

New Art School: Correspondence

BY THOMAS ALBRIGHT

One of the most far-reaching, far-out and potentially revolutionary avant-garde cultural "undergrounds" is operating virtually right beneath everyone's collective nose, primarily via the international mails.

Its membership is a curious motley of individuals and largely fictitious or mythical "companies," "banks" or "schools" with cryptic names like A Space, Ace Space, Northwest Mounted Valise and Fat City School of Finds Art. They are connected through a number of loose, unstructured, and variable "centers" on the West and East coasts, in Canada, Northern and Eastern Europe, to outposts in the American Midwest, Latin America and much of the rest of the civilized world.

Their raw materials are ideas, jokes and words and images scavenged from the diarrhea of verbal and visual "information" that spews forth endlessly from the mass media. These materials are dressed as poetry, graphic art, letters, newsletters, collages or mere packets of junk mail, usually reproduced in quantity via offset, Xerox and other easily accessible forms of dime store technology.

They are exchanged like pen-pal letters, or they are sent to unsuspecting celebrities, art critics and other public figures; they are sometimes hoarded like commemorative stamp issues, sometimes sent to others or returned to sender with additions, or merely thrown away. This, at least, has been the pattern in the past; recently, however, the material has begun to surface in more public forms, with exhibitions such as the big Correspondence show in the fall of 1970 at the Whitney Museum in New York, and in several new and forthcoming books.

The individuals and groups who make up these "networks" differ widely in backgrounds, aims and modes of expression. Some are "minimal" or "concept" artists or happeners, others are poets, designers, photographers, typographers, maverick architects, psychologists, educators and/or pranksters; many are generalists schooled in a variety of traditional disciplines and unwilling to come to terms with contemporary specialization. The Whole Earth Catalog (along with its various imitators and successors) shared some of the characteristics of a correspondence network, although it was more functional, indeed survival-oriented, and operated more or less independently from others.

Although many people involved in correspondence and information exchange disown the "artist" label, their emphasis parallels the concern of contemporary artists in general with process, communication and evolving mass consciousness. Some are moved principally by guerrilla ideals, aiming to strip "art," "education" and "philosophy" of their customary elitist trappings and make their substances accessible on a direct, common, even banal level, bringing art into everyone's mail as well as to the street. Some primarily turn a cold, anthropological eye on the workings of modern society. Some are inspired by Zen-rooted attitudes wherein flux, ephemera and common objects become sacred vehicles of potential enlightenment, and some are concerned primarily with exploring and expanding the nature of the communications process itself, via miniaturized micro-systems that parallel the workings of the artist-gallery-critic-collector establishment and form non-commercial alternatives to it; by probing the psychology of perception and epistemology, or how we come to know about things; or by more mystically conceived activities that transform information into energy and energy into a fluid matrix or web that cements together the isolated "spaces" occupied by private individuals throughout the planet.

Whether the emphasis is Dada or Zen, anti-art or a logical extension of art, correspondence art is, in an oblique, apparently impersonal way, working to restore the function of art as a form of social or personal, even intimate, communication. In the process, it is attacking or subverting many of the roots by which "art" has traditionally been defined.

Correspondence artists do not make "original" objects that become valuable

because of uniqueness or rarity, and therefore their work has little or no sales value — if, indeed, anyone would want to buy it, for their things are often eminently disposable once you have looked long enough to mine the meat of the idea from them. Compact in format (the output of an entire career can be stuffed inside a carton), dense in content (sometimes four puns to the word), their work does not lend

itself readily to conventional, wall-hung museum exhibitions; on the other hand, their material can be cheaply anthologized in note book form where — in contrast to the pictures of pictures found in expensive art books — you can have for a few dollars what is essentially a permanent collection of original art — or at least as original as it gets.

But enough of generalities, for each correspondence artist or collective has his or its own distinctive, often bizarre, style. And since almost anybody can play, we furnish herewith the current addresses of various groups so that you too can be an artist, as easily as getting to your nearest mailbox.

Oldest, and most influential, of the correspondence networks is *The New York Correspondence School*, c/o The Pink House, 44 West 7th Street, Locust Valley, N.Y. (The spelling is a play on "dance," but it is likely to appear in any of several variations — dense, dence, dunce).

Visibly, the "school" consists solely of its head, artist-collagist Ray Johnson, and a corporate charter; and it teaches nothing. On a process level, however, it encompasses hundreds of persons — artists, critics, movie actors — who have received mailings from Johnson and/or written to him; thousands who have come across his published works in *McCalls*, *Art Forum* — and here; and it teaches — well, whatever element of amusement, instruction, revelation, absurdity or logic that one happens to derive from Johnson's mailings, or the sheer fact of his and the school's existence. Somewhere in between are perhaps 200 more or less regular correspondents who form the core of "faculty" and/or "students" and an NYCS letterhead is apt to be graced with such distinguished names as Helen Gurley Brown, Dennis Hopper, Ultra Violet and Tiny Tim, as well as most of the other people involved in correspondence art and a host of unknowns.

A 44-year-old native of Detroit, Johnson studied art at Black Mountain College, and began in the early Fifties as a puristic abstract painter. His career, however, hit the rocks of the New York gallery establishment and he went underground, exhibiting in places like the streets and Grand Central Station, embarking on a prolific series of remarkable collages (all of which he later dated 1959) and launching the beginnings of the NYCS.

In his collages and correspondence work, Johnson extends the "found object" tradition of the early Dadaist Kurt Schwitters to near cosmic proportions, approaching objects, people, processes, even time and space themselves, as though they were all potential components to be juxtaposed and synthesized in infinitely comprehensive, infinitely variable, collages.

His more conventional works in the collage medium (which sell for \$500 and upwards, and help finance Johnson and the NYCS' printing and mailing activities) combine, as Johnson puts it in a kind of collage prose style, "sandpapered painted cardboard chunks casting shadows with hand-lettered poems, ink drawings of combs, condoms, massage balls and snakes, lists of famous people and Movie Stars and dollar bills painted on white backgrounds." They are also apt to contain remnants of earlier collages, or of other people's correspondence and collages, sometimes laminated with new layers of painted paper or cardboard. Deft, elegant, combining pre-War, post-War and contemporary pop imagery with an artful sense of layout that derives from cubism and surrealism, Johnson's collages isolate common objects to lend them a kind of opaque beauty, and joins them together in parabolic, coincidental relationships.

The same ingredients go into the NYCS mail-away art, although here the medium ordinarily becomes paper printed via xerox, rubber stamps and other means of rapid data copying; the collage-making process is extended throughout part, or all, of the "school's" correspondence network. More or less typical is a xeroxed page bearing the grotesque image of Johnson as a skeleton, along with the hand-lettered notation: "Please add to and send to David L. Shirey, art editor, N. York Times." Some mailings take the form of "surveys" and lists "of who you think the ten most glamorous people are," together with results; some pages are cryptic visual parables involving personal fetishes associated with famous people, as "Carrie Snodgrass's shoe." (Other favorite people: John Cage, Andy Warhol, Joan Crawford).

Sometimes Johnson sends someone an intimate, personal object, like baby doll shoes. Sometimes he asks the school's entire mailing list to take part in a collective project, such as mailing Valentine greetings to the Behavior department of Time Magazine. There are "special meetings": of the "Marcel Duchamp" club, or a "Stilt Meeting" that convened on the Central Park mall. There are reports and letters — unpaginated assemblages of sometimes unpunctuated, free-association sentences — and little parodies of correspondence school "lessons," like step-by-step dia-

grams of how to draw a daisy. The NYCS' triumph was the Whitney's Correspondence show, in which 107 "members" of it and other correspondence groups were represented with worn envelopes, stickers, collages and "messages" of every description.

Johnson's "school" constitutes, in effect, a continuous happening by mail, a sophisticated communications-feedback system in which correspondence is always being received, replied to or ignored, and data on what happens is methodically collated and filed away or recycled. As varied as it is prolix, Johnson's art nonetheless has a distinctive style marked by a fey, whimsical, almost off-handed admixture of fantasy and logic for which almost any label — "art," "anti-art," "Zen" — would seem pretentious and inappropriate.

A pale-eyed, shaved-headed, intense-looking figure whose face often appears on his collages and mailings, Johnson has compared the NYCS to a "fantastic, gigantic Calder mobile" whose elements — which could also include phone calls, movies — are constantly kept moving. "Poetically, I like to say I'm the ocean, and like the tide, I mash up everything."

In a recent letter, Johnson interrupted a sequence of typos to say, "I am so very tired of mailing letters and mailing material and mailing things. I have spent my whole life doing this. I am 44 years old."