

Mail Art

By Marit Barentsen

What is mail art? When FEATURING announced a call for mail art it turned out that you too, did not quite know what mail art is. “What do you mean with mail art, do you mean envelope art?” one asked. Finding a definition for mail art is not that easy. We do know that the artist Ray Johnson (1927-1995) – who can be associated with the Fluxus art movement – founded the ‘New York Correspondence School of Art’ in 1962 and is thus seen as the founder of the mail art movement that developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Its aim was to create the opportunity for the direct exchange of art, ideas and information among artists in different countries without interference from art dealers or galleries.



Ruud founded the “International Union of Mail-Artists” (IUOMA), which is still active in the mail-art network. Ruud seemed to be exactly the person I needed to shine a light on the mail art movement and he kindly agreed to an interview. Before we talked about mail art though, I asked Ruud to tell a bit about himself and his background.

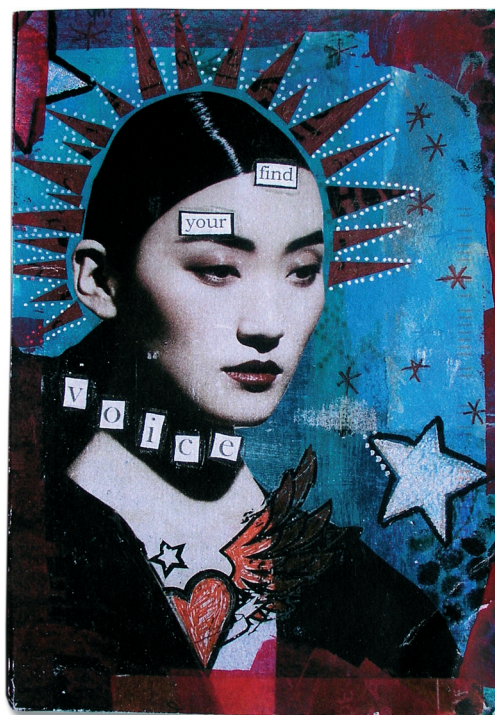
“As a child I had to choose between Art Academy and Technical Physics. I choose the latter with a



The name ‘mail art’ made it already clear that it had something to do with sending art via the postal system, but that is still a bit vague. Is sending a homemade postcard to a friend mail art?

While I was looking for more information on the subject, a variety of mail started to arrive at FEATURING’s headquarters. The diversity showed that the subject ‘mail art’ can be widely interpreted indeed: stamped and collaged cards and envelopes, original art pieces, decorated packages, stenciled brochures, a framed drawing made with lemon juice, a music CD, a tin lid with our address on it, cards made from wood, cardboard, fabric – the fact that it all found its way and was safely delivered was amazing in itself!

Meanwhile, I had stumbled upon the name Ruud Janssen, a Dutch Fluxus and mail artist. In 1988,





quite specific reason..." Ruud begins. "At college I was already drawing and painting on another level compared to the 'ordinary' pupil but I decided that I wanted to learn a profession that would generate an income so I would be free in my art. These days, I am a chairman for an IT college in Breda, the Netherlands."

When and where did you first encounter mail art?

I must have seen an exhibition of Donald Evans in the 70s at an art gallery in Tilburg. I was already involved with correspondence as a child, and so my regular correspondence gradually was taken over with creative communication in the beginning of the 80s. In 1983, I sent my first letter to Guy Bleus in Belgium to ask if he knew how large this network was. He in return sent me his complete address list from which I could start. I wrote more and received more. After intensifying the contacts with the mail-art network, I also started meeting people and doing projects.

How would you define mail art?

I would not define mail-art. That is the clearest answer. I have tried over decades to gather all kinds of definitions. I even started the definition on Wikipedia years ago. But times and views change. Participants want to write down the unwritten rules, and that causes problems because unwritten means that they are interpretable in many ways.

You've started with mail art in a time before the Internet was extensively used. How did you get in contact with other mail art artists?

It is quite simple, by networking. In the mail art community, catalogs with address lists are sent to participants of mail art projects. That brings a wealth of new addresses. Every new catalog generates new contacts. Also when you issue a zine (like my *TAM bulletin*), everybody starts to send you his or her latest information. News travels fast in the traditional mail-art network and networking then is not that much different from how it is now.



Normally the rate of building a network is equivalent to the energy you send out. So things can go very quick. Or slow. In the 80s, I invested a lot of energy, so the network I knew then was intense. In the first decade of this century, I spend a lot of time making digital connections and that makes my digital network also quite large.

Now that you have mentioned the TAM bulletin... for years now, you are building on the TAM Rubber Stamp Archive – can you tell something more about that?

I started the TAM Rubberstamp archive in 1983, not long after I got connected to the mail-art network.



I was fascinated by the creative use of rubber stamps so I thought out the concept of sending out half-sized A4 papers with the invitation on it to send in prints of the rubber stamps mail-artists used. Besides the prints also the original rubber stamps are collected, but for archival purposes, a print is the best way to keep a visual memory alive. Besides the 'normal' bureaucratic stamps, many mail-artists order special creative rubber stamps or even make eraser carved stamps themselves. The sheets are sent out with almost all of the outgoing mail-art. Not all sheets are returned, but in the last 30 years, over 30,000 sheets came back. Because of the historical value of the prints, the collection becomes more interesting with the years. In 1996 a first exhibition was held in San Francisco. Later exhibits took place in 2004, in Moscow, and in 2010 at the Stendhal Gallery in downtown Manhattan, New York.

“News travels fast in the traditional mail-art network”

In 1988 you founded the “International Union of Mail-Artists” (IUOMA) that still is active today. What was your intention, and did it turn out the way you were hoping for?

I consider the IUOMA as a conceptual artwork I thought out in 1988. I played with names for the network and decided to call it the IUOMA (International Union of Mail-Artists). The concept is the same now as it was then. Mail-Artists become a member just by declaring that they are a member. Leaving the IUOMA is also simple. The mail-artists just declare that they are no longer members of the IUOMA. It just works like that. If you claim to be a member, you can also claim a role inside the Union. For myself I claimed the role of General-President, which has an impressive sound to it.

Some may think there is a hidden agenda to all of this and that I claim to be the leader of the IUOMA. It is not a leader role though. I am the owner of the name and concept. However, all members are free in their roles and their work and in the way they want to use the name to support their work. There





lies the secret. People who don't know what the mail-art network is and wonder how it works start to look for the organization's structure. The IUOMA gives an illusion that there is a structure and sometimes mail-artists like to use this name of the structure to do projects or actually to gain funds of prestige. It is all allowed.

In the 80s and 90s it was a paper union. All paperwork was done with computers, but all was sent by regular mail. The IUOMA evolved as the digital communication forms came up. In 2008, the IUOMA got its own social network where now 2700+ members are registered. All kinds of mail-art projects are done inside and outside this social network. The concept is 25 years old now. Somehow the name is still alive and well, and there are still a lot of artists out there that say that they are a member of the IUOMA.



