Whether the emphasis is Dada or Zen, anti-art or a logical extension of art, correspondence art is, in an oblique, apparently impertinent 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 valued.

Correspondence artists do not make “original” objects that become valuable because of uniqueness or rarity, and therefore their work has little or no resale value — if, indeed, anyone would want to buy it, for their things are often ephemeral and disposable once you have looked long enough to mine the meat of the idea from them. Compact in format (the contents of an entire catalog can be stuffed inside a cartoon), dense in content (sometimes four pages 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 its or his or its distinctive, often bizarre, style. And since almost anybody can play, we furnish with the current addresses of various groups so that you too can be an artist, as easily as getting to your nearest newsstand.

Oldest, and most influential, of the correspondence networks is the New York Correspondence School, 6/4 The Pink House, 44 Vest St South St, Locust Valley, N.Y. (The spelling is a play on “dance,” but it is likely to appear in any of several variations — dash, dot, dash, dot, dash, etc.)

Visibly, the “school” consists solely of its head, artist-critic Ray Johnson, and a corporate charter; and it teaches nothing. On a process level, however, it encompasses hundreds of persons and personal circles, critics, movie actors — who have received mailings from Johnson and/or written to him; thousands who have come across his published works in McCall’s, Art Forum and — here; and it reaches — well, however eloquent of “invention, 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 follow the core of “faculty” and/or “students” and an NYC 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, John son studied art at the Yeshiva University Mountain College, and began in the early Fifties as a purist 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 Graceland 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 college and correspondence work, Johnson extends the “found object” tradition of the early Dadaist Kurt Schwitters to intentional proportions, approaching objects, people, processes, even time and space themselves, as thence they work to esoteric compounds to be juxtaposed and synthesized in infinitely comprehensive, infinitely variable, collages.