, was an important West Coast mail art correspondent and central force in the mail art movement’s golden age. In 1984, Spiegelman guest edited a “mail art issue” for Judith Hoffberg’s *Umbrella Magazine*, a controversial issue that Spiegelman dedicated entirely to the NYC Franklin Furnace Mail Art Exhibition in which curator, Dr. Ronnie Cohen, deleted artwork from the Furnace’s walls after having agreed that all work would be shown. The event was mail art’s most public demonstration against the art establishment in New York City. Spiegelman’s *Umbrella* issue is arguably the most famous published effort devoted entirely to the International Mail Art Movement.

which eye.² He (Johnson) once played a good trick on The Northwest Mounted Valise (Stu Horn), using me as unwitting catspaw, when Stu and Woofy Bubbles came to spend a week with us at old Gnome Club HQ in Houston, Texas. If you have any correspondence with him, you might casually mention how you understand that he once met Rain rein in the rain. Heh. (Don't tell him where you heard it). Well, nine o'clock in here — time to head downtown for library; my long article, "The Thing in the Barn," about why I think mail is a lot like sic-fi, is taking more research than I expected. Then, too, I have to get week's marketing done and answer tons of mail, etc. But first (first things first indeed!) I want to smoke one of these funny little cigarettes."

Letter 3, Chaw Mank, 1982 "Cracker, I read Chaw Mank's³ column "You Ask and I'll Tell."

Letter 4, Pauline's "Adolph Hitler Fan Club Flower Box," and Various Other Collected Oddities, 1982 "Hi Dear C.J. - The brain arrived unscathed, in one piece. Put it in place of honor on top of the old radio cabinet in middle room — our black museum, so to speak — along with other precious items, Jim Haining's "Tooth Powder Jar," H. G. Lessee's little dolly's arm emerging from the oreo cookie, (Rhoda) Mappo's Abortion Puppet with real steel claws, Pauline Pauline Smith's Adolph Hitler Fan Club Flower Box, the grinning redheaded Will Greenhouse Vent Dummy, etc. (The tiny styrofoam penis in box you sent, that was almost lost before I saw it when Patty, who was opening the package, Patty laughed so hard she blew it right out of its box and onto the labyrinth messy deeply hebephrenic table top which is simultaneously our work space/ dining area...things have disappeared forever into that cluttered landscape... miraculously however we were able to locate it after only short search — about forty-five minutes all it took—). So thanks for the two brains...and I trust the Laughing Postman Hebephrenic, Part I reached you there o.k.?"

Letter 5, Mail Art Blender Death by Establishment Smoothies, 1982 "Dear C.J., I have never worried too much about whether mail art was going the way of the establishment. It's probably something I'll address myself to when I have enough research done and start writing my "Thing in the Barn" article....Right now the work of Ray Johnson is about the limit to which the contemporary market extends. I think Ray would tell you himself that it's very poor pay for the years and work he's put into it. I could be wrong about all this of course, but if I was going to pick something to worry

² Robert Creeley was an American poet and author of more than sixty books. He is usually associated with the Black Mountain poets, though his verse aesthetic diverged from that school's. Ray Johnson attended Black Mountain College from 1945-1948.

³ Chaw Mank, father of movie fan clubs and a mentor to Al Ackerman and David Zack, both often quoted Mank in their mail art correspondences.



“Eel Leonard Fan Club” Envelope art by Al Ackerman dated July 13, 1982

“Hi C.J., I don’t know a word of Chinese, only a little Japanese, but the old gentleman who runs a store down the street where I buy those little black mushroom, wrote it out in Chinese for me on a card I did: “Teaching a Crow to Read.” The way you teach a crow to read is by turning him loose in a room and then open a book and hold it high over your head so that, being a crow, he naturally lies head-on into it -Crunch! Again and again. And by and by, I’m assured of this, he learns how to read. Whether he retains much of what he reads is something I never found out. Hm. Anyway, I imagine you’ll recognize the system from your years on the front lines there at the school eh?”

Letter 8, A Big White Worm Anthology, January 1982 “Thanks for the handsome seaweed paper stamps, Have already started sticking them on my envelopes. Presently, foolishly, I’m in the process of assembling a big *White Worm Anthology*. Got any good White Worm stories? I’ll be collecting them lil the end of the month...Today, when I dropped by my p.o. box there was a pink slip (for mail too large for the box) addressed to “White Worm.” Heh, you should have seen the lady behind the P.O. counter when I handed it to her. “Is this for real?” she wanted to know and of course I put on my best demeanor, severe and dignified, and said yes, yes, “I’m a limnobiologist and this is for a book I’m doing on the effects of renal cement on intracellular parasitic organisms etc.” She became very impressed and scurried away to fetch my mail too large for the box. Never underestimate the power of limbobiology, CJ. Or renal cement, either, for that matter”.

Letter 9, More About Teaching Crows How to Read, February 1982 News arrived from Al Ackerman about an ongoing hospital strike where he worked. Also a story about his wife, Patty’s “Reading Is Fun” campaign at their daughter’s school. and word about

railroad boxcar graffiti artist, Russell “BuZ Blurr” Butler passing along a postcard about “Teaching A Crow To Read.”



“The Hebeephrenic Appears to the Yellow Kid” Al Ackerman, color copier of original cartoon drawing

Letter 10, Modern Mail Art, April 1983 In his opening correspondence lines, Ackerman made reference to Mexican mail artist, David Zack’s MODERN MAIL ART manuscript, a book that was never finished or published. Ackerman was also writing a very long article called “The Thing in the Barn,” which Ackerman explained as “why I think mail art is a lot like sci-fi.” He continued, It should take me about 7 years to do it. I’m up to part III now, dealing with the “private” as opposed to “public” mail sectors. Though I’d use as epigram for III a little prose piece out of Kafka.”

Letter 11, Irreverent & Crazed in Spades, April 1983 Kid informed Al Ackerman that their mutual friend, David Zack, had described him as “an irreverent, crazed beast.” Ackerman responded, “As far as being “crazed goes, what does that mean? If it means subscribing to Don Marquis’s description of what he hoped his old age would be like: “Between the

years of ninety-two and a hundred and two, however, we shall be the ribald, useless, drunken, outcast person we have always wished to be—”, then yeah, I’m crazed, I’m crazed in spades...

Letter 12, Tragic News About My Navel, 1984 Context: In late 1984, Crackerjack Kid began collecting plaster navel casts, a correspondence project lasting twenty years in which Kid asked and received navel castings in plaster from Anna Banana, John Cage, Buster Cleveland, Ray Johnson, and many others associated with mail art. Kid dubbed the project his *Mail Art Navel Academy*. and three North American chapters were established by him in New York City, Los Angeles, and Calgary. When asked for a contribution, Al Ackerman deferred with this letter.

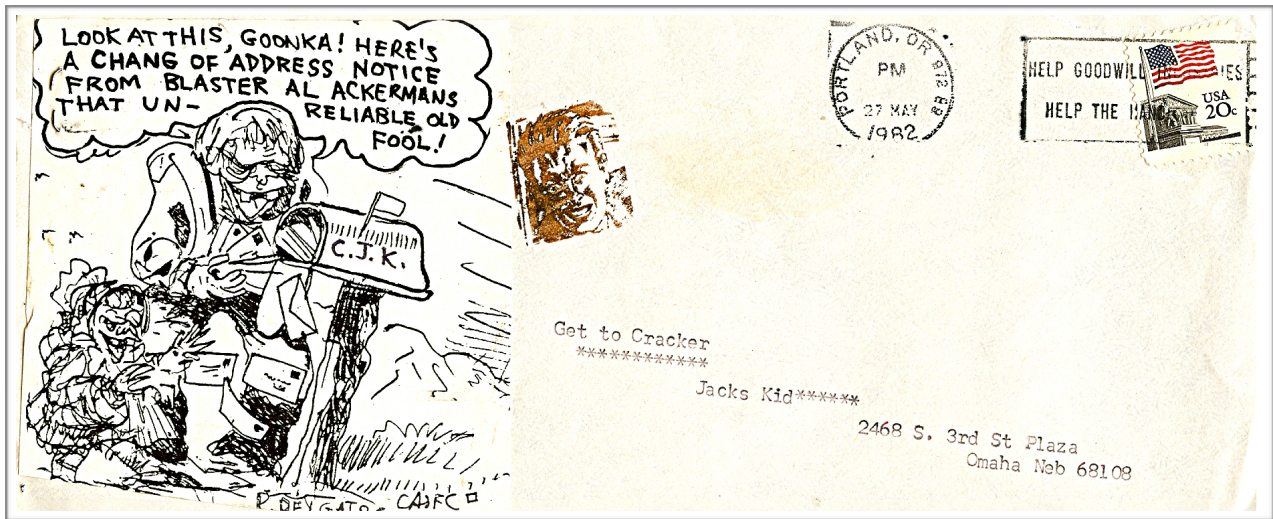
“Chuck, “I believe that I already sent you tragic details about my navel, eh? No time to go into it again here as I’ve got my hands full battling rat worshippers!”

Letter 13, Rat Fritten, 1984 Most of Ackerman’s letter is devoted to “rat-fritten” newspaper article about busting a large rat coven in a Liverpool-road lodging house. News also relates to the late Eric Finlay (d.1996), a British art instructor, printmaker, and painter known as a first generation mail artist whose correspondences were laced with humor, wit, and prankish wordplay. Ackerman wrote having had some “wordplay

with Finlay,” and “Eric has his own unique style of batting out a poem. My guess is he bats them out while hanging upside down in his closet...His work lies far outside the possibility of parody. I’m fairly certain that he was dead-serious about seeing himself as the real, true Old Adam of Correspondance. Well, that’s ok; everybody should have that title. My title is The Hall Porter of Correspondance. Michael Leigh over at A-1 Waste paper Products wrote me not long ago that his title is The Sandwich King of Correspondance. Etc. No end to it, once you get started.” Ackerman confessed, as he often did as a “con-jest” job via correspondance - he confessed to frequently wearing a pillow case while doing his mail.

Letter 14, The Persistence of Navel Memories, November 1985 Cracker Jack Kid’s requests for Al Ackerman’s navel resulted in a lengthy reply by Ackerman aimed at putting Kid’s persistent requests to rest. “I am in receipt of your latest, shall we say, obsessive fixation or jones on having my navel or a facsimile thereof within your clutches to perform God knows what unspeakable acts on it in the privacy of your temple or navel academy there or of, if I read your ribbon right. I hope you won’t become like the dissolute and irresponsible Thrush Liebnitz who lived next door to me at the Palm Hotel when I sojourned there for a few hellish months. Thrush, as I keep trying to tell you, blames a virtual slave to her unnatural desires viz a viz navels, chiefly mine — today, the poor crazed thing is running an uptown Manhattan Art Gallery (!) and has sunk so low certain mutual acquaintances have informed that she no long uses dope. For god’s sake, Chuck, mend your ways & get back on the straight and narrow, stop debauching yourself with this plethora of belly buttons and remember there are healthier ways by far to spend your time when you slip over the edge into passion’s Chateau D’if or dungeon. The smart money is coming belatedly to realize that belly buttons, and not the \$30,000-a-month ether habit, is man’s worst enemy”

Letter 15, Official and Unofficial, October 1986 In early 1986, Crackerjack Kid wrote *Networking Currents: Mail Art Subjects & Issues*, a pioneering book about mail art as a networking alternative to mainstream art. Upon receiving the book, Ackerman wrote to Kid, “Thanks for NETWORKING CURRENTS. I’ve been tied up doing tv work and am just now getting a chance to catch up on my reading and so far have been able to read your book in only a very general, skimming way, although some of it (the WNYC Radio Broadcasts) I’ve already seen. Ackerman offered his opinions concerning “Official” and “Unofficial” histories of mail art stating that “it’s a good deal more complicated than that.” He continued, “About the closest I can come to it (and, I suspect, the closest anyone can come, if they’re interested in being honest and not just simply flogging their favorite myth) is to say that any statement I make about the nature of the beast as it existed prior to 1972, which is when Stumbled into the field, is consistently open to question, and that any statement I make about it as it has existed after 1972 will probably be no worse than anybody else’s fragmentary map or prejudice. So much for historical surveys...Anyhow, I admire how you can persist and manage to get a book out at all.”



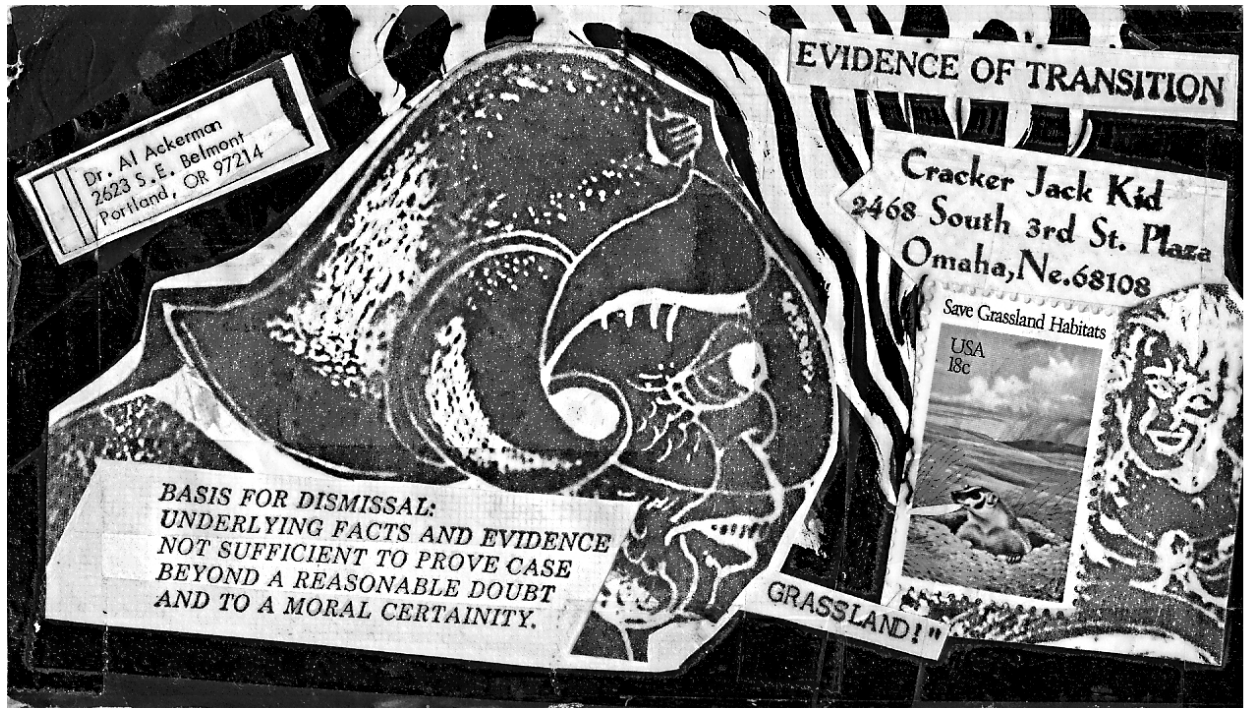
“Get To Cracker Jacks Kid,” Envelope Art by Al Ackerman, May 1982

Letter 16, Brave Soul Who Ate the First Oyster, April 1989 Kid wrote Ackerman for original art to accompany a new book about mail art. Ackerman generously offered to send work and reminded Kid, “You’re welcome to use any of them (drawings) as I retain all rights to my stuff. Any you do use I would appreciate you crediting the original publication in which it appeared — like the brave soul who ate the first oyster the publications that use my stuff first, deserve credit at least for temerity is my feeling.”

Letter 17, Luddites for Remington Uprights, May 1989 “Dear Chuck — Thanks for your letter and the new stamps. I’ll look forward to the stuff appearing even though you say how the post office botched up your floppy disc. When I do work occasionally in TV they’re always trying to get me to use floppy discs but as the president of the SW Chapter of Luddites Internationale I steadfastly refuse and just go on delivering my typescripts as I always have, double-spaced and written on this ancient Remington upright. “That’s what you got secretaries for” is what I tell the tv boys when it comes to transcribing stuff onto the insidious floppy discs.”

Crackerjack Kid gave an account of how his car had been smashed in while parked in a curbside space. Ackerman wrote, “But this person who you say was able to smash their door into your car even though you two were the only ones on the street. These people have a sense or instinct not unlike a homing pigeon or a killer drone, that is, no matter where you park your car or how deserted it is these people can come from miles away and unerringly home in on your car with their door. Just as the heart’s kick is to beat and the bowel’s kick is to move so these people’s kick is to drive for miles across the country in all sorts of inclement weather and smash their door into the side of your car. They’re like a special species and there’s probably a special name for them if we but knew it (the ILLUMINATI may tell what is is but I’m not sure having never read the

ILLUMINATI books.) Anyway, the best thing you can do, seeing as how it's impossible to evade these "smashers," as we'll call them, the best thing to do is to carry a Magnum. 357 in your hip pocket. Then, when they smash their door into your car, bring out at them, brandish your Magnum and cry, "You! You killed Trotsky with your ice pick!" then proceed to dart about their vehicle firing your Magnum into their tires till the chambers are all empty. Jump back into your (dented) car and as you're driving away, shout back at them, "I'm Mark Bloch and don't you forget it!" It's really the only way." Post Commentary - bad advice now that road rage dominates parking lots and highways everywhere.



"Basis for Dismissal," Envelope Art by Al Ackerman, 1982

Letter 18, Running in the Cracks, October 1989 Context: Kid requested Ackerman's participation in two mail art projects, a Neoist poetry cassette add-on project titled *Art Strike Mantra*, and a life-size handmade paper skull casting of Shozo Shimamoto, one of Japan's most influential Gutai artists of the post WWII era. Ackerman had to decline Kid's offer, "These days I'm doing things more or less on the run and in the cracks: I can still manage to toss off an envelope or a drawing or a letter as the impulse seizes me, but full-blown projects — anything requiring more than one fast sitting — no, I can't right now. But thanks for thinking of me."

*Other items by Al Ackerman (File 1) in The Eternal Network Mail Art Archival Index, Postcards (14) 1981-1984; Envelope Art (5) 1982-1985; Copier Art (12) 1981-1982; Mail Art Projects (1) 1982; Zines (3) 1982-1989; Miscellaneous items (6) 1981-1989.

