

Intimate Bureaucracies & Infrastructuralism: A Networked Introduction to Assemblings

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1. In the second half of the twentieth century, artists, writers, and printers started many alternative distribution networks for their experimental art and literature. They supplemented or ignored the gallery system with direct mailings and other innovative ways to reach their audiences and collaborators. During the 1960s, these alternative networks became the driving force of a new artworld scene that encouraged works difficult to classify or hang on a wall. By the early 1970s, distribution networks depended on the periodic mailings of very small editions, 50-500 copies, collected in folios, bound volumes, and boxes of original artist's print, texts, pages, books, and textual-objects. These *assemblings* require that each book maker, visual poet, media artist, or printer send the entire run of his or her contribution to an assembler or compiler who, in turn, distributes the collection to subscribers or sometimes simply to all participants.
2. Often consisting of visual and concrete poems, rubber-stamp art, xerography, small three-dimensional found-art, fine-press printing, re-cycled or *détourned* cartoons and advertisements, mock examples of mass produced printed objects, hand-drawn scribbles and pictures, etc., the assemblings are extremely difficult to describe in terms of a single medium's form or structure or as art or craft. Many of these collections consist of a single page from each participant. Significantly, iconoclastic and personal code systems as well as the common practice of parody and allusion make the network, rather than the internal workings of the texts, the key reference of these works.
3. In the 1990s, many of the people involved in mail-art networks began producing multimedia magazines on the World Wide Web. "Home pages" and electronic "zines" depend on making links to other sites on the Internet. Each

page, even corporate pages, link to and assemble other groups' or individuals' work. The pages link according to the logic of amateur discoverers. "Here's what I found," they say. As with earlier assemblings and networks, the sense of a potentially infinite web appears as a salient characteristic of these electronic forms. As with the artists' networks, the participants in the World Wide Web also seem to cherish an intimacy between visitors and the assemblers of the page. The seemingly inevitable iconoclastic personality of each site makes it too difficult to imagine other ways to code and construct these pages. Much of the fetishism of artisan production appears in the electronic forms of assemblings. Although they depend on extremely limited and constrained design parameters, the designers try to add their own personal twists. The pages' codes reflect the play within this huge impersonal system with bureaucratic routing instructions, the iconoclasm of the site, and the intimacy between visitors and "home" sites. While comparing the Web to a medium like film or video makes it difficult to examine this type of social-aesthetic interplay, comparing the Web to assemblings and mail-art networks helps to highlight this interplay. Because the alternative artists' networks examine the same fears and hopes found in many descriptions of the information super-highway, we can learn about the electronic web's potential from studying the assemblings' codes.

4. The attention to artists' magazines and electronic on-line 'zines has further encouraged the growth of these works and networks. Chuck Welch estimates the number of mail-art participants at around six thousand in 1993; that number does not include the many more who buy 'zines at newsstands. Because these magazines inherently offer a forum for discussions about this type of work, much of the secondary literature resides within the community of these artists. For example, in an issue of *Arte Postale!* Vittore Baroni has written one of the most complete histories of mail-art, but only subscribers or collectors have access to this treatise. A flirtation with more ambitious summaries, analyses, and definitions has emerged among current participants. The special issue of the popular *RE/Search* magazine dedicated to "ZINES!" also includes a *détourned* photograph of the editor of one magazine, *Mystery Date*, with the cartoon-like voice balloon exclaiming,

"SURRENDER TO THE INCREDIBLY STRANGE URGE...TO CREATE YOUR OWN ZINE!" This issue, and Mike Gunderloy's earlier *The World of Zines: A Guide to the Independent Magazine Revolution*, mark the increasing interest in low-budget self-produced magazines, as well as a cross-over of these works from 'zines, networks, and assemblings to a wider audience.

5. From April 17 through June 27, 1997, the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania will host an extensive exhibition of assemblings, ["Networking Artists & Poets: Assemblings from the Ruth and Marvin Sacker Archive of Concrete & Visual Poetry."](#) In conjunction with the exhibit, a series of talks and demonstrations and a compilation of Web sites will help give visitors an opportunity to experience these works. In keeping with the "networked" characteristic of these works, this essay can function as the curator's introduction to the exhibit.
6. Except for one notable exception, which began in the first half of the twentieth century--*Feuillets Inutiles* (and perhaps *Spawn*, begun in 1917)--and issued compilations from the late 1920s through the middle of the 1930s, most of these assemblings began as part of the underground art scene in the second half of the twentieth century. Of course, Dada publications, like Marcel Duchamp's *The Blind Man*, hinted at collaborative efforts with claims such as: "The second number of *The Blind Man* will appear as soon as You have sent sufficient material" (qtd. in Perkins 15). The editors did not turn the magazines into artworks in themselves, unlike assemblings.¹ General histories of underground, experimental, and neo-*avant-garde* activities during the 1960s and 70s include only peripheral discussions about these crucial distribution systems. When future scholars examine the sensibility appearing during those years, and how it influenced later Web sites and e-zines, the work on texts somewhere between visual art, literary text, and performance will prove essential.
7. In the late 1970s, punk 'zines appeared in England as a fanzine variant of assemblings. Dick Hebdige writes that "the existence of an alternative punk press demonstrated that it was not only clothes or music that could be immediately and cheaply produced from the limited resources at hand." These works allowed for a "critical space within the subculture itself to counteract the hostile or

at least ideologically inflected coverage which punk was receiving in the media" (111). These punk 'zines' attitude grew from concerns shared by the Situationists with their forerunners the Lettrists. Greil Marcus traces the lineage from the Situationist aesthetic to the punk movement; later I will trace the historical development of these Lettrist and Situationist tendencies in assemblings.

8. The two most significant factors of these punk 'zines' involved their production practices and their attitude toward readers. Punk 'zines' were published without editorial interference. "Typing errors and grammatical mistakes, misspellings and jumbled paginations were left uncorrected in the final proof. Those corrections and crossings out that were made before publication were left to be deciphered by the reader" (Hebdige 111). This slipshod aesthetic produced a sense of urgency and immediacy. These publications wanted to make readers into music makers, 'zine publishers, and protesters rather than passive consumers. The most important sign of punk's impact had as much to do with a diagram printed in the fanzine *Sniffin Glue* as it did with a particular concert. *Sniffin Glue*, with its irreverent title and attitude, achieved the highest circulation of the punk periodicals. The diagram showed "three finger positions on the neck of a guitar over the caption: 'Here's one chord, here's two more, now form your own band'" (Hebdige 112). The most influential punk group, The Sex Pistols, played few concerts; the band members hated each other and much of their own music; yet their punk pose, flaunting raw, simple music challenged others to start bands. Much like the underground art scene's assemblings, the punk 'zines' captured this "do it yourself" attitude and allowed for a positive spin on a cultural movement that mainstream media only described as a scourge, threat, or oddity. Considering punk music's re-emergence in the form of grunge rock and more recently neo-punk, it is not surprising that the number of 'zines' has also rapidly increased since the late 1980s.
9. This attitude that *everyone is an artist* also appears in the conceptual work of Fluxus, which helped motivate the emergence of mail art networks and assemblings with activities like their "flux-post" stamps and mailings. Many assemblings began because of the Fluxus influence. For example, the editor of *ART/LIFE*, Joe Cardella, worked with Alison Knowles and Yohima Wada at the Fluxus influenced

performance space "The Kitchen" before he began his assembling. Not only did the "flux kits" serve as a model for boxed assemblings, but the Fluxus invention of fictitious organizations and official codes and stamps greatly influenced the attitude of some of these assemblings. In her discussion of conceptual artists' books Johanna Drucker² suggests a socio-political dimension of publication and distribution practices by coining the phrase "democratic multiples" (69). This type of work began with Fluxus, CoBrA, Lettrist, and Situationist work,³ and in assemblings we see this same spirit everywhere. In the first issue of *Libro Internacional* (1976, compiled by Edgardo-Antonio Vigo, Argentina), the influential mail artist Guglielmo Cavellini constructs a poem relevant to this democratic impulse. He prints his version of the ten commandments on a sticker of the Italian flag. The commandments instruct one to avoid being part of the history of art and modern art and not to glorify one's art or art movement. The last commandment reads: "thou shalt not publish the story of thy past present and future history, nor shalt thou write it in diverse and sundry places such as thy personal clothing, other human bodies, bolts of cloth, columns, and so forth." In the first issue of *Arte Postale!* (1979), Vittore Baroni's introduction states that "the only way to get a copy of 'arte-postale' is contributing by sending a mail-art work or publication in exchange. Special contributors send 100 words size A4 and get a free subscription to 5 issues of the magazine." One very influential assembling, *Commonpress*, is named after this effort at producing work by "common effort." The coordinator of the assembling, Pawel Petasz, even invites readers to volunteer to edit special issues.⁴ In an interview, Baroni confesses that he started his assembling because he "needed something readily available to trade with other networkers," so he followed the lead of other mail-artists and started his own periodical (Janssen 3). An advertising slogan for *ART/LIFE* captures the democratic spirit by offering the participant to "become a page in art history in your own time."⁵

10. Drucker explains that a similar move toward democratization occurred at first in artists' books because of the new inexpensive modes of reproduction available in post WWII Europe and America. Fluxus member George Brecht staged mail art events that resembled the famous

Happenings. As the artists increasingly became engaged with conceptual art rather than traditional media or forms, they looked for alternative forms of expression. They soon found that the concept of "multiples," as opposed to the unique art object, offered a fascinating way to criticize the aura or place of a work of art. By definition the printed book did not have an original in the same way that an oil painting does. Drucker notes that with a relatively wider audience, the conceptual artists had to confront the problem of an audience left "baffled by...esoteric and complex conceptual terms" (Drucker 80). In fact, she argues that the artistic vision of some of the artists' books never quite came to terms with their ideal of liberating the body politic. The conceptual book artists needed to make and find an audience. To do so, they started several institutions, including Printed Matter, which sells mass produced multiples of books and periodicals with over 100 copies; Franklin Furnace, which recently sold its collection to the Museum of Modern Art; the Visual Studies Workshop, which the book-art critic Joan Lyons founded; NEXUS Press in Atlanta; and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, which has helped publish a number of important conceptual book works. Many of the printers and conceptual artists also looked to assemblings as a distribution and publicity system. For example, one editor of an assembling introduces a compilation by writing that "neither the editor nor the publisher feels this project will make any money, but it might well attract some press attention" (Bowles).

11. The premiere issue of *Running Dog One and Done* (1976) is packaged in a portfolio with a silhouette reproduction of Muybridge's running greyhound from 1879 on the cover. The contents include photocopy montages, concrete poems, and other texts on single sheets of loose pages. The letter from the editor, Michael Crane, notes that "the attempt of this publication is to present the documents of the experiments and explorations artists are undertaking today on an international level." He explains that the unbound pages allow readers to "recycle the pages within their own information systems." The introduction and the cover art point to a shared interest among participants in assemblings returning to a situation in which artists function more as experimenters, where information is produced to

encourage and facilitate sharing. The work should feel as if it is taken from a journal of experimentation. The gallery system cannot compete with faster distribution systems that treat art as experiment rather than as masterpiece.

12. The interest in manipulating distribution systems came by the end of the twentieth century to resemble a new form of art in itself--networked art. Nam June Paik, in his play on Karl Marx's world-changing phrase, "seize the means of production," emblemizes Fluxus' concern to democratize networks. He says, "Marx: Seize the production-medium. Fluxus: Seize the distribution-medium!" This attitude led to great interest in mail-art systems. A fine example of mail art is Ben Vautier's "postman's choice," which consists of a postcard with two identical sides. The sender fills in each side with two different names and addresses. The postman then has the choice of delivery. This work uses the open structural parameters of a system (mail) to run a humorous experiment.
13. Assemblings allude to a socio-poetic practice and call for some type of network analysis. To describe these practices and analyses, alluding to the network artists' penchant for playing on authoritative codes or terms, I use the term **infrastructuralism**. While structuralism is concerned with signs and sign systems, infrastructuralism is the study of system signs, socio-poetics, and conceptual-traffic patterns. The poets and artists involved in assemblings use many of the techniques of modernist poetics, but they especially cherish the dry wit involved in making fun of authoritative terms, official sounding institutional names, and the trappings of academic research. The Neoists, for example, invented a name that both spoofed and bettered any effort at riding the wave of the next new thing or neo-old thing. Infrastructuralism, with its connotations of bridges and roads as well as its apparent extension of structuralism, participates in this gentle caricature of the latest method even as it offers a serious and valuable methodology. A literal version of this motif or preoccupation with infrastructure, the assembling *8 X 10* includes a work by Robert Cummings analyzing sections of Los Angeles street maps. Cummings, once associated with mail art networks, withdrew in 1973 after writing a letter (which later appeared in *FILE* 2.3 [1979]) explaining that "The quick-copy mail art may pass in Vancouver or San Francisco as art, but

wherever, it's not worth the paper it's on, nor the ink either; the utmost in idle activity" (qtd. in Banana, "Mail Art Canada" 252).⁶ A fascinating translation of concrete poetry into infrastructural poetry is "poemparades" by G.J. de Rook, which appears in *AH* (issue 8, 1967, compiled by Herman Damen). These "poemparades" consist of two photos of masses of people in a parade formation spelling out words and images in Chinese. This smirking seriousness is a defining characteristic of networked art. Conscious of readers, fascinated with bureaucratic collectivities, and aware of the serious value of a sense of humor, the networked artist often produces Janusian works.

Impasses To Interpretation, or What An Assembling Can Teach Us About Reading On The Web

14. The assemblings and mail art distribution systems examined here do not fit neatly into an art historical context in part because the individual works in any given assembling often, and often intentionally, lack aesthetic sophistication. Even an advocate of anti-aesthetic sensibilities might argue that many of the individual texts have little value to anyone besides the sender and possibly the receiver. These works appear in the context of hundreds and thousands of individual texts, images, objects, and textual-image objects all found in assemblings, collections of mail art, visual and conceptual poetics, and potentially mass produced multiples. My analyses follow many trails through the sometimes insignificant to suggest something monumentally important that exceeds the individual works. This strategy also assigns the prominent works a different significance in the context of this sea of insignificance. In this sense, the assemblings explicitly and implicitly advocate a postmodernist counter to modernist notions of genius and great works. Few of the individual works found in assemblings represent a great achievement. Some of the works flirt with a poetry of simple recognition. Marjorie Perloff notes that this sort of "license-plate joke" poetry merely demands one glancing look for appreciation. In the assemblings, recognition only starts the process of discovering invention and genius as inherently tied to the interconnectedness of these works.

15. This resistance of assemblings to the leveling power of mechanical and electronic reproduction, even as they make use of these mechanisms, resembles the modernist poets' struggle with the notion of genius while yielding to the initiative of (popular) languages. Network artists attempt more modestly to stave off homogenization, though they nonetheless wallow in the systems and mechanisms of mass distribution. Out of this and other peculiarities of networked art and poetry will spring an interpretive methodology unlike literary and art theories used to interpret individual texts and those texts' individual contexts. Networked analysis and infrastructuralism refer both to the study of a particular type of networked art and literature and to a type of analysis which emerges from studying these networks. A number of interpretive impasses appear as soon as one begins examining these materials.

1. Circumstantiality

16. In describing one common paranoid schizophrenic symptom, clinicians use the term "circumstantiality." That term describes the inability to edit out an overwhelming mass of trivial or irrelevant details which stymies the ability to stick to a topic or express a central idea. Read as an aesthetic strategy, circumstantiality appears in a comedy routine by Gilda Radner. Her character, Roseanne Roseannadana, begins her meandering stories with the pretext of giving a special news report on cultural events. She never quite gets to the point. Beginning a report about returning Christmas gifts, for example, she discusses her surprise at finding Bo Derek right in front of her in line. She notices that the movie star had a hair sticking out of her nose. She adds to this that she fantasized about pulling two more hairs out of her nose, making a braid, and putting a bead on them [in the style of Derek's braided hair in the movie *10*]. When the anchorman interrupts her absurdly irrelevant discussion, she quotes her uncle Dan Roseannadana who "always said, 'if it's not one thing, it's another.'" Radner's routine parodies the traditional news essay and also suggests a hilarious alternative. Circumstantiality as a joke allows for the realization that we usually edit out the morass of details when we want to "communicate" an idea, story, a point, or what have you.

17. The mass of details in an assembling functions much like linguistic fetishes substituting for the loss of any central meaning. Readers cannot attend to everything; instead, they inevitably read and watch in the same way analysts listen: askew. Quickly they learn that to look for a central idea is not only frustrating, but also not particularly productive as an interpretive method. Using the analogy of circumstantiality to guide an interpretation allows readers of these often daunting works to appreciate the function of effects in terms of a social-aesthetic disruption or change. It will not help a reader to appreciate or cure an artist's pathologies. The analogy highlights the significance of what appears explicitly and intentionally as a random compilation of many unrelated artists' and poets' works in assemblings.

2. On-Sendings and Fanzines

18. Another impasse for interpretation exists in the unique ways the network challenges authorship. Ray Johnson, the most influential mail artist, founded the New York Correspondance School (other artists invented variations-- for instance, Glen Lewis' Corres Sponge Dance School, started around 1970). Ed Plunkett, who actually coined the name, explains that "it was a reference to the 'New York School,' meaning the leading group of mostly abstract painters that flourished then" (qtd. in Filliou 7).⁷ This type of work always had a (parodic) connection to the vanguards of abstract painting. May Wilson, who also participated in Johnson's School, explains that "Correspondence is spelled correspondance...the truth for Ray Johnson is not correspondence to actuality (verisimilitude), but is correspondence of part to part (pregnant similarities that dance)" (W. Wilson 54).⁸ His correspondence art has an implicit epistemology: a fan's paranoid logic. This is the logic examined in the next section.

19. Johnson initiated a practice called "on-sendings." An on-sending involves an incomplete or unfinished artwork sent to someone, who, in turn, completes the work by sending it on with some additions to another participant in the network. The on-sending also creates the first (putatively) real network because the art depends on each link in the chain. These chains began when artists wanted to avoid the gallery system and art market. The gift exchanges evolved

into more elaborate networks, but, in this case, remained relatively small circles of participants. This gift giving is reminiscent of the Lettrists' interest in *Potlatch* (the name of their journal). The cultish gift exchanges soon led Johnson to explore the fan's logic, and he increased his manipulation of the participants.

20. Johnson would often involve famous artists, like Andy Warhol, as well as literary and art critics in his on-sendings. Another variant of this process asked the participant to send the work back to Johnson after adding to the image. Much of his mail art and on-sending consisted of trivial small objects not quite profound enough to be called "found-objects." These on-sendings were part of the stuff previously excluded from art-galleries. He became famous for his repetition of a bunny-head character. These identical hand-drawn bunny-headed representations of famous people, each with its own caption, suggested that one could substitute any head as long as you included famous or personally significant names. The characteristic look of these bunny heads also suggested that portraiture represented an artist's trademark as much if not more than the subject painted. His earlier collage works that included prints of James Dean and Elvis Presley found him a small place in the history of early Pop art, but the later work moved off the canvas and into conceptual work involving participants' own desires. Clive Phillpot mentions that his later work is witty and demonstrates superb graphic skill.
21. Because all his portraits are identical, his name-dropping stands out, as the reader inevitably associates the name under the picture with the identical image. The readers care about the big "names" even as they laugh at the absurdity of that interest considering the endless serial repetition. Johnson's fascination with celebrity also manifests itself in his mail from fan clubs like the "Shelley Duval Fan Club." Other clubs included: Marcel Duchamp Fan Club, the Jean Dubuffet Fan Club, and the Paloma Picasso Fan Club, as well as the Blue Eyes Club (and its Japanese division, Brue Eyes Club), and the Spam Radio Club. He even advertised meetings in newspapers, much to the surprise of the "genuine" fans. The kind of celebrity watching and stalking that Johnson is examining here pokes fun at artworld celebrity seeking. The lineage of assemblings from fanzines suggests another level of satire. Johnson's work inevitably

comments on fanzine-like networks and assemblings; his work takes these connections literally for figurative purposes. They put the reader in an uncomfortable position by highlighting the participants' fan-like fascinations and identifications. For example, in his on-sendings, he challenges the participants not just to "participate," but to resist sending the artwork on to a famous artist like Andy Warhol. The work points out just how difficult it is *not* to want to associate your scribbles with a work completed by a celebrity.

22. The term "fan" re-emerges in common usage in the twentieth-century, but the word derives from the Latin *fanum*, a temple for prophets, and refers to the priests who flagellated themselves into a frenzy of inspiration. It appears in isolated instances during the 17th century, and becomes a more important term in the late 18th century as the threat to enlightenment. One study of fanaticism argues that the pejorative sense of the term appears only in the context of tolerance and tolerant societies. One is only a fanatic when certain intense behaviors are no longer considered appropriate (see Haynal, Molnar, and Puymège). Even though they share the same denotation, the usage "fan" has a different connotation from "fanatic." The term "fan" conjures an isolated pathetic character idolizing stars, celebrities, or even genres of film, television, and literature like science fiction. We might think of the science fiction fans with their fanzines like *Spockanalia*. The fanzine began as a marketing ploy of Hollywood studios in the 1920s as part of their publicity machine. In the 1930s, fanzines produced by fans begin appearing. By the 1940s a new twist to these 'zines appears. The Amateur Press Associations produce a type of science fiction collection of works by fans that will have an enormous impact on conceptual art especially during the late 1960s and early 1970s. An Amateur Press Association, usually referred to as an **apa**, consists of "a group of people who publish fanzines and send them to an official editor who mails a copy of each to each member in a regular bundle" (Sanders xi). The apas focus increasingly on the lives and interests of fans rather than on science fiction itself--they include "mailing comments" that do not react to sci-fi but to each other's contributions. Soon these apa fanzines leave sci-fi behind and focus on small audiences of under a hundred. With the

number of apas increasing through the 1950s, the participants in all such groups grew to include thousands (maybe even more than ten thousand). One commentator notes that these apas have a "curious blend of distance and intimacy." That blend reappears in the conceptual art works found in mail-art and assemblings since the late sixties.

23. The apas fanzines included written sounds, visual effects, puns (especially visual puns) irony, humor, nastiness, "fun with language," running jokes and allusions, obscure lingo shared by the participants only, and a highly interactive feel to the works. One critic calls the atmosphere of an apa a "mail order cocktail party." The especially "creative apas" contained poetry, drawing, and art. It was only a small step from these apas to the production of assemblings for artworld fans, those not-yet-famous artists looking for an outlet besides the absurdly restricted gallery system. In the science fiction apas, slogans like "Fandom Is A Way Of Life" and corresponding acronyms like FIAWOL or parodic comments on those acronyms like FIJAGH ("Fandom Is Just A Goddamned Hobby") brings to mind the later use of pseudonyms and corporate names in assemblings and mail-art like The New York Correspondance School or the slogan "Mail-Art is Tourism."
24. A contemporary observer cannot help but notice the connection between fans and their particular type of fanaticism called stalking. The current political climate, with new national statutes defining and restricting stalking as well as increased concern on the state level, and the on-going representation of fans as stalkers in films like *The Fan* or *King of Comedy*, have highlighted the tendencies lurking in more benign forms in all fans--every one of us.⁹ The fan as stalker comments on the society of the spectacle in a disturbing performative criticism. While celebrities enter your home through the television, the fan returns the favor as a stalker. They challenge the one-way spectacle. If the star demands attention, then the stalking fan gives attention and demands a response. So, for example, Margaret Ray decided to pose as David Letterman's wife. While he was away in California, she moved into his New Canaan, Connecticut house with her son, and began to live life as a celebrity's wife. She ate meals there, drove the Porsche, and was only caught when she did not have the

money for a turnpike toll. When Letterman dropped the charges, she moved back in within five days. When the police came to get her, she insisted that she tidy-up the house because Dave insists on a tidy home ("An Obsessed Fan Decides...").

25. Stars seek devoted and adoring fans. They send out photographs with personalized messages and their signature. Most fans understand the convention that this signature is not a personalized mark, but a signature in every other context functions as a sign of legitimation by connection to the actual person. Fans sometimes misrecognize these signs as signs of intimacy. They simply want their love requited, and when it goes unrequited, they write more letters. The typical stalker will write letters which in another context could pass for love letters. The crazed fan is perhaps the quintessential character in the late twentieth century. We see the dynamic in the films about obsessed fans mentioned above. In *The Fan*, the anti-hero confesses to his or her hero that "I lived my whole life for you, and you never answered me." In fact, stalkers often begin by writing hundreds and thousands of letters to their idols. These letters often contain fetishized objects like locks of hair or pieces of skin much the same way that mail-artists send small fetishized objects to each other. Michael J. Fox and his bride received 6,000 letters with death threats from one of Fox's fans because the fan was upset that Fox had not married her. Anne Murray received 263 phone calls in six months from a middle-aged farmer obsessed with Murray. The stars most likely to receive these letters have friendly approachable images on the screen; they are usually not the most glamorous or interesting stars.
26. Michael Perry, who stalked Olivia-Newton John, had a fascination with her eyes and thought that her colored contact lens were a special signal to him. He eventually killed five people, including his parents, by shooting out their eyes. His fantasy also included Sandra Day O'Connor, and he was arrested in a Washington, D.C. hotel near the Supreme Court. In his hotel room, he had seven television sets--all turned on but tuned in to static and painted with eyes on the screens. The scene is reminiscent of *Equus*, the play in which a boy stabs out horses' eyes. "Normal" fans do not recognize the embarrassment of the spectacle looking back at them--mocking them; the "normal" fan does not

fantasize the possibility that she or he might play a role in the celebrity's life. Normal fans give their love and attention without ever wanting anything in return: they recognize the celebrity as a god. The stalker wants his or her prayers answered.

27. The mythic star quality of Ray Johnson himself (often referred to as "Sugar Dada") grew as the networks increased in size. In 1970, Marcia Tucker staged the "New York Correspondance School Show" at the Whitney Museum. The show included work from 106 people--except Johnson's own work--because he included only work sent to him. He put himself in the position of a structuring absence, and increased the desire to know more about him. Although he announced the death of the New York Correspondence School, in 1973, by sending a letter to the obituaries department of the *New York Times*, he soon invented Buddha University (reminiscent of Naim June Paik's early mail-art series The University of Avant-Garde Hinduism). Playing on his tendency to drop people from his list of participants, his stamp read, "Ray Johnson has been dropped." This sort of stamp, and the appearance of rubber stamps of Johnson's head throughout the mail-art networks, further fueled the star frenzy. The mail-artist Honoria mentions a project in which she includes an image of herself with other images of mail-artists in a tub; the caption reads, "taking a bath with Ray Johnson." (Honoria) In his efforts to become invisible from the art markets, he became a world-famous icon and name brand. He was so well-known as a "name" rather than as a personality, that in 1973 he was mistakenly included in a biographical dictionary of Afro-American artists. He had finally reached the status shared by Woody Allen's Zelig. In fact, Johnson had done performances at the Fluxus AG gallery on "Nothing." As one perverse twist on his highlighting of a fan's logic, he would often include prints of potato mashers in his work as well, playing on that word's other slang meaning: "a man who annoys women not acquainted with him, by attempting familiarities." Fans were the ultimate mashers.
28. In an article on Johnson, Clive Phillpot, the former director of New York's Museum of Modern Art's special collection of book and mail-art, mentions the last twist in Johnson's effort to play through this perverse fan's logic--the logic that fuels the art markets as well as the society of

the spectacle--by calling or writing strangers. I think I received one of Johnson's calls after publishing an article on the use of Fluxus strategies in University education. I do not know how he got my number, but one day my answering machine had a message on it ("Ray Johnson, Ray Johnson, Ray Johnson"); I did not recognize the voice, and at first was flattered. Then, when I could not figure out who called me, it began bothering me. Who actually called? How did they find me? Why did they call? What do they want? And, if it is actually Johnson, then what should I do with the tape-recording? Is this an artwork? Should I salvage the tape? What does this mean? Johnson (or some surrogate) had electronically mashed me. About two years later, Ray Johnson committed suicide--somehow not very surprising, considering his "suicide" of the New York Correspondence School and his book *A Book About Death*. With his typical flair he turned the sad occasion into a morbid joke and event. The *New York Times* ran a series of articles sifting through the details of his staging of the suicide, including a postcard sent to his home address that arrived the day after his suicide; it read: "If you are reading this, then Ray Johnson is dead."¹⁰

29. John Lennon often participated with Yoko Ono in Fluxus work and events. In issue number 7 of *Aspen* (1968, "The British Box"), Lennon includes a facsimile of his diary for 1968. Because of his status as a star, one rushes to read it carefully for any new information. This parodic use of "everyday life" appears in "The Lennon Diary" in which all the entries read: "Got up, went to work, came home, watched telly, went to bed." The entries get increasingly scrawled, and the diary ends with one last "memorandum" that says, "Remember to buy Diary 1969." In some ways, then, the repetition of the same everyday events plays a joke on the fan's narcissistic identification with a star. One cannot avoid the urge, and the joke depends on that uncomfortable recognition and deflation of the pay-off. The other reading of the diary is that it parodies the boredom of everyday life in a Situationist send-up of the promise of change in the "society of the spectacle." Like much of the work in assemblings, this is at first just a joke of recognition: you simply get the joke and move on. Its other meanings seep in more slowly.
30. These works attack not just the art world's production of

celebrities as a marketing device, but also the way this marketing depends on the fantasies of other artists including those in alternative art groups. To break the narcissistic link between the participant and the celebrity may in fact be impossible; Johnson's jokes depend on the link remaining strong. When you look at one of his serial images of basically identical bunny-like faces captioned by various famous names, or you are asked to function as the middle relay for a work involving Johnson and a celebrity, you laugh only if you recognize your own investment in this game. Otherwise, you simply discard the junk mail, fail to subscribe to the assemblings, and focus your narcissistic fascinations on other stars. You cannot simply disentangle personal desire from mass culture; there is no utopian outside for Johnson. His work challenges particular forms of celebrity and identity formation. On-sendings are not benign.

31. Because the works depended on both reproducibility and on-sending, the notion of authorship was not merely disrupted by implicit problems with deciding about intention, but with the explicit disruption of that category. At the least, at the moment of the on-sending, everyone participated in authoring and reading. In assemblings the individual works often have signatures and sometimes even numbered prints or multi-media objects. Yet, when the works appear together in a compiled package, the works refer to each other and to other related assemblings and networks. It is not that authorship falls prey to a reader's solipsism. It changes into a more fluid notion of production and consumption. The distinction between artists and spectators blurs not because of the open-ended-ness of interpretation, but because of the effort to build-in interactive game-like structures of discovery and play. Compilers, for example, function both as readers and as writers when they assemble work, package it, and send it back to the participants involved. Receiving this assembled package in the mail makes the participants join in the pleasures involved in discovery and relay. Once the participants begin joining in a number of assemblings, they often allude to other works in other assemblings. In fact, this article might function as a type of on-sending as it links to other sites and pages that then supplement and send-on

the work in different contexts.

3. Network Coverage

32. The phrase "network coverage" probably conjures images of a nightly news broadcast rather than innovative artists' and mail artists' magazines. The irony of that situation is not completely coincidental. These assemblings explicitly respond to the distribution of words and images through gallery systems and in mass media. They respond to the lack of distribution systems for experimental work in the "media." Some of this work responds to the art scene and some to the larger cultural scene's or mass media's exclusions and limits.
33. The term "coverage" in museums, galleries, and academia usually refers to the research model of a scholar covering a field of study with a theory of explanation and corresponding descriptions of major works in that field. In the context of mail art and artists' magazines, the term is somewhat ironic. The very form of these works challenges the coverage model with an information explosion that threatens the coverage paradigm, not only because of the elastic and ever-expanding number of these collaborative works, but also because authorship is often difficult to determine. In fact, Robert Filliou, associated with Fluxus, coined the term "eternal network," often used to describe the mail-art networks, to describe the contemporary situation in which no one person can command all knowledge in any field; his article appeared in 1973 in the assembling *FILE*. The phrase describing the networks defines it as the chronicle of this failure of the coverage model.
34. Assemblings propose another coverage model. Each assembling covers a mobile and changing network of artists and poets for a transitory moment even as it marks that moment for use by other readers at a later date. Each of these assemblings functions as a kind of relay system. Network coverage, in this sense, suggests a new way of understanding art and poetic practices which began flourishing in the last third of the twentieth century. From the perspective of the 21st century, may look like experiments in networked productions. They may, that is, have a similar impact and produce similar consequences as

the rise of the novel in the 18th century.

4. Unreadability (condensed version)

35. The work found in assemblings tends to share one trait. It challenges any participant/receiver to figure out how to begin to read an assemblage. In an historical context, the assemblings do seem to share a combination of lineages. From that history, a participant/receiver/reader can begin to find appropriate reading practices if not definitive meanings. To understand how "unreadability" becomes readable as an aesthetic opportunity requires a summary of the poetics involved. These poetic tendencies include concrete poetry as a break with "mainstream" expressive poetics, visual poetry as an effort to expand language systems, and conceptual art strategies as an intervention in everyday life. Through all of these tendencies, the problem of identifying the tone of these works makes the interpretation more complicated. Often these works' meanings depend on the reader to recognize parodies, jokes, and a masquerade with the trappings of mass distribution systems like the post office and corporations. The tone of these works often presents many levels of meaning with important implications for interpretation. Besides these tendencies, the socio-poetics of networking also has important implications for ways of reading the unreadable assemblings.

5. Craft as Conceptual Art

36. Assemblings represent a special place in twentieth century art because they chart the emergence of *craft in the age of mass production*. The artists flaunt their fetishism of print and book-making alongside their fascination with huge bureaucratic systems of production and distribution. The artists cherish the production of carefully constructed individualized visual poems and constructions as well as the insistence that readers recuperate, re-cycle, plagiarize, and forever alter these codes and messages.
37. In his study of modernist visual poetics, Jerome McGann argues that the "history of modernist writing could be written as a history of the modernist book" (McGann 77). In making and persuasively supporting this claim, McGann

also opens the door to exploring other art and poetic practices as crafted and constructed objects. He explains how two small presses in particular, Kelmscott Press and Bodley Head, influenced modernist poetic practices by their emphasis on visual design over and above "legibility" (77). These practices also wanted to appeal to, as well as **create**, a particularly modern and aesthetically inclined audience. This interest in the printed page as an object found important practitioners not only in the later postmodern Concrete Poetry, but in Louis Zukofsky's poetry. He initiated the interest in considering poetry as a "musical score" and an "aspiration...toward the condition of music" (83). Here again, the modernist precursors point toward the poetic compositions that resemble musical scores in concrete and visual poetry as well as the scores, instructions, and games found in assemblings. Ken Friedman explains how to perform a Fluxus event score:

You can perform a Fluxus event in virtuoso or bravura style, and you can perform it jamming each piece into the minimal time possible as Ben Vautier does, or go for a slow, meditative rhythm as Alison Knowles does, or strike a balance as you'll see in the concerts organized by Dick Higgins or Larry Miller. Pieces can have a powerful torque, energized and dramatic, as in the work of Milan Knizak, the earthly folkloric touch seen in Bengt af Klintberg's pieces, or the atmospheric radiance, spiritual and dazzling, that is seen in Beuys's work. (Friedman, par. 4)

38. McGann, focusing on American modernist poets, examines the usually overlooked work of Robert Carlton ("Bob") Brown's *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine*. In that work Brown wanted to "immerse the reader in the print medium, much as the viewer is immersed in images at the cinema" (McGann 85). The modernist poetics of the page gain in intensity in postmodern poetry. McGann focuses on Language writing as the "key index of postmodern scene of writing" (88); that poetry uses a "textual process for revealing the conventions, and the conventionalities, of our common discursive formations" (107). This suggestion that the postmodern poetry emphasizes the social conventions of writing through the concrete visual construction also speaks

to the further expansion and intensification of this process in assemblings. McGann summarizes these social concerns by discussing the implications of this writing's "ironic self-representation," that "situates poet and poem firmly in the social, institutional, and even the economic heart of things...an imagination of writing that knows it inhabits a world ruled by Mammon" (108). As Charles Bernstein writes, this poetry "flaunts its core idea as candy coating." (Bernstein 380) McGann goes on to examine contemporary small presses, like Burning Deck, The Figures, Jargon, and Roof, in order to argue that in these presses' publications (as well as throughout postmodern poetry) "writing is necessarily imagined as part of a social event of persons" (McGann 113).

39. Charles Bernstein's "Lift Off" demonstrates the way poetic practices capture this "social event." To describe this process, McGann inserts a second narrative voice into his book. This disgruntled and humorous narrator describes Bernstein's poem as a transcription of everything lifted off a page with a correction tape. The more earnest narrator remains unflappable and suggests that his (or her) reading also describes how Bernstein's poem "foregrounds the machinery of writing" (McGann 109). For the suspicious narrator, it literally foregrounds the machinery, while for the more Apollonian narrator it figuratively foregrounds this process. In the work of assemblings individual pages or poems mean less than the distribution and compilation machinery. The assembling reader finds threads of the social connections as if receiving something "illegible," but visual and poetically allusive and suggestive. Assemblings function as model and tool kits for both building and spoofing "a world ruled by Mammon" or at least Mammon's corporate bureaucracy in webs and networks.

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Notes

1. Held argues that "The first publication I know of to reflect the assembling sensibility was the cooperative periodical *Spawn*, initiated in East Orange, New Jersey, in 1917. In the March issue (1.3), the editorial stated that, "*Spawn* is the embodiment of an idea and is co-operative in the strictest sense of the word. Each man pays for his page and is absolutely responsible for what goes on it. *Spawn* is a magazine in name only.... It has no ax to grind or propaganda to propound."

2. Drucker is not only the premiere scholar in the study of book arts, having produced the first substantive book-length studies of these works, but is also an accomplished book artist.

Editor's Note: This issue of Postmodern Culture contains an extensive interview with Drucker. See ["Through Light and the Alphabet": An Interview with Johanna Drucker](#).

3. For an historical account of the development of CoBrA, Lettrism, and Situationism see Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Ice Box: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*. Although Wollen focuses on the social history rather than aesthetic strategies, he does mention the importance of the "play of calligraphy" for the Lettrists (144). He also mentions the leader of the CoBrA artists' strong criticism of Max Bill, who went on to influence the formation of Concrete Poetry.

4. Pawel Patasz mentions that in Poland the censors would stamp each and every proof page of a publication on the back side of the proof. With these kinds of absurd controls, one can imagine how Commonpress began investigating these stamps of authentication.

5. Joe Cardella, advertising slogan for prospective participants, *ART/LIFE*, 15, 11 (1995), back page.

6. Also quoted in Banana's "Corresponding Worlds: Debate and Dialogue," Welch 189.

7. The same quote appears in John Held, "Networking: the Origins of Terminology," 17.

8. The same quote appears in John Held, "Networking: the Origins of Terminology," 19.

9. The legal statute concerning stalkers in the state of Pennsylvania explains that "a person commits the crime of stalking when he engages in a course of conduct or repeatedly commits acts toward another person, including following the person without proper authority, under circumstances which demonstrate either of the following:

1) an intent to place the person in reasonable fear of bodily injury;

or

2) an intent to cause substantial emotional distress to the person."

Pa.C.S. Ch. 27, 18 §2709 subsec. B.

10. For comparison, see also D.A. Levy's suicide while incarcerated. Levy was an important mail-artist collected by Fluxus list-maker Ken Friedman. Friedman had close ties to both of these artists. Perhaps they saw in suicide a socio-political act?

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