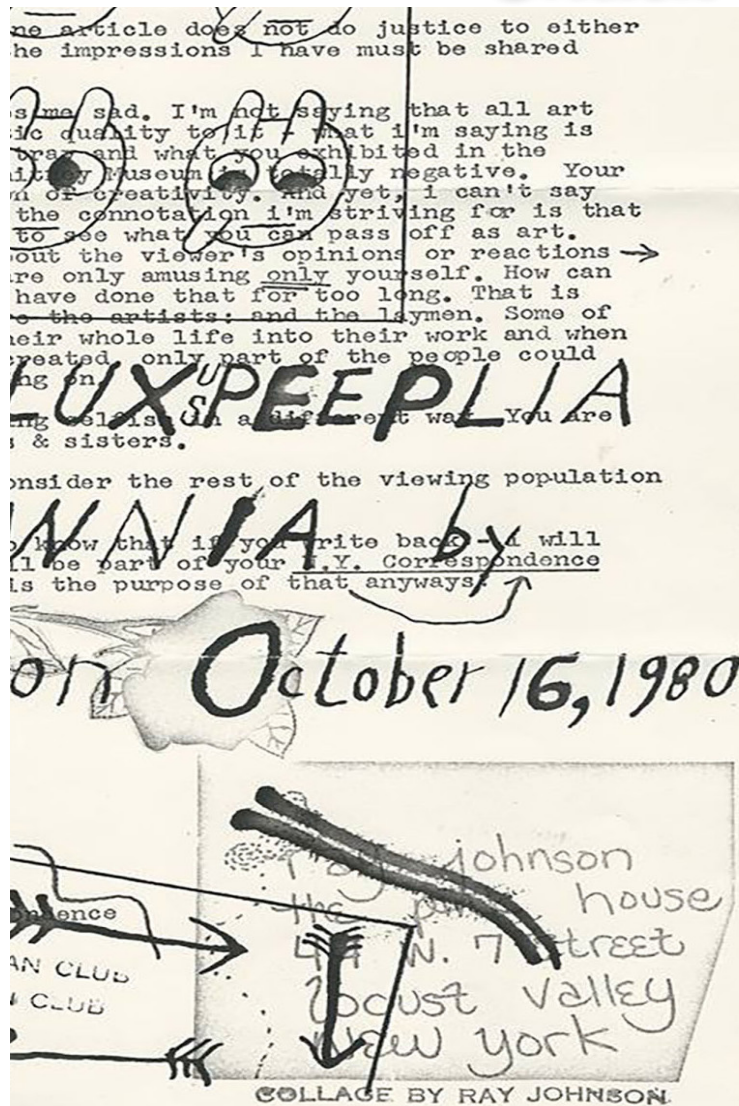


The Mail Art - Internet Link

by Chuck Welch



The following text appeared in ETERNAL NETWORK: A MAIL ART ANTHOLOGY, published in 1995 by University of Calgary Press, a work edited by Chuck Welch. The essay is reprinted here with the permission of the author for the benefit of those scholars wishing to retrieve an accurate account of the merging of mail art and telematic art. Some of the pioneering projects and texts by Welch, notably Telenetlink, The Emailart Directory, The Electronic Museum of Mail Art (EMMA) and The Reflux Network Project, created by Brazilian artist Dr. Artur Matuck are central to the bridging of mail art and the internet from 1990-1995.

“Tele” is a Greek word for “far off,” “at a distance.” Netlink is terminology meaning “to interconnected

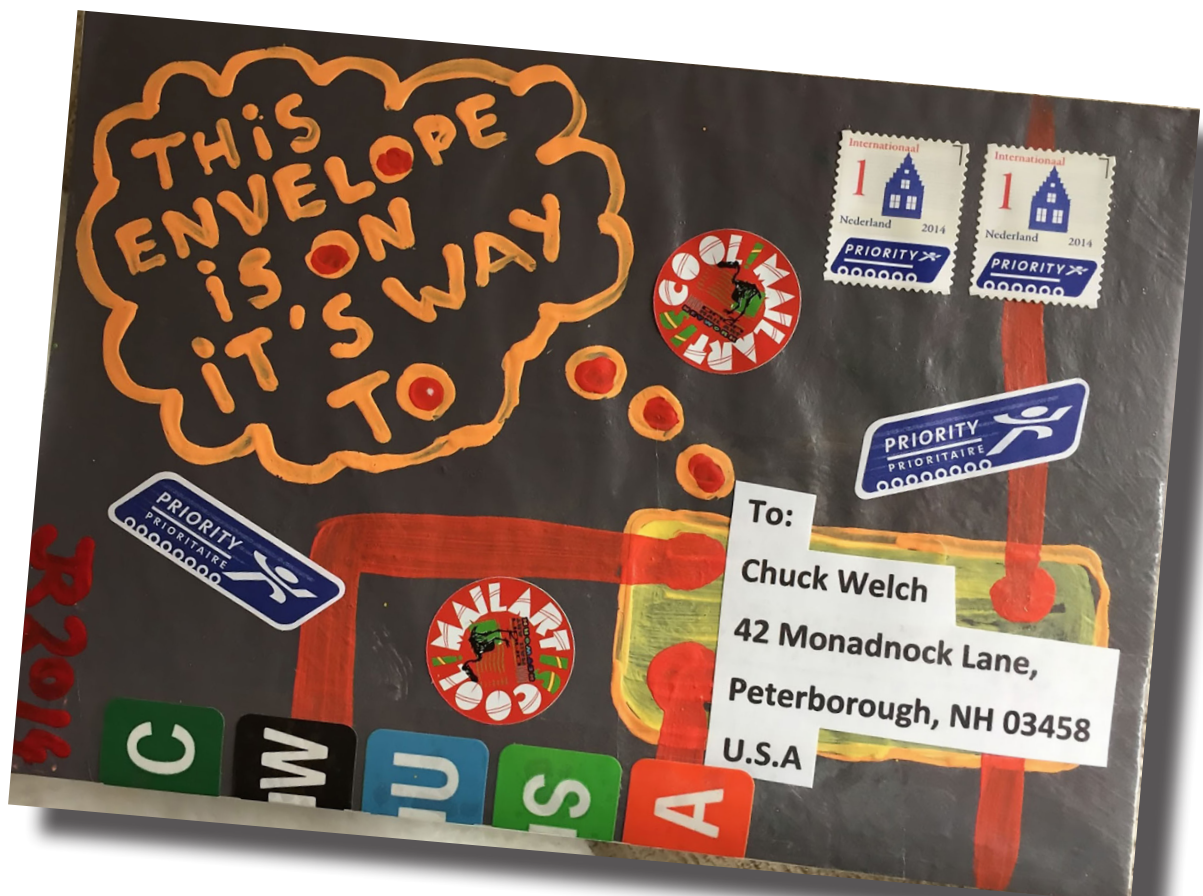
networks,” especially communication networks that are perceived to be distant. Artists impart attitudes, values, and sensibilities in their shared communication with others. Aesthetic sensibilities, when coupled with social hierarchy and economic inequality, create media boun-

daries, “netclubs.” Mail art networking attempts to soar above these distances, to fly beyond all media boundaries-to telenetlink!

Mail art is communication that travels a physical/spiritual distance between senders and recipients. For nearly forty years mail artists have

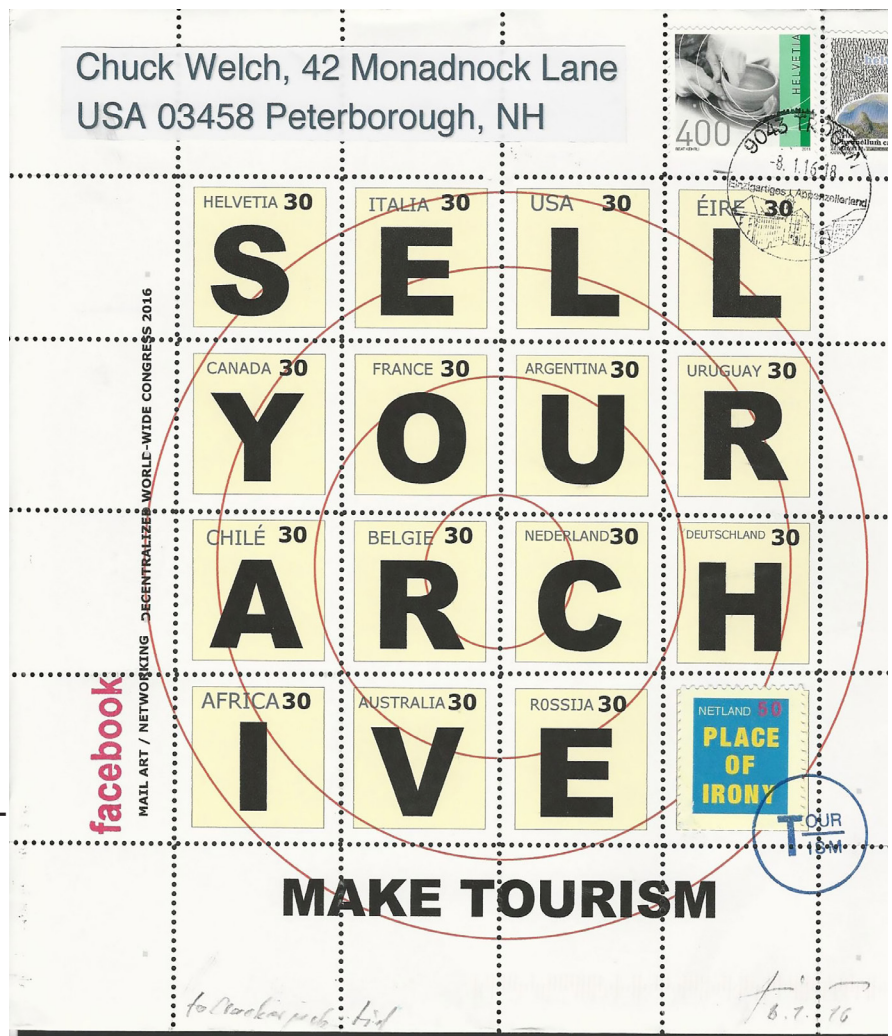
been enjoying interactive mail characterized by free, open, often spirited visual/textual correspondances. Mail artists have worked hard to abolish copyrights through dispersed authorship. In the distant, parallel world of high technology, telecommunication artists often work in the same collabo-

rative fabric interwoven with mail art. But emailartists network online in a simulated, textual, paperless world. No wonder there are mail artists who prefer the tangible, tactile, handcrafted encounter of pen, pencil, collage, paint, and handmade paper. It is true that some postal artists are suspicious of art and technology. they view telecommunications as hasty, simulated, impersonal interaction lacking in privacy. These mail artists find the time-lag of postal delivery a desirable quality. Conversely, there are telecommunication artists who view mail artists as unskilled in aesthetic differentiation, hopelessly lost in a slow, antiquated, and expensive postal bureaucracy. Distances widen between these communication forms, especially by the stilted influences of normative art standards. Such attitudes obscure the notion that art communication is an intermedia concept.



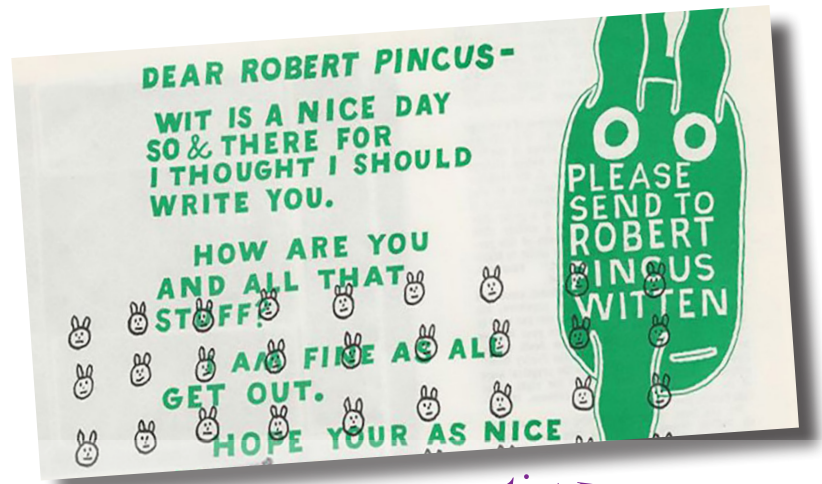
The Artist As Networker

Distance between mail art and electronic art is sometimes more imagined than real. The notion that mail artists are hostile to high technology is one common misconception. Experimentation with mass-media technology hastened the evolution of mail art long before the advent of telecommunications technology. Mail artists experimented with electrostatic (copier art) technology in the 1960s, and in the late 1980s embraced the technology of telefacsimile. Throughout the 1980s mail artists matured into networkers who reached for an inter-cultural transformation of information. Mail art networkers experience the form and content of the information age. They dare to apply values that will nurture a larger global society. It comes as no surprise that pioneering telecommunication artists like Judy Malloy, Carl Eugene Loeffler, Anna Couey, George Brett, and Fred Truck were all active mail artists during the early 1970s before they moved towards telecommunications art. Time has obscured the fact that many idealistic, democratic values of early mail art were carried forth in the development of today's online telecommunications community.



Networkers use both telecommunications and mail art as tools rather than boundaries. These intermedia networkers embrace immediate, direct concepts of exchange that sometimes lead to real-time, face-to-face conferences. Networkers are equally comfortable using the postal mainstream to meet vicariously as “tourists.” The hallmark of both mail and telecommunications art resides in attitudes of creative freedom, collaboration, the abolition of copyrights, and independence outside mainstream art systems. Telenetlink is a forum created to celebrate this interactive spirit between mail art and telecommunications artists.

The international Telenetlink evolved in June 1991 as an interactive part of Reflux Network Project, an artists' telecommunication system created by Brazilian artist Matuck. Reflux Network Project was an ambitious, progressive experiment that interconnected 24 on-site nodes located in university art departments, art research sites, and private inter-



net addresses. Through Reflux, the Networker Telenetlink became mail art's first active online connection with the world of internet. Telenetlink became an active component of mail art's Decentralized World-Wide Networker Congresses, 1992 (NC92). Throughout 1992 the Telenetlink Project functioned as the only continuously active online mail art resource in which the role of the networker was actively discussed. An international community of mail art and "internet-workers" were introduced to each other before and during the NC92 Telenetlink.

Some mail artists claim that the 250 sessions of Networker Congresses in 1992 were carbon copies of the smaller 1986 Mail Art Congresses. But NC92 differed from the 1986 Mail Art Congresses in a major context. Participants in the 1992 Networker Congresses were challenged to interact with other marginal networks parallel to mail art; to build, expand, introduce, alert, and interconnect underground network cultures. These objectives were underscored when the Networker Telenetlink bridged the telecommunications art community and the

mail art culture. I chose internet as the focal point for understanding the role of the networker. Why internet? Because it is the world's largest information superhighway that is moving art towards new communication concepts.

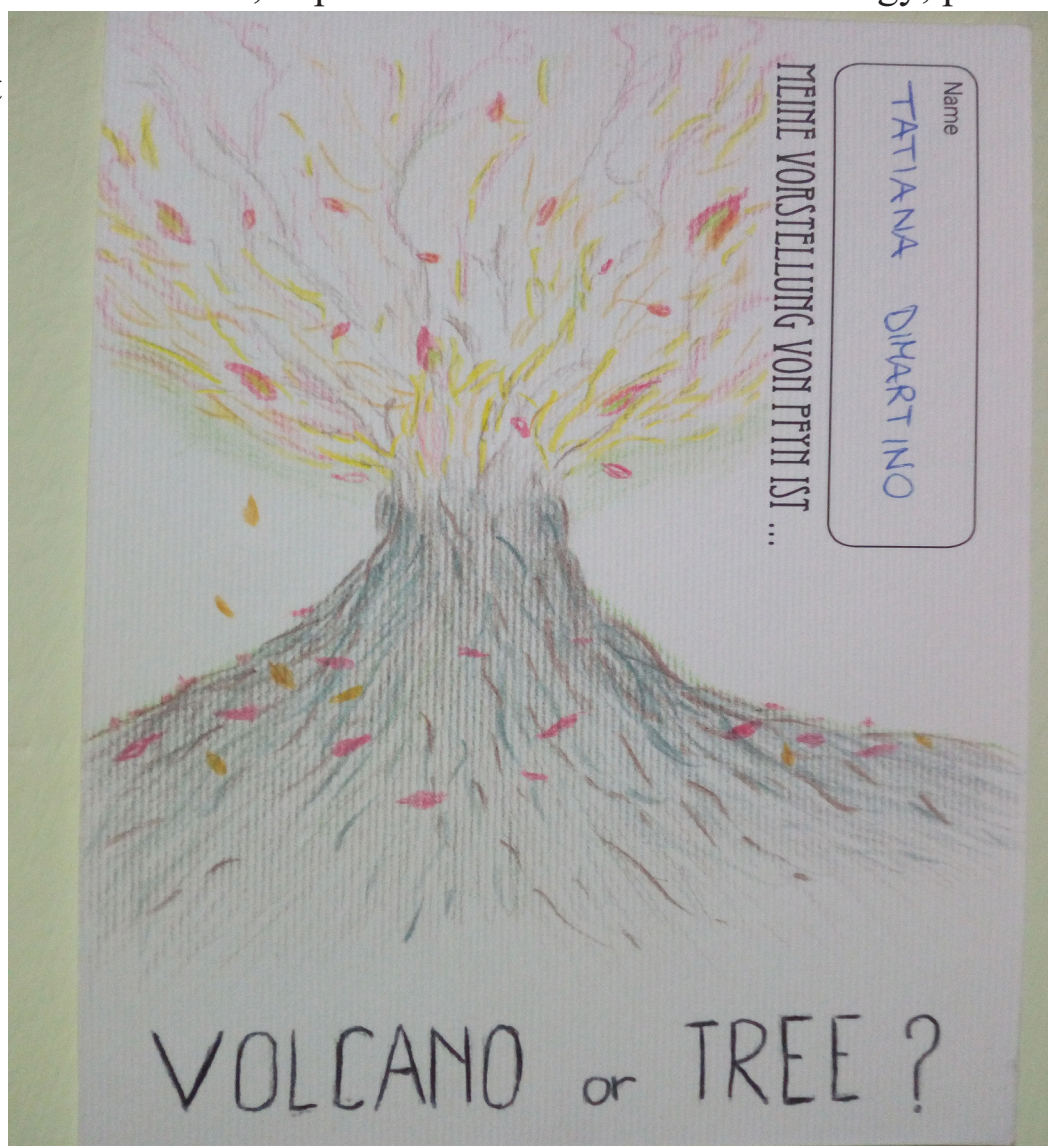
NETWORKER TELENETLINK: THE OPEN PROPOSAL (TELENETLINK 1991-1996)

OPEN OBJECTIVES

Objectives for a Networker Telenetlink Year in 1995 are open for discussion, but encourages interACTION now. Possibilities? Embrace the telematic medium and explore its parameters; develop a local/global emailart community; exchange cultural communications; interconnect the parallel network worlds of mail art and telematic art through internet and the World Wide Web; contact online communities of mail artists working on commercial networks like CompuServe, America Online, Prodigy, and other connected email gateways; place networker archives online; experiment with telematic technology; participate as a FA-

Xcilitator; exhibit in the Electronic Museum of Mail

Art; interact in public and private forums; merge media; mail and emailart; and enact networker ideals invisioned for the millennium.



Tatiana
Dimartino