# The Eternal Network: System administration, spam and trolling in the 1970s and 1980s

Florian Cramer @Simon Frazer University, Vancouver, Oct. 30th 2019

#### Introduction

First off, I am talking about "Mail Art" as in "m-a-i-l", not "m-a-l-e". I first thought that it was only me as a non-native speaker who couldn't properly pronounce the two words so that people knew which one I meant; until pronunciation sound files of the Cambridge Dictionary taught me that the two words are indeed identically pronounced both in British and American English,. 0 But this linguistic confusion actually brings me closer to my topic: Although Mail Art departed from a radically democratic, inclusive ethos and was one of the art currents (or subcultures) of the 1970s that prominently included feminist and queer positions, I want to propose a contemporary reading of its "Eternal Network" as both an anticipation to today's Internet-based social networks, both the corporate and self-organized ones; so my reading is explicitly not historical but through a contemporary lens.

Who am I to speak about this subject? As a teenager part of 1980s post-punk subculture, zine-making and DIY cassette music, interconnections through second-/third-generation mail artists like Vittore Baroni and my friend Graf Haufen; part of (the Canadian-founded network of) Neoism since 1988, maker/publisher of SMILE magazines until the early 1990s (whose heritage goes back to General Idea's FILE magazine - more on that later).

My lecture will have three parts:

- 1) A brief historical overview of Mail Art and its "Eternal Network", since I do not presume that everyone here is familiar with it, plus pointers to a number of select resources
- 2) A more in-depth look at the network dynamics of Mail Art, using a number of examples, and focusing on similarities to contemporary network culture.
- 3) Tentative conclusions to be drawn both for media studies and media critique of contemporary networks, and for the self-organized arts practices.

### **Brief history of Mail Art**

Mail Art has been alternatively referred to, by its own protagonists, as Mail Art, Correspondence Art, Postal Art and "The Eternal Network". The latter was a coinage of the French Fluxus artist

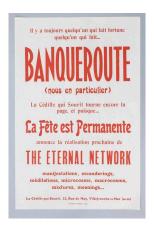


Figure 1: eternal\_network

Robert Filliou from 1961. Leaving aside uses of artists' postcards and international networking in early 20th century Dadaism, Fluxus was in many respects a precursor to the Mail Art network of the 1970s. Fluxus had departed from a concept of non-elitist, performative, everyday and inexpensive creativity outside fine art, and in the course of its existence included several experiments of coop economics and lifestyle. Part of this was a "Flux Post" kit designed by George Maciunas, the founder and central organizer of Fluxus. It included a postcard by Ben Vautier from 1965 on whose sides two different addresses could be entered in order to give the postman the choice of where to send it. ("Postman's Choice" is also the title of the piece.) In modern terminology, one could call this a network art piece that played with underlying protocols and routing. The first exhibition and catalogue of Mail Art, made in France by the curator Jean-Marc Poinsot in 1971, mostly focused on artists' individual works that used the postal system as a medium, quite similar to how most video art approached video as an artistic medium.

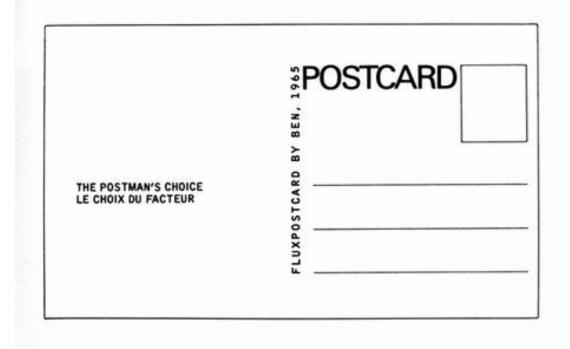


Figure 2: fluxus-1

Partly prior, partly in parallel to Fluxus, the artist Ray Johnson maintained a correspondence networks with friends and collaborators, mostly from New York's contemporary art world. Johnson had studied at the Black Mountain School and was friends with among others Andy Warhol, Robert



Figure 3: fluxus-2



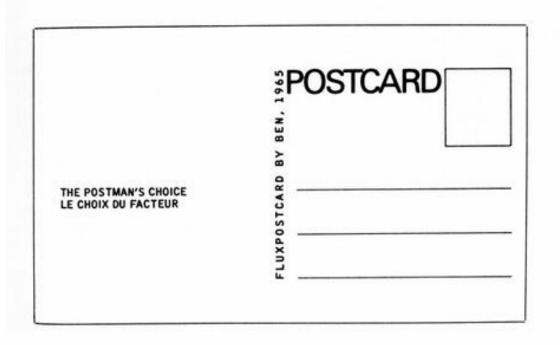


Figure 4: fluxus-3

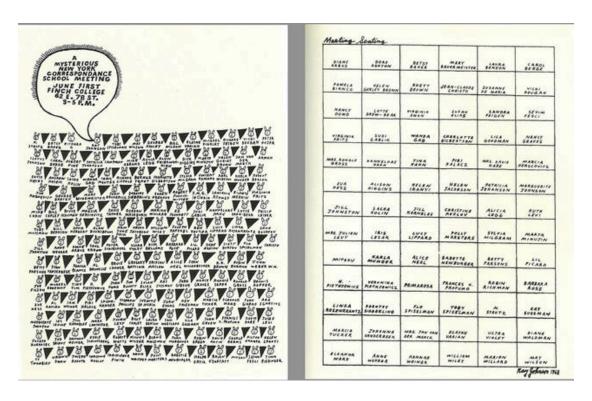


Figure 5: ray\_johnson-nycs-1

Rauschenberg and Lucy Lippard. From the 1960s on, his ephemeral drawings and writings for his correspondence network became his main art practice. In 1962, the name "New York Correspondence School" was coined for this network. By the early 1970s, it had grown beyond New York and transformed into a larger, international network of artists who primarily worked in and through the medium of postal exchange.

Canada played a particular role in the Mail Art network of the early 1970s, ostensibly through artist collectives like General Idea (Toronto), Image Bank and Western Front in Vancouver and Vehicule Art in Montréal. In this context, Mail Art was a central component of artist-run media and infrastructures, which also included artists' books (through spin-offs like Art Metropole, later Printed Matter in New York), what we nowadays would call zines, self-organized shows, and work with performance and video.

A good example for this networking are the early issues of General Idea's magazine "FILE", such as the first issue from 1972. If we just take the cover, there are all kinds of interesting details including methods of media appropriation and Vancouver's local history - that I would like to leave aside for a moment and touch upon later. Re-reading the magazine is now possible thanks to a complete facsimile reprint of FILE from 2008. It becomes immediately clear that the early, Mail Artcentric issues of FILE were not classical editorial publications, but for the most part unredacted contributions sent by correspondents in General Idea's Mail Art network. In this way, Mail Art publications resembled Internet forums much more than typical contemporary art catalogs or

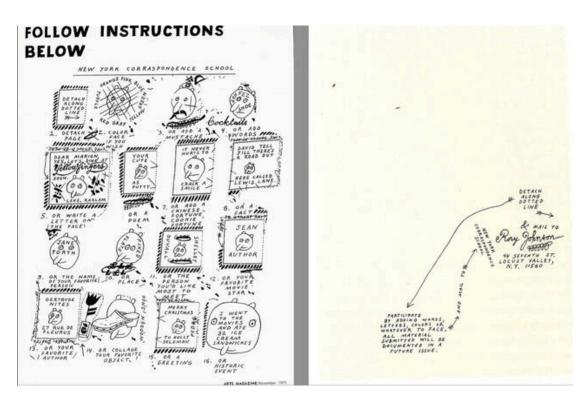


Figure 6: ray\_johnson-nycs-2

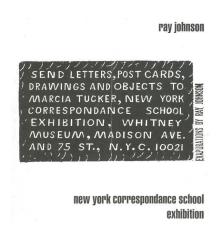


Figure 7: ray\_johnson-nycs-3

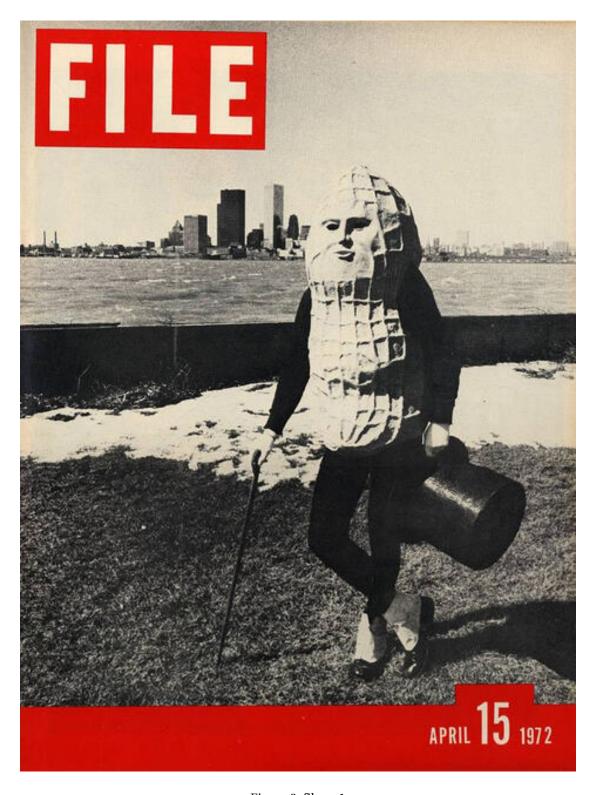


Figure 8: file\_-\_1

HISTORY ... in the making



My Friends,

I suppose I've always been a west coast
artist living in cxile and because of exp
loss of memory three as accident to my
had I can't remember how I got here or
what my origins are. For some reason I
have this distinct that I'm from the fintion distinct on the I'm from the fortion. All I remember of my mother is
that the had a strange fittish for a centain tropical freit, yellow in color.

tain tropical fruit, yellow in color. Many was the night as a small child that I

tain tropical fruit, yellow in color. Many was the night as a small child that I lay in my call libraing to my mother's grunts in the night. Not why should I berden you with my personal petty pro-blems?

blems?
Your friend,
J.R. Blevins,
Usoditaid Advisor and Helper
to Everyone Absolutely Pazzied.
PROPAGANIADA
Ceretand, Obio 44106



SOMETHING VILE CONT'S. from P. 2 you a rundown of his careet, or even aummarize his minoumental study of all of the different kinds of facking that.

aummarize his minonomental study of all of the different kinds of theking that were sngaged in by the various more of the galaxy. It ought to be enough if I simply say that the Federation for whatever it was thought highly enough of him to give him a grant so that he could go to the pleaset are study. The In. The bartender was a woman. She was drawed in a some what skingsy banane contumer sulong with dark stockings and a black garier bell. There were Rabbing ights around her pump. As Fior tried to explain to her about his chastily belt, she climbed up onto the bar and tried to press his fare into her crotch. Fex looked into the lights, I don't know what he was thicking; poshobily it was recentible, rather grounds. It would have been nice if he had been thinking. "Jesus Christ, if you escape getting turned into ablt on continued Ind column a

# **INTERMEDIA**

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Multi-Media Photographs Project Proposils Articles New Art Graphics Small Press Atternatives

CUNTEARTS - Tom Hosier Chapter 8

"Your Honor, I swear that was how it occurred," instiffes Sally, her Surroundings cassing her more than a slight nervous reaction. "The mysterious Kotex tampon was discovered to belong to Mother Superior. This explains the lack of Vasilians or similar hebricants in the lab report. No wonder Becky was unable to sell any in the convent—it seems that commonion waters scaled in holy water make a cheaper, safer, and more effective lubricant for the insertion of inter-vaginal napidits."

"And the voices in the dark?" Investigates the prosecution.
Sally costinues, "It turns out that they were lost in the lavestory. The gumbog and reverse mirror effect were, of course, ballacinations, probably brought on by our embarransament at having Levoy in the Laties room."

"And the others?"

"And the others?"

"And the and Lived probably eloped. Dyke Fem is now working as a

The press and photographess proceed to wonder as all the characters line up in front of them and sing their theme song in unison:

"Bend to my dreams glorming texth, short bairs.

Mission into mantoids, journey ridicule."

"Quantitati," crosses the estoial.

"Manefestations of allegance," continues the chorus, adopting various squalling pestures. The soloist grate the microphone.

"Journey to palls, childhood sounds, box top servey."

"Contilats, eggplants, comquats," sings the chorus.

"Spudie twints copper settal," resolves the soloist.

The chorus continues: "Cuantitats, eggplants, cumquats...."

PROPOSAL: SAN FRANCISCO-NUMBER II

Cari E. Loedfler/La Mamelie

Can it, Loccine(La Mannian).

Baset the city of San Francisco utilizing Twin Peaks as a sighting device, Sunday at 3:00 pm those inhabitants West of the division will consether daily functions, walk out of doors and stand at attention facing does East. Those final of the division will deplicate except face due West. This orientation periode will be given two (2) minutes for completion, where upon at 3:00 pm the main body of the proposal shall begin. For a period of one (3) minutes the three (3) systable phrase NUMBER TWO is to be chanted by the city's inhabitants. Safficiently choused, this will allow skey (60) utberances of the phrase.

CHORUS:
NUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBER
NUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBER
TWO NUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBER
TWO NUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBER
BERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBER
TWOMUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBER
BERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBER
NUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBERTWONUMBER
TWOMUMBERTWONUM

SOMETHING VILE CONFU.

this planet, you've liable to get died in Hann Binnans's electric poury. "But, as I said, he probably wasn't thinking that. Life in never that perfect.

Fox pushed himself away, policed up his his glass, and moved toward is slabe. He said down, wiped a stickly gob of come off his check (it had come flying through the air as though out of nowhere), and at down. As he did, he noticed a man sitting at a table nearby. Fox has seen him when he walked in, but hach't paid much attention. Now he booked more closely, Take away that grinded beard. The man hour an unestanty... could it he? He quickly got up and appearable the man's table. "Bill Calglioner" he asked.

Laglione motioned to Fox that he should it down. But before Fire could even pull away the chair, he was attacked by the bartender again. Gaglione slowly gut up and xicked Banana in the stometh. Shaking, Fox sat down.

"It can get amonying." Gaglione sudd. "They coly leave me shore because they know I drink so much I can't get it up any more. Deinking's the only way I know of that you can survive if you want to stay on this planet for long.

"Dr. Gaglione," Fox histerie out, "we all thought you were doed."

"You know what the Eli ser!"

Gaglione didn't answer the question, lastead, he picked up Fox's glass and his own. Stapping over Tim Mencasi (who was bying on the fison eating CENSORED 's passy), he said, "Till get us a reflix."

Speaking over his houlder, he added, "if Banana comes hack, just hick her. Better than try, flu or reasons to show your changity belt to the bioth. Didn't do you any good, did it?" Fox glassed down. He woulder, he added, "if Banana ones hack with the drinks. If I swented to the chastity belt.

As you might expect, Gaglione soon on beking) hadre't even known existed. Well, he thought, maybe next time he'd come one one who helded like the Queen of the Nexthediands. Finally, Fox pot up and lift. If this were any transcubile it, you wouldn't believe the latter wouldn't believe in not continuing that the latter wouldn't believe in not co

ż



Figure 10: vile-5

#### magazines.

At this point, the purpose of Mail Art was not experimentation with mail as an artistic medium, but the use of the international postal system for an alternative, self-organized, non-institutional art system that would completely bypass the established art system consisting of the art market, museums, curators, editorial art magazines, criticism and catalog publishing.

These working principles became Mail Art's ethos and unwritten law: A Mail Art show and/or publication could be announced by *anyone* through an open (often thematic) call spread through the Mail Art network and its publications; *all* submissions had to be accepted, no curatorial selection would take place, and all participants would receive free copies of the publication or documentation of the exhibition or event. There was also no distinction between professional artists and non-professional artists, or artists and non-artists: Mail Art was supposed to be a radically democratic system, which is why by the 1980s and 1990s, most of its participants preferred to call it "Eternal Network" (in order to obliterate "art" as a filter and distinction).

The Mail Art network spanned most if not all continents, but most prominently involved participants from North and South America, Western and Eastern Europe and Japan. In Eastern Europe, it was closely related to Samizdat and underground art, and partly had its own parallel developments. In 1971, the Polish artist Jarosław Kozłowski sent the following manifesto to 350 correspondents:

#### "NET

- a NET is open and uncommercial
- points of the NET are: private homes, studios and any other places, where art proposition are articulated
- these propositions are presented to persons interested in them
- propositions may be accompanied by editions in form of prints, tapes, slides, photographs, catalogues, books, films, handbills, letters, manuscripts etc.
- NET has no central point and any coordination
- points of NET can be anywhere
- all points of NET are in contact among themselves and exchange concepts, propositions, projects and other forms of articulation.
- the idea of NET is not new in this moment it stops to be an authorized idea
- NET can be arbitrarily developed and copied"

(The stamp was a subversive means of giving the letter an official appearance and make it slip through censorship. But it didn't work, and like many Eastern European artists, Kozłowski got factually banned from publicly showing his work.)

What is clear here is that the idea of, to use contemporary terminology, free, open and peer-topeer network culture did not originate in the 1990s with the popularization of the Internet, but



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- NET can be arbitrarily developed and copied

Jarosław Kozłowski

Andreej Kostolowski

proses toronk

Figure 11: kozlowski\_kostolowski-net

was fully conceptually developed in the correspondence arts of the early 1970s. (Personal note: This is why the early net culture and net.art manifestations around 1997 annoyed me, because they seemed to reinvent the wheel, repeat the same mistakes and perform historical revisionism.) - I will cover this in more detail.

While Mail Art in the 1970s must be seen in larger context of artist-run infrastructures, and next to groups like General Idea also involved artists like Genesis P'Orridge and Cosey Fanny Tutti, John Armleder and Ulises Carrión who became known through other work and in other contexts, it paradoxically became more self-centered by the 1980s when it had fully embraced the concept of networking over that of art.

The following is a diagram by the Italian mail artist, musician and publisher Vittore Baroni, who embodies a shift of Mail Art from 1970s artist-run practices to 1980s DIY subculture, where Mail Art operates in close vicinity to zine culture and cassette tape labels for DIY post-punk and industrial music.

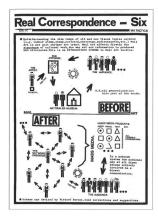


Figure 12: baroni-real\_correspondence-1981

The communication model sketched by Baroni in 1981 is essentially the same as that for top-down mass media communication versus bottom-up network communication, or for centralized versus peer-to-peer network services. Remarkable is that Baroni insists on communication *structure* versus superficial appearance (mail art, rubber stamps etc.) of "real correspondence". His statement that "[i]n a network system the audience may at all times become actively involved in a [sic] direct communication" could just as well come from early Internet activism, or from contemporary advocacy for federated social networks like diaspora and Mastodon.

Even the notion of a world wide web was anticipated in subcultures that originated Mail Art such as Neoism, whose activities in the early 1980s mostly consisted of self-organized festivals that took place in apartments and for which a 1983 manifesto reads as follows:

"The APT fests are NEITHER 'performance-art' NOR 'installation' festivals. The APT fests are the "fêtes mobiles" of the neoist-network-web".

Even the notion of "copy-left" existed in Mail Art before it was used for Free and Open Source soft-



## The APT Project the practice of a common cause

The APT festivals are usually one week events with various activities such as conferences and performances, but the main purpose of these "friendship gatherings" "drills", "habitation manoeuvres" is to create a simple and confortable situation for personal meetings between the concerned collaborators.

The APT fests are NEITHER "performance—art" NOR "installation" festivals.

The APT fests are the "fetes mobiles" of the neoist-network-web.

Figure 13: neoist

ware. This open-participation Mail Art magazine was published by the Swiss mail artist Manfred Vänçi Stirnemann, and first appeared in 1983, two years before Richard Stallman's GNU Manifesto:



Figure 14: copy-left-0

As early as in 1973, the British artist Stephan Kukowski created an artist's search engine called *Blitzinformation*, a "free art service which replies to your enquiries in the most artistic way possible". Kukowski today goes by the name Stephan Shakespeare and is the co-founder and CEO of the British Internet polling company YouGov.

[Pete Horobin, DATA project]

By the late 1980s, several Mail Artists experimented with modem dial-up electronic bulletin board systems, both self-run such as Ruud Janssen's TAM in the Netherlands, Mail Art boards on San Francisco *The Well* (run by Carl Eugene Loeffler, the publisher of the first seminal source book on Mail Art) and on the Echo NYC electronic bulletin board.

The Mail Art or Eternal Network and community *still* exists, people like Vittore Baroni are still active in it, although less visibly so than in earlier decades and with aging participants.

It struck me that when I first gave a public presentation on this topic, in the form of a workshop at the art space ODD in Bucharest, I received very negative feedback a person who had been involved in Mail Art in the past, but retrospectively considers it a waste of time and story of disappointments. (The same is probably true for many Internet activists.) So it's time to talk about network administration bureaucracies, censorship wars, spam and trolling in Mail Art.

#### Resources

Stofflet/Crane, Correspondence Art (published by Art Metropole), 1984 - in my view, still the best source book on Mail Art

FILE magazine reprint, ironically by Ringier, the Swiss Murdoch

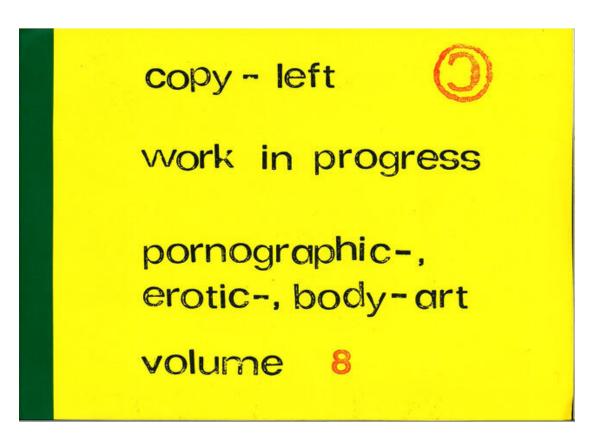


Figure 15: copy-left-1

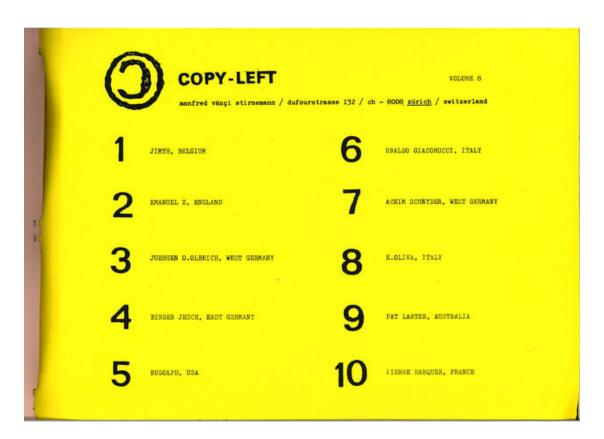


Figure 16: copy-left-2

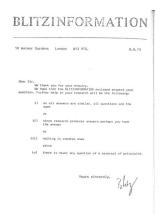


Figure 17: blitzinformation

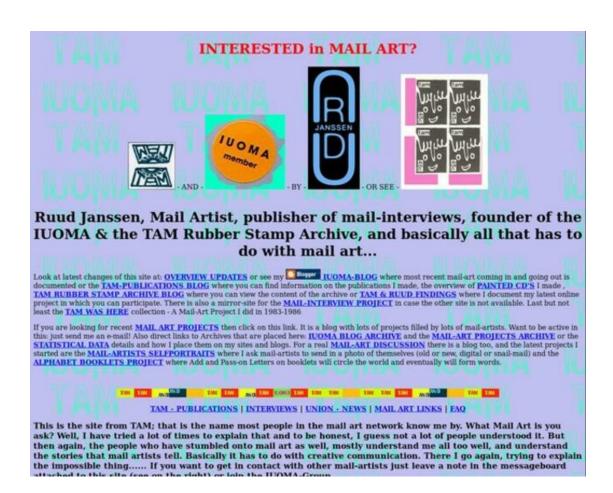


Figure 18: janssen\_-\_tam-2



Figure 19: janssen\_-\_tam

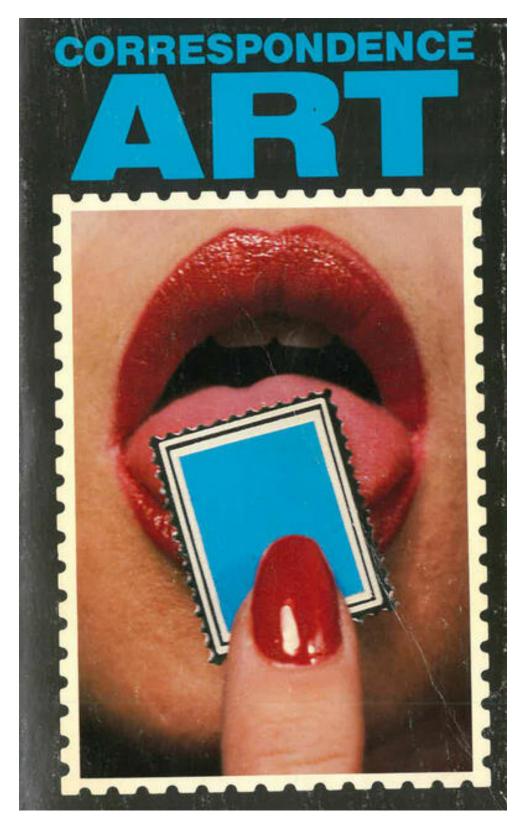


Figure 20: crane-stofflet-1

## CORRESPONDENCE ART

## Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity

CORRESPONDENCE ART: SOURCE BOOK FOR THE NETWORK OF INTERNATIONAL POSTAL ART ACTIVITY is the first major anthology to document primary activity and literature on the subject of correspondence art. It is the second volume in the series, CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTS, devoted to the examination of post-modern theories and activities. CORRESPONDENCE ART includes essays by leading artists and historians in the field, statements by major artists, numerous illustrations of artworks, bibliography, and appendices (including a glossary to the multitude of aliases used by artists in the network). The anthology is divided into four sections: definition, origins, emergence, and exhibitions and publications.

Correspondence art, an ongoing artists' communication system, includes participants throughout the world who have formed an international postal network to exchange art information and original artworks. First used sporadically by the Dada and Futurist artists in the early twentieth century, correspondence art has expanded since the 1950s to become a major international art activity. Artists involved in correspondence use a variety of means to send art through the mails, including artist-produced postcards, postage stamps, broadsides, "zines," drawings, collage, rubber stamps, found images, and color xerox. As a contemporary art activity based on the interactive flow of ideas and information, correspondence artists have produced an abundance of materials which are basic to their art exchange.

CORRESPONDENCE ART: SOURCE BOOK FOR THE NETWORK OF INTERNATIONAL POSTAL ART ACTIVITY is the first comprehensive anthology to offer an historical overview as well as primary documentation and artworks produced by artists. CORRESPONDENCE ART is an indispensable source book for artists, educators, students, and researchers interested in major forms of contemporary art.

## CONTEMPORARY ARTS PRESS

POB-3123 RINCON ANNEX, SAN FRANCISCO, 94119

Figure 21: crane-stofflet-2

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Figure 23: crane-stofflet-4



Figure 24: file-ringier

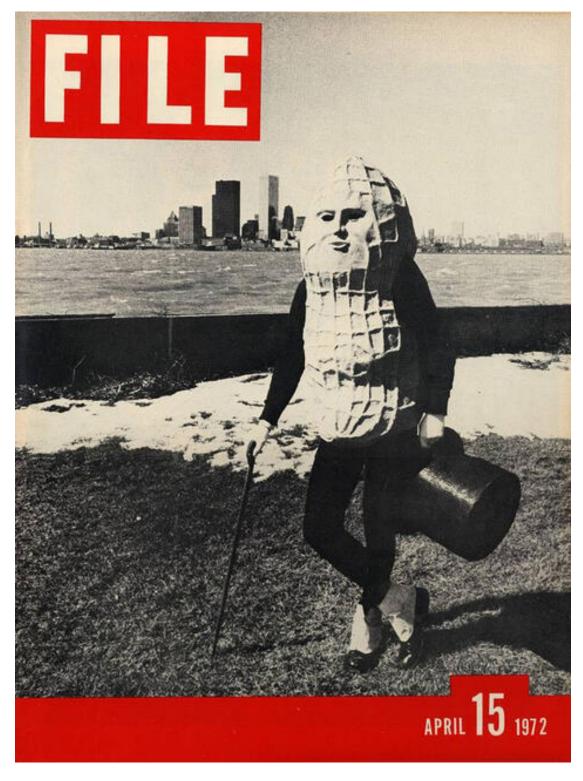
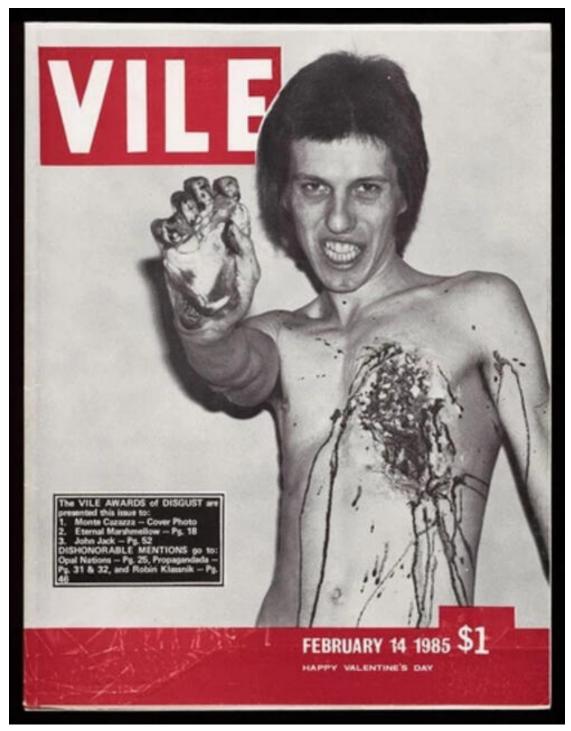


Figure 25: file

# The Eternal Network and its memes, campaigns, spam, trolling, bureaucracies

#### FILE, VILE, BILE, SMILE:

To go back to FILE magazine: The magazine parodied the title and visual identity of LIFE magazine, while being just the opposite in its editorial policy. In that sense, and in its use of the catchy title image, it has a similar strategy to that of contemporary memes and imageboards that also (a) rely on open, pseudo- or anonymous participation while (b) recycling and parodying mass media visuals. In other words, the early issues of FILE could be seen as a forerunner to imageboards like 4chan, in their early years, before they got taken over through the extreme right. Just as 4chan fostered other chan boards, FILE became the point of reference departure for a number of other mail art magazines, VILE published in San Francisco by the Mail Artist Anna Banana:



This issue featured the Californian performance artist and Industrial musician Monte Cazzaza, and was not the only issue of VILE that used grotesque and pornographic visuals both on the cover and inside the magazine; another parallel to imageboards.



Figure 26: bile

VILE conversely fostered BILE by the mail artist Bradley Lastname (the pseudonyms are another parallel to Internet culture).

In the 1980s, they were followed by SMILE (first published by Stewart Home in London) which became a multiple-use zine title that anyone could use, but was most popular within Neoism:

On the cover of the first FILE issues is the artist Vincent Trasov in his persona and costume as "Mr. Peanut". In 1974, he ran for mayor of Vancouver in an artist-run campaign:

(newsreel on Trasov's/Mr. Peanut's election campaign for mayor of Vancouver)

In 2019, we of course watch this video with another perspective. In retrospect, it seems to be historically located right in between the Berlin Dadaist satirical-political campaigns, amongst others in the German parliament, protesting the pre-fascist tendencies in the Weimar Republic; and contemporary populist political spectacles such as those of the Five Star movement in Italy around the comedian Beppo Grillo, and to some degree also of Donald Trump in the U.S.. I state this not as a critique, but simply as an observation, proving that the Vancouver artists of 1974 anticipated a later zeitgeist; which proves McLuhan's (in my opinion: correct) observation that artists are "antennas" of social, cultural and technological developments. The Eternal Network of Mail Art is a very good proof of that hypothesis.

#### Genesis P'Orridge & Ulises Carrión

In 1976, Genesis P'Orridge got into legal trouble for having made and sent out two Mail Art post-cards that were confiscated by the British postal service and deemed obscene. Genesis P'Orridge is now better known as a founding figure of Industrial Music with the band Throbbing Gristle (followed by Psychic TV) and today as a transgender body artist. At that time, he and his partner Cosey Fanny Tutti were the nucleus of the artist collective COUM Transmissions, the forerunner of Throbbing Gristle, that caused a public scandal with the exposition "Prostitution" in the ICA London, which featured among others documents of Cosey Fanny Tutti's work in the sex industry.

During the legal prosecution, P'Orridge started a "Mail Action" of soliciting public support letters from artist friends (including William S. Burroughs) and correspondents in the Mail Art network; a factual anticipation of contemporary crowdsourcing and online petition campaigns.

Most significantly, the postcard affair exposed the vulnerability of the "Eternal Network" being dependent on national and international postal systems out of the participants' control. The structural dilemma was, I'd argue, the same as in today's use of the Internet through artists and political activists: dependency on a hybrid corporate and state system whose governance is not democratic, and the use of censorship and content filtering and infringement of communication privacy within that system (be it postal employees or employees of content filtering agencies working for Facebook and company).

In 1977, the Mexican-born poet, artist's book practitioner and theoretician and mail artist Ulises Carrión (by now a well-known name, back then a little-known artist) gave a lecture "Mail Art and the Big Monster" which is reprinted in *Correspondence Art* and prescient of contemporary criticism of the Internet:

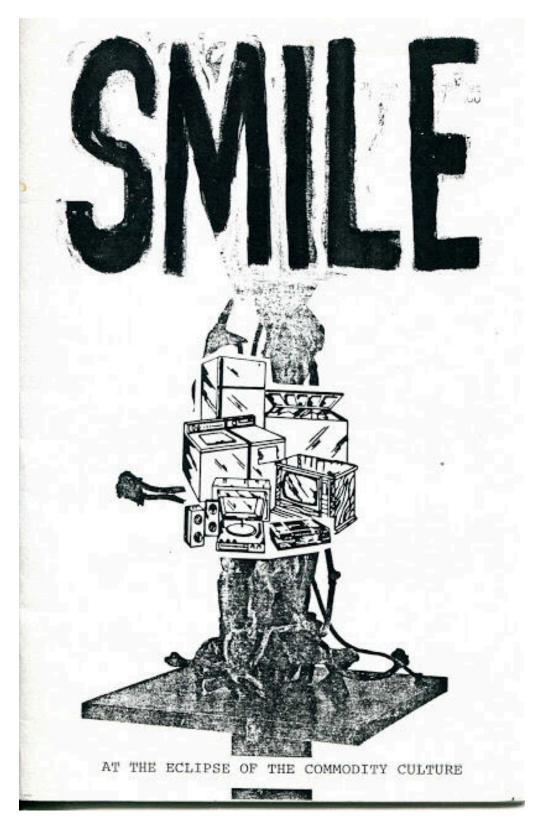


Figure 27: smile\_zine-1

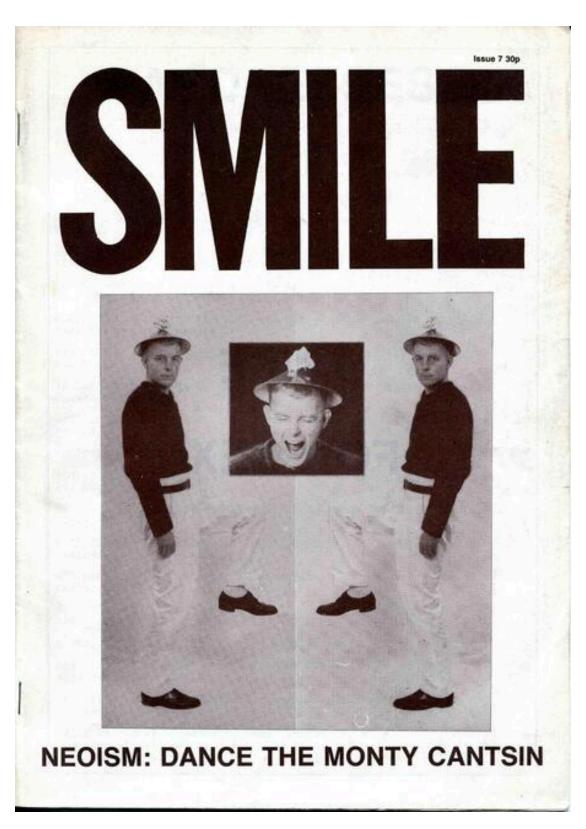


Figure 28: smile\_zine-2



Figure 29: smile\_zine-3

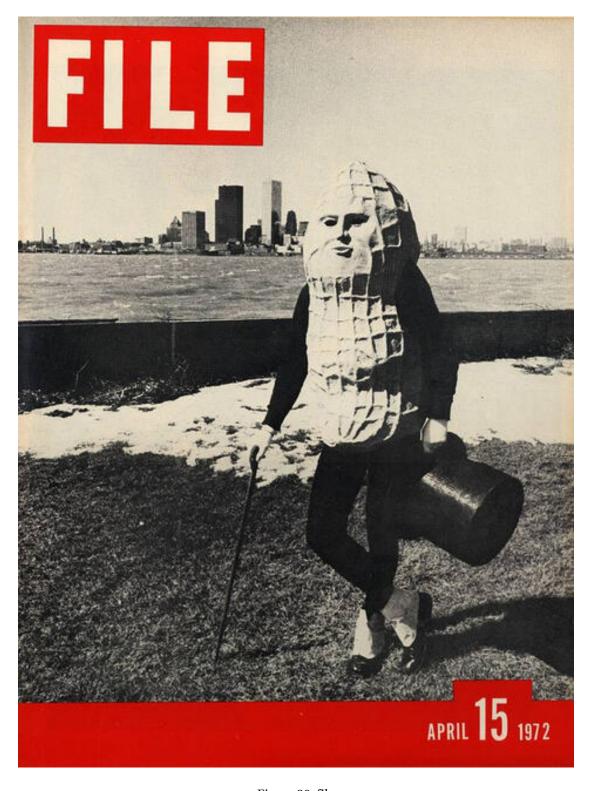


Figure 30: file

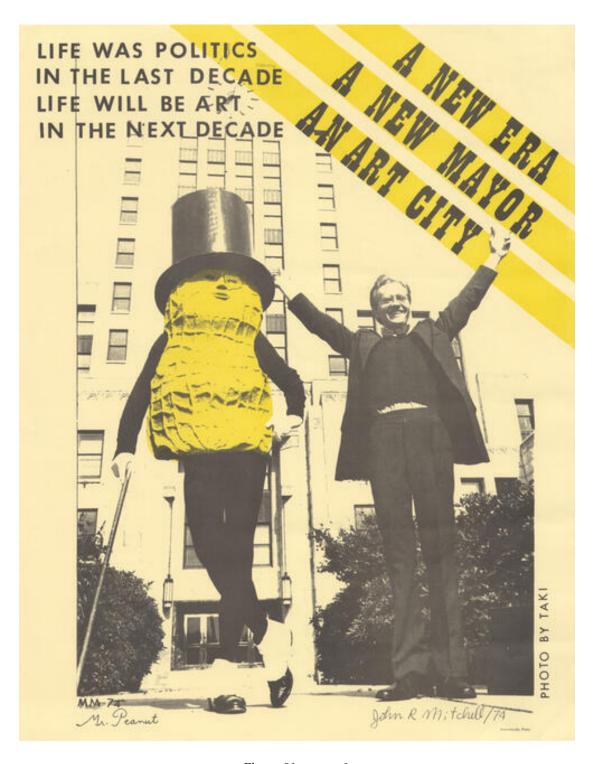


Figure 31: trasov-1

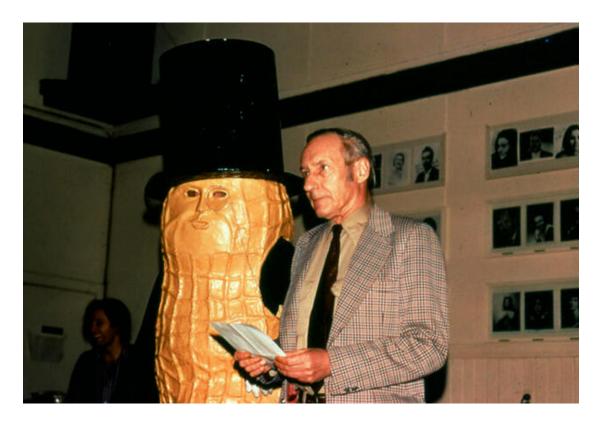


Figure 32: trasov-2



Figure 33: trasov-3



Figure 34: gpo-1

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 about the mailing? Then we are not free, we are subject to certain rules established beforehand. [...]

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 lives and oppresses us. [...]

What or who is the monster I am talking about? Do I mean the postmaster? 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, colorful 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.

Carrión's solution for that dilemma was the same that activists for peer-to-peer and federated networking use the same: The creation of an alternative, artist-run postal distribution system outside the institutional postal system, which he called E.A.M.I.S. ("Erratic Art Mail International System"); a variation of it is being practiced today by the Danish musician, artist and activist Goodiepal.

## October 19th-26th 1976



SEXUAL TRANSGRESSIONS NO. 5

# PROSTITUTION

COUM Transmissions:- Founded 1969. Members (active) Oct 76 - P. Christopherson,
Cosey Fanni Tutti, Genesis P-Orridge. Studio in London. Had a
kind of manifesto in July/August Studio International 1976. Performed their works
in Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels; Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris; Galleria Borgogna,
Milan; A.I.R. Gallery, London; and took part in Arts Inglese Oggi, Milan survey of
British Art in 1976. November/December 1976 they perform in Los Angeles Institute
of Contemporary Art; Deson Gallery, Chicago; N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago and in Canada.
This exhibition was prompted as a comment on survival in Britain, and themselves.

2 years have passed since the above photo of Cosey in a magazine inspired this exhibition. Cosey has appeared in 40 magazines now as a deliberate policy. All of these framed form the core of this exhibition. Different ways of seeing and using Cosey with her consent, produced by people unaware of her reasons, as a woman and an artist, for participating. In that sense, pure views. In line with this all the photo documentation shown was taken, unbidden by COUM by people who decided on their own to photograph our actions. How other people saw and recorded us as information. Then there are xeroxes of our press cuttings, media write ups. COUM as raw material. All of them, who are they about and for? The only things here made by COUM are our objects. Things used in actions, intimate (previously private) assemblages made just for us. Everything in the show is or sale at a price, even the people. For us the party on the opening night is the key to our stance, the most important performance. We shall also do a few actions as counterpoint later in the week.

PERFORMANCES: Wed 20th lpm - Fri 22nd 7pm Sat 23rd lpm - Sun 24th 7pm

## INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS LIMITED

NASH HOUSE THE MALL LONDON S.W.I. BOX OFFICE Telephone 01-930-6393

Figure 35: coum



Figure 36: gpo-2

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Figure 37: gpo-3



Figure 38: carrion-monster



X

- as alternative to the official Part Offices.

- 1. The £ A.M.1.5, will carry messages in any format cards, letters, parcels, etc., and realized in any medium book, country, tope, film
- The escange must reach the E.A.M.1.5, office by any way other than the official Fast Offices. It can be delivered by the author or by any other person.
- The E.A.M.1.5, is tree of charge. Any piece, however, intended for delivery should be accomposited by a second copy or duplicate. This second copy or duplicate shall be kept in the urchives of the E.A.M. 1.5, ofter delivery of the original.
- 4. The E.A.M.1.5. guarantees delivery of the entrusted pieces by any means other than the official Fost Offices. If for any reason a piece remains three years undelivered, it will be send back to the author by any means other than the official Fast Offices.
- The E.A.M.I.S. will keep on its premius, open to any potential receiver, a stock of yet undelivered pieces. On the other hand, it is not necessary to be a potential receiver in order to visit the archives.
- Mail pieces are accepted regardless of size, country of origin and country of destination.
- The E.A.M.1.5. is not responsible for takes and fabilities. Every piece from the E.A.M.1.5. most carry our over stamps and seals.
- By using the E.A.M.1.5, you support the only afternative to the national birroveracies and you strengthen the international artists community.

ULISES CARRION (Fost Moster)

ERRATIC ART MAIL INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM Strengracht ist Aresterdam, The Notherlands Office Hours: Toesday to Saforday 14.00 - 17.00 pm Pelephone 0.10 - 2590 87

Figure 39: carrion-eamis



Figure 40: gpo-4

## **VILE & Pauline Smith**

Genesis P'Orridge was not the only Mail Artist whose correspondence was intercepted and led to legal prosecution. P'Orridge's "Mail Action" booklet includes a letter by the London-based Mail Artist Pauline Smith who writes:

"On the day of your trial a policeman arrived at my flat with a search warrant muttering about bombs & Jewish MPs etc.

Only single copies of my leaflets were taken away - no addresses".

P'Orridge adds a note that "Since this letter Pauline Smith has had to move to a new flat [...] Thee Special Branch have been and taken thee number of her passport. She no longer can stamp Adolf Hitler Fan Club on any letter".

The *Adolf Hitler Fan Club* was Pauline Smith's art project at that time. It was widely perceived as pre-punk style provocation and testing of the limits of free speech, much like P'Orridge's later work. However, reading Smith's own statements, doubts are in order:

"The ADOLF HITLER FAN CLUB was intended to be an analogy for the week-kneed British Governments since 1945 and was stimulated by local Chelsea politics regarding landlords/tenants/development/tourism, in which I was interested in the early seventies. The country is a mess and nothing gets any better. [...] For the immediate present I am preoccupied with Adolf Hitler's involvement in the occult, the mediumistic nature of his public speaking and the mystery of his charismatic appeal to the multitudes. He may have been a bad man but he knew very well that people do not live by bread alone."

("I did not read *Mein Kampf* until 1971. At that tie I was struck by the way Hitler's description of decadent Austrian democracy prior to WW1 could equally well suit the last few British governments. In 1971 ruthless destruction of the community in which I lived was being carried out by commercially minded people whilst those who had the power to stop this happening stood by like

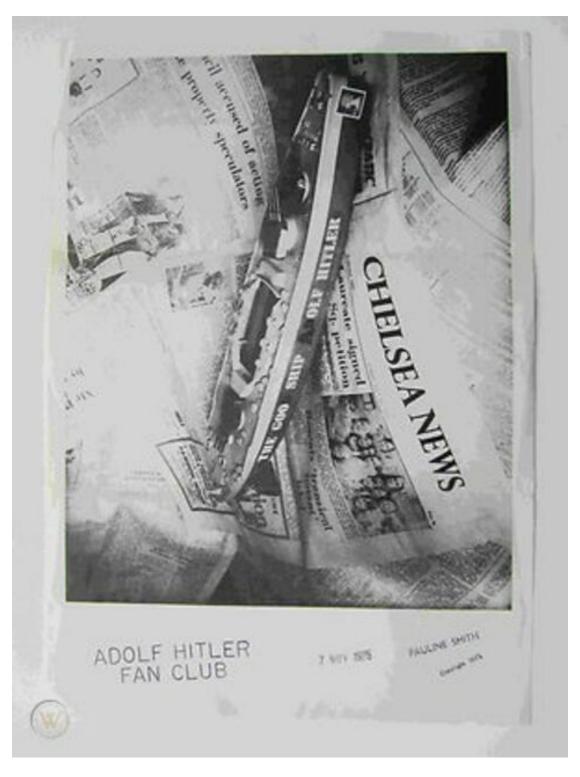


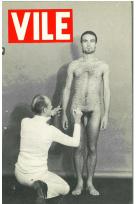
Figure 41: pauline-smith-1



Figure 42: pauline\_smith-1

## reeds in the wind.")

It's probably fair to say that Smith's motives were dubious and quite comparable to the contemporary resurgence of esoteric fascism and anti-semitic anticapitalism. But even if this was merely an artistic research experiment or an early example trolling (the same sort of ambiguity we encounter in today's imageboard and meme culture), it was embedded in a larger radical free speech ethos of the Eternal Network at large. This is obvious in the covers of San Francisco-published VILE, which appeared in close geographical and historical proximity to the Berkeley free speech movement:



Scanning this cover for this lecture, I re-read the whole issue and found this sent-in contribution on its pages:

Obviously, the above is an antisemitic caricature. On top of that, the drawings have a great visual similitude to the now-popular antisemitic "Happy Merchant" meme that is a staple in Neonazi and Alt-Right Internet culture, and originated (like most popular memes) on the 4chan image board.

While, VILE itself and the Mail Art network at large tended to be on the political left, the principle of no curatorship, radical democracy and radical inclusion opened it up for such contributions, a phenomenon that repeated itself in practically every free-speech subculture, including punk and post-punk in the 1980s and Internet culture since the 1990s, with either libertarianism or anti-

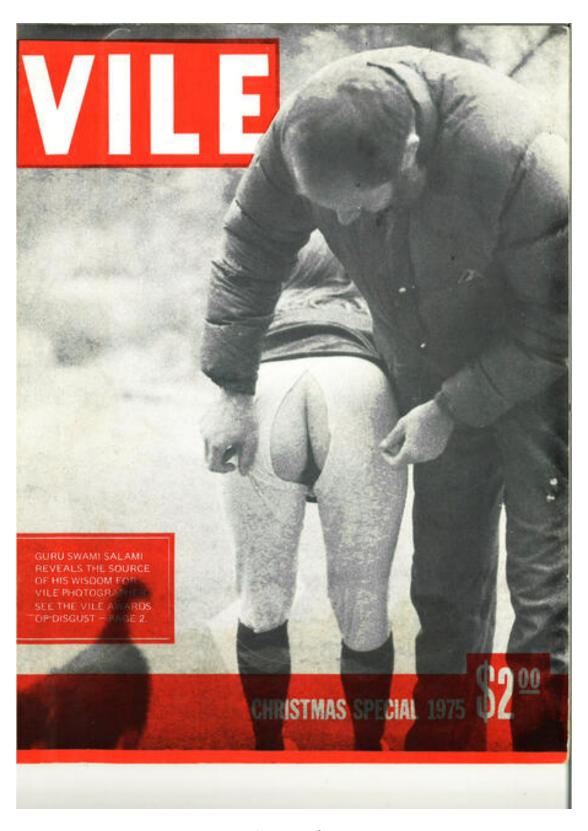


Figure 43: vile-1

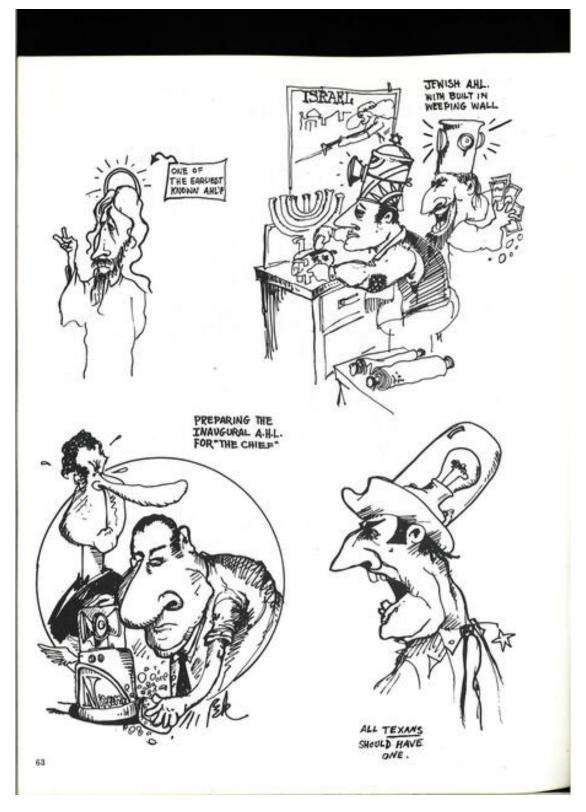


Figure 44: vile-6

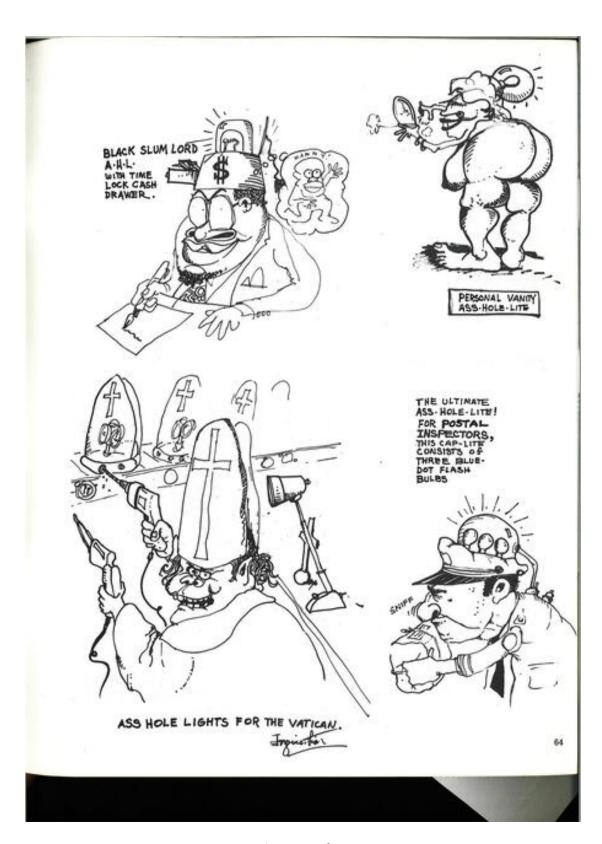


Figure 45: vile-7



Figure 46: happy\_merchant



Figure 47: happy\_merchant

capitalism providing the glue between the left and the extreme right. (Seen this in contemporary art as well; recent examples include Nina Power and, apparently, Emma Sulkowicz who got redpilled.)

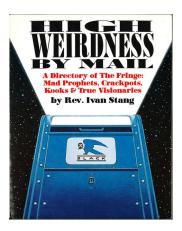


Figure 48: stang-high\_weirdness-01



Figure 49: stang-high\_weirdness-02

Another example for this inclusionism in pre-digital network culture is the book *High Weirdness by Mail* by Ivan Stang, the founder and head of the (satirical) Church of SubGenius. Published in 1988, it reads like a precursor of an Internet directory of fringe culture, only that the organizations and individuals listed corresponded by postal mail. Neonazi and other extreme right organizations were included in this directory, both out of a free speech ethos and for amusement. Three decades later, campy fascism has become a fully integrated propaganda tactic of the extreme right.

## Cavellini + junk mail

The main reason why participants left the Mail Art network, however, was not political, but "junk mail" as the downside of Mail Art's radical inclusionism. Many people saw mail art exhibitions and



Figure 50: stang-high\_weirdness-03



Figure 51: stang-high\_weirdness-04



Figure 52: fricker

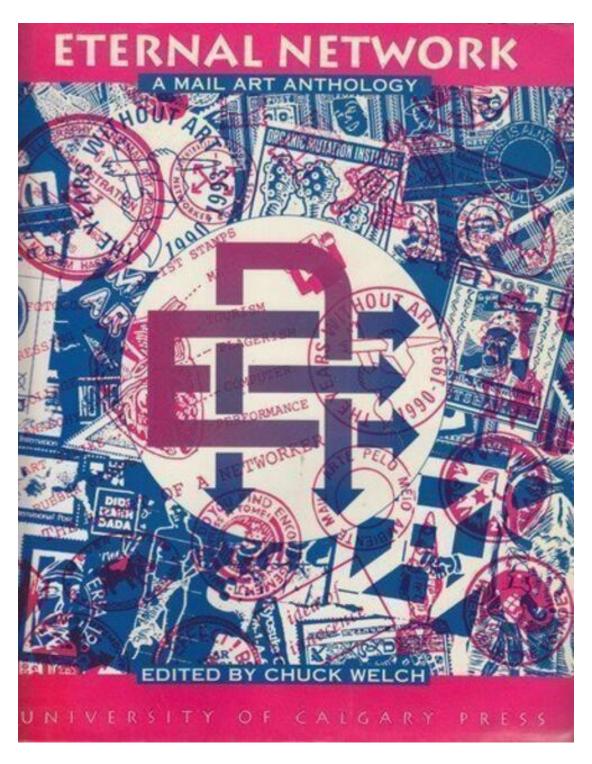


Figure 53: welch-eternal\_network



Figure 54: braincell

publications as an effortless way of obtaining exposure. Mail Art therefore had a "spam" problem as early in the 1970s that only became worse over the years. Parallel to that, one can observe in Mail Art publications an increasing preoccupation with the network, its structure and administration as such. By the 1980s, Mail Art - or The Eternal Network - became less and less an infrastructure for and paralleling other artist-run initiatives, but a system mostly preoccupied with itself. Every Mail Artist, or networker, ultimately became a post master or even post office, or in modern terms: a systems administrator - which is best visible in the boom of rubber stamp art as a subgenre within Mail Art. (In his 2001 book "Networked Art", which is actually about mail art, not Internet art, the US-American critic and scholar Craig Saper calls these "intimate bureaucracies".)



Figure 55: cavellini-2

The Mail Art network actually happened to be used for art-commercial spamming and yielded its own spam artist, the Italian Guglielmo Achille Cavellini, the son of a rich industrialist family and unsuccessful artist, who used Mail Art to as a promotional vehicle for himself, with mass-produced and mass-spread stickers advertising his future museum retrospective as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Since this was done as a conceptual artwork, the "eternal network" was defenseless against this self-marketing campaign, and Cavellini stickers were a staple of 1980s Mail Art.

The definition of mail art as an "eternal network" and its peer-to-peer "real correspondence" topology (as sketched by Vittore Baroni) ultimately lead to the same problems as in the Internet when E-Mail became a common good in the 1990s.

## Conclusion: It's not the algorithm, stupid

While my narrative has admittedly framed Mail Art in the terminology and through the lens of contemporary Internet culture, I do insist that this parallel is not coincidental, but that both the Eternal Network of Mail Art and the Internet expose structural issues of *any* networked communication, regardless the technology that is being used: the problem of ownership and governance of the infrastructural apparatus, with the issues of "monsters" rising from ostensibly decentralized structures, issues of both censorship and laissez-faire politics including crypto-fascism and



Figure 56: cavellini-sticker

esoteric politics, issues of growing bureaucracy and system administration, issues of commercial and vanity abuse, issues of spectacle and populism. Mail Artists, in that sense, were indeed experimenters, "antennas" or even literally an avant-garde of contemporary networked culture, and perhaps that quality of the "Eternal Network" can now be more clearly seen and appreciated. (Whereas in the past, Mail Art was frequently criticized for allegedly being an inferior copy of Dada and Fluxus.)

Conversely, for contemporary media studies of the Internet, the lesson to be learned from Mail Art can be summed up with the sentence: It's not the algorithm, stupid. Since most Mail Art neither involves any electronic technology, nor any form of automation or formalization of processes, none of the above issues stem from problematic algorithms, biased data sets and resulting discriminatory artificial intelligence. This makes one wonder whether algorithms, filter bubbles and big data aren't being used as scapegoats for problematic social dynamics.