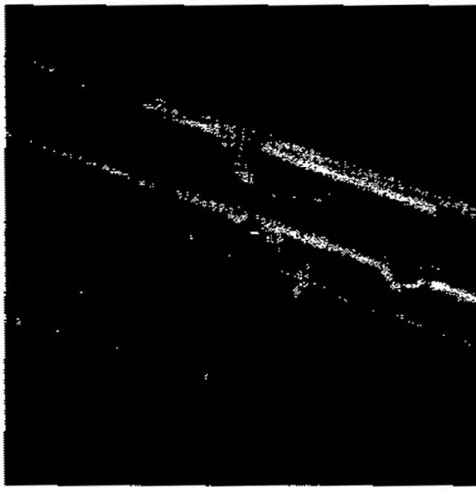
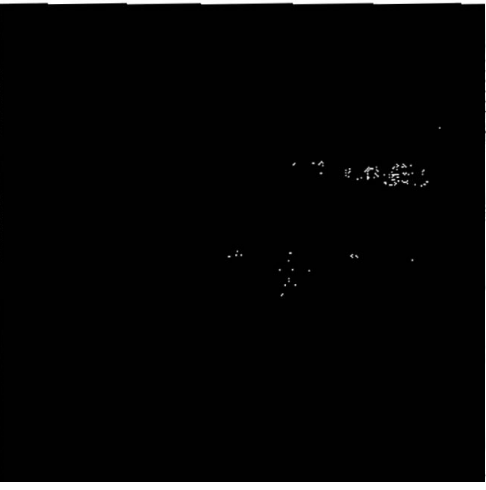




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SECOND THOUGHTS  
VOID Distributors  
Amsterdam  
1980



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Published by VOID Distributors, Anjelierstraat 153,  
1015 NG Amsterdam.  
Printed by Mekka, Passeerdersgracht 32, Amsterdam.  
Edition of 500 copies.  
Cover photographs from 'High Level Dinner,'  
Amsterdam, 1974, from Hetti Huisman/CeragenetiCs  
to Ulises Carrión.

## MAIL ART AND THE BIG MONSTER

This was my contribution to the International Artists Meeting that took place in April 1977 at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw. My performance consisted of the reading of this text and the opening of my E.A.M. I.S. or Erratic Art Mail International System.

This text has been published in Journal No. 20, The Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1978. A Dutch translation appeared in Wierschem No. 9-10, Gouda, 1978. It was also included, in English and Danish, in the catalogue The Erratic Art Mail International System, published by The Edmont Hylskolen, Hov, 1979, on the occasion of my visit to the Festival Kunst og Kunstnere that Niels Lomholt organized.

I've used this text as a basis for lectures at the Galerie St. Petri, Archive of Experimental and Marginal Art, Lund, in 1979, and at the Universidade Católica de Pernambuco, on the occasion of the First Winter Festival, Recife, 1978, organized by Paulo Bruscky.

The moment has come to declare that Mail Art has very little to do with mail and a lot to do with art.

\* \* \* \*

In the expression 'Mail Art' the word 'Mail' can be replaced by multiplicity, by expediency, by distribution, or by many other words. On the other hand, in 'Mail Art' the word 'Art' is there for art, for art and for absolutely nothing else.

\* \* \* \*

Mail Art uses the mail as support in the sense that non-mail arts use canvas, paper, iron, and wood as support.

\* \* \* \*

Many individuals using these supports never thought of canvas art, 'wood art,' 'paper art' Words, pieces of paper, envelopes, and colours are media. When an artist utilizes one or several of these media, and chooses the Postal System as their means of support, then Mail Art comes into existence.

\* \* \* \*

Mail Art uses as support the Postal System - a complex, international system of transport, including thousands of people, buildings, machinery, world treaties, and God knows what.

\* \* \* \*

The proof that the post is not the medium is that to use it, an artist doesn't need to understand how it functions. Even in the utopic possibility that the artist reaches complete understanding of the system, he cannot control it. What he controls is the 'work,' the 'mail piece' that he shall post. *That* is his creation.

\* \* \* \*

Most artists and the public seem to have lost themselves in the game. They have come to think that making Mail Art means producing postcards.

\* \* \* \*

Those artists use Mail Art as they would use paint, since they believe that mail is a medium that allows one to produce art works in postcard format.

\* \* \* \*

Only a few people realize that in Mail Art the terms of the equation have reversed: what in daily life functions as a system of communication, as means for conveying messages, as medium, has become in the hands of certain artists the support of all sorts of different media in order to produce Mail Art pieces.

\* \* \* \*

When I send by post a letter that is only a letter, I am using the mail as a system that allows the transmission of my message. This system includes two sub-systems - on the one hand the sub-system of written or visual language, on the other hand the sub-system of the Postal Services.

\* \* \* \*

The relationship between the two sub-systems is permanent but not rigid. The accent can be laid on one or the other according to the motivation or intent.

\* \* \* \*

When you receive a letter from your lover you are not so interested in what is written on it. You are mainly interested in receiving something from him or her. Your lover could have sent flowers instead of words - you would have understood very well. He/she may use words or flowers as long as he/she mails something to you. In this case the accent lies in the sub-system

'Mail.'

\* \* \* \*

Something very different occurs when we get a letter from the bank or from the police. Then, who does not care about the content of the envelope? Then it is not important if we got the message from the postman or from a heavenly spirit. In this case the most important sub-system is the written language and not the mail.

\* \* \* \*

When I say, that in Mail Art the mail is not the medium but the support, I don't mean to say that the mail is not important. It is extremely important. But it is first necessary to recognize and define its role in the process implied by a Mail Art piece.

\* \* \* \*

Let's imagine a piece of Mail Art that uses a substitute for the Post System. For instance, we can give letters to a number of friends that set out in different directions. We can give these friends precise instructions regarding when and how and to whom our messages should be delivered. All this is perfectly possible, is it not? But normally we use the Post Office because it happens to be the most convenient and widely used network. If we utilize the Post Office for our imaginary piece, its meaning would not change essentially.

\* \* \* \*

On the other hand, we cannot imagine a piece of Mail Art that does not use words, or drawings, or paper, or plastic. These are thus the media, the significant elements with which we construct our message in Mail Art.

\* \* \* \*

Immediately after having written this phrase I got the idea for my Mail Art project, the foundation of the E.A.M.I.S. or Erratic Art Mail International System, that delivers messages 'by any way other than the official Post Offices'.

Yes, it would change essentially. But here I'm underlining the idea of the Postal System as a means of distribution.

The question now arises: What about if an artist conceives of a piece in which mailing, the act of using the Post Office, post-stamps, one or several post-office clerks, or any other element of the Postal System play an important role? In this case we all would agree on calling the Postal System the medium or at least an element of the medium.

\*\*\*\*

Further, it can be that only by incorporating the Mail System as an essential part of the piece we are able to make a real Mail Art piece. It is actually so — the best Mail Art pieces use the post as an integral, functional element of the work.

\*\*\*\*

In order to realize this, it was first necessary to prove how marginal mail, as such, can be to Mail Art. Only then we can appreciate the role that mail should play and does play as an element of Mail Art. Which is to say, of Art.

\*\*\*\*

The question now arises, How does the adjective Mail affect the noun Art in reality? All sorts of platitudes have been given as answer to this question. It has been said that Mail Art is easy, cheap, unpretentious and democratic. All this is rubbish.

\*\*\*\*

Is it easy for an artist to send a postcard? Yes. But, as we have seen, an artist does not become a Mail artist by sending a postcard, no matter how 'beautiful' this card might be.

\*\*\*\*

Is it cheap to produce and to send a postcard? No, certainly not. You rarely produce one postcard, you

produce an edition of several hundreds or thousands of copies. In fact, many artists are forced to produce one postcard because they do not possess the financial means to produce a thousand copies.

\*\*\*\*

Is Mail Art unpretentious? This is difficult to answer. It depends on the artist. I would not care to say that mail artists are unpretentious. I, for one, am very pretentious. And there are those who state 'I am a mail artist' which almost means 'The other artists are no artists at all.'

\*\*\*\*

Is Mail Art democratic? I doubt it. For an art that pretends to be widespread, 200 correspondents is very, very little. And these 200 names are chosen with great care. And some answers are with no doubt more valued than others. Artists do not answer every letter from a not well-determined sender. Sometimes because of time-economy. More often because they do not deem the letter worthwhile to answer.

\*\*\*\*

Whether Mail Art is or is not easy, cheap, unpretentious, and democratic, is not very essential. A more important question is, Can you make good art with Mail Art? An even more basic question, What is and what is not Mail Art?

\*\*\*\*

A Mail Art piece consists of a series of actions, of which two are the most important — the production of the piece and the posting of the piece. There exists however a radical difference between these two actions. Namely, our control of the first is almost absolute, but we have almost no control at all for the second, the actual posting.

\* \* \* \*

When we are producing the piece to be mailed we are free to choose the materials and how to utilize them. We can choose the dimensions. We decide as for the outside and the inside. In other words, when I write a letter I am free to write whatever I want.

\* \* \* \*

What about the mailing? Then we are not free, we are subject to certain rules established beforehand. Not only that, we have also to pay a price that is calculated with precision concerning size and weight. There is no question of bargaining or being talented. You pay, or forget about your beautiful Mail Art piece.

\* \* \* \*

Seen from this point of view, Mail Art is no longer something easy, cheap, unpretentious and unimportant. Mail Art knocks at the door of the castle where the Big Monster lives. You can tell the monster anything you like, according to your experiences and beliefs. But the fact is, that the Big Monster exists and oppresses us.

\* \* \* \*

Every invitation we receive to participate in a Mail Art project is part of the guerrilla war against the Big Monster. Every Mail Art piece is a weapon thrown against the Monster who is the owner of the Castle, who separates us one from the others, all of us.

\* \* \* \*

What or who is the monster I am talking about? Do I mean the Post Master? Post Office clerks? Do I mean the Minister of Communications? Or, do I mean the technology they use and control? Do I mean those little, colourful pieces of glued paper that we must buy every time we post something? To tell you the truth,

I do not know exactly what or whom I am talking about. All I know is, that there is a Monster. And that by posting all sorts of mail pieces I am knocking at his door.

\* \* \* \*

When we were making painting we could talk about sensibility, beauty, vision, craftsmanship, etcetera. But when we are knocking at the Monster's door, what does it count? The answer is simple: it counts how hard you are knocking. How can we measure the intensity of our knocking? By the echo we produce, obviously.

\* \* \* \*

I know that the eternal skeptics won't like this. First they found Mail Art was too small, too petty. Now they are going to say that you cannot judge art with arithmetics. They do not see that, when we talk of numbers, it is not arithmetics we are talking about. We are talking about harmony.

\* \* \* \*

When someone posts a Mail Art piece and later gets an answer — that is harmony: agreement, accord. We could judge the beauty of the answer, yes. But as far as the Mail Art piece is concerned, the only thing that really counts is getting answers.

\* \* \* \*

What about Mail Art pieces that require to remain unanswered in order to exist?

\* \* \* \*

The answer is as follows — we still don't know how to measure the response. We count them one, two, three and so on because we still don't know any other way. This is only a temporary, provisional sort of measur-

ing. However, this imperfect method gives us an idea.

\* \* \* \*

We need more ideas for Mail Art. We are receptive to more ideas. Why don't you give some ideas? Only, do not say them: Mail them, please.

\* \* \* \*

To my knowledge, the only person who has ever written of Mail Art with understanding is Jean-Marc Poinso. His introduction to the catalogue Mail Art — Communication à distance — Concept (Collection 60plus, Editions CEDIC, Paris, 1971) is brilliant and even visionary. On the basis of his analyses of the works in the Section Envois of the Paris Biennale 1971, Poinso accurately predicts the ulterior developments of Mail Art.

This table was drawn by me to go together with the text Mail Art and the Big Monster. For various reasons, it was never published. This is a somewhat modified version of the original.

## TABLE OF MAIL ART WORKS

### 1. Format

#### 1.1. Total

- 1.1.1. Postcard
- 1.1.2. Letter
- 1.1.3. Package
- 1.1.4. Telegram

#### 1.2. Partial

- 1.2.1. Envelope
- 1.2.2. Post Stamp
- 1.2.3. Rubber Stamp

### 2. Scope

#### 2.1. Individual

- 2.1.1. One sender, one mailing
- 2.1.2. One sender, serial mailing
  - 2.1.2.1. One addressee
  - 2.1.2.2. Several addressees

#### 2.2. Group

- 2.2.1. All the invitations to participate plus all the answers
- 2.2.2. The answers alone are part of the work

### 3. Subject

- 3.1. Free
- 3.2. Given

### 4. Anomalies

- 4.1. Alteration of format
- 4.2. Alteration of scope
- 4.3. Alteration of subject
- 4.4. Alteration of the table

