



Mail art: networking without technology

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Abstract

Focusing on the mail art movement and its legacy for other forms of networked art, this article looks at how historically, culture has accompanied technological change. The mail art movement provided separate but fertile ground to explore themes of disembodiment in a networked society prior to spread of digital technology. Surfacing in the 1950s and flourishing in the 1970s, at a time when computers and the internet were still largely the domain of military and government control, mail art challenged the threat of technocracy by making available metaphors and the experience of networking. Its goal of social connection inspired other networked arts, which eventually found a place among digital technology users. An unlikely but productive clash between artists and early users aided, validated and expanded the network ethos of early online social groups or ‘virtual communities’. This investigation shows how art clears the ground for social practices that technology instantiates.

Key words

Art Com Electronic Network • culture and technology • La Mabelle • mail art • networked art • network culture • Ray Johnson • virtual community • WELL

The distance from this sentence to your eye is my sculpture.
(Friedman, 1974: 45)

Many contemporary histories of digital technologies focus on the nexus between government, military, corporations and technologists. This

article takes a different tack and argues that culture, broadly and artistic practice, specifically, play important historical roles by making sense of and producing meanings about digital technology. This article investigates mail art and its legacy among other networked art practices, focusing on their exploration of the power, promise and problems of a society connected by information and communication technology long before the widespread diffusion of digital technology. In time, mail art practices leached into the online environment of the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL), an early computer-mediated community and demonstrated the process of articulation (Grossberg, 1986; Hall, 1985) between art and technology.

In the 1970s, mail art became an impressive movement, attracting artists from around the world. Between 1970 and 1980, the number of exhibitions increased from two to 425 (Held Jr, 1986). One mail art show could attract as many as 20,000 contributions (Friedman, 1995a, 1999[1973]), although based on one mail artist's attempts to document the extent of the movement (Held Jr, 1986), the more common number of participants in any given event was about 200. Participants hailed not just from the USA (the primary site of activity) but also Iceland, New Zealand, Poland, South Africa, Venezuela and more (Held Jr, 1986). Publications featuring mail art also abounded, with modest circulation but passionate readers (Banana, 1995; Crane and Stofflet, 1984; Friedman 1995a; Saper, 2001; personal interview with John Held Jr, 21 May 2005). The style of mail art publishing – collage-based and often tongue-in-cheek – made a lasting impact and informed the zeitgeist of 'zine publishing in the 1980s (Duncombe, 1997).

The sizable presence of shows and publications was in distinct contrast to what mail art was originally: a one-man show. Mail art consisted of 'sendings' and 'receivings' by one artist, Ray Johnson, to more than 100 artists involved in the downtown New York arts scene in the 1950s and 1960s (Cotter, 1995; Danto, 1999; Held Jr, 2005; Jones, 1997). Johnson also accompanied 'sendings' and 'receivings' with events featuring artist performances and, in time, assembled mail art pieces for an arts publication. Whether through postal communication, in person or in print, Johnson succeeded in creating an art form which was both object and experience. The participants in Johnson's pieces acted as consumers of his work and producers of the process, and although he did not call it a network, Johnson evoked the idea and configured participants as equals within the mail art network.

The mail artists after Johnson elaborated the network ethos to include additional egalitarian principles. By bringing more artists into the process of 'sending' and 'receiving' and growing the mail art community, these artists claimed that they were establishing an alternative to the hierarchical, commodity-oriented, mainstream art world and to the impersonal, information and communication-saturated, bureaucratic society (Friedman, 1995a; Saper, 2001). Mail art practices involved collective authorship across a

geographically diverse setting, whereby a receiver of a work would ‘add to’ and mail the piece to the next artist. Artists dabbled with pseudonymous identities, playing with authority and (further) exploring the concept of authorship. Finally, artists bartered their works, creating a non-monetized system of exchange: a ‘gift economy’ (Rheingold, 1993) of artistic exchange.

To both casual and serious observers, the likeness between the network ethos of the mail art movement and ideas of the network society (Castells, 1996), network culture (Terranova, 2004), virtual community (Rheingold, 1993, 1996[1992]) and other social forms associated with the rise of the internet and digital technologies gives pause for concern. How, if at all, does culture link to processes of technological and social change? Further, how does art, which mainly exists in domains far removed from the ‘milieux of innovation’ (Castells, 1996) of a post-industrial economy, connect to an understanding and experience of technology? Answering these questions, this article hopes to bridge art historical inquiry and communication research to create a richer understanding of how symbols, metaphors and culture function in the development of technology and social change.

Exploring the mail art phenomenon, its legacy among other networked arts and links to the celebrated virtual community, the WELL, this article proceeds in four main parts. The first section targets the metaphorical power of mail and other networked art practices, examines culture as an important site of inquiry in the study of technology and social change and suggests that culture (broadly) and art (specifically) clear the ground for the social practices that digital technologies facilitate on a wider scale. The second section establishes the historical context of mail art and introduce the ‘father of mail art’, Ray Johnson and the network ethos apparent in his seminal works. The third part further explores the network ethos of mail art by focusing on a key engine of its growth and popularity, *FILE* magazine. The final section traces the incorporation of mail art into a larger ensemble of artistic practices concerned with networking and turns attention to La Mamelle, a facilitator and innovator of networked arts. It shows how art makes metaphors and practices available, cultivating symbolic resources from which meaning about digital technology can be constructed (Swidler, 1986). More importantly, it demonstrates the unexpected but productive encounter between La Mamelle and the early virtual community, the WELL, highlighting the articulation between artistic and technosocial practices.

CULTURE AND TECHNOSOCIAL CHANGE

Historical analysis of the internet typically begins with a focus on the uses of digital technology and its function as a tool. The narrative arc traces government and military activism around the development and deployment of new technologies, examines scientific experimentation and innovation, and references corporate and university involvement as a preface to the public

launch of the internet, with the subsequent flowering of practices and norms associated with disembodied, decentralized communication (Abbate, 1999). Experts often narrate this history (Cerf, 1993) by relying on inside accounts of innovation and emphasizing how technology functions as a tool to transform social practices. Similarly, early users who have contributed to this history accept the instrumental power of technology. For example, Rheingold (1993, 1996[1992]) presents the internet as a tool that gives individuals the opportunity to find one another and restore a communal way of life that is absent in the 'real world'.

While these perspectives are important, the focus on inventors and early users or user communities ignores cultural processes at work in the history of the internet and the interplay between technology and culture. Culture here refers to that which operates at the level of the symbolic – to meaning-making processes. Culture yields meaning for a group or sociation through symbolic communication and experience. While social and economic forces can shape or structure culture, culture can act as its own force with determining effects (Schudson, 1989). That is, at a distance from economic and social influences, culture can arise, produce, develop and create (Hall, 1985). There are unintentional, unexpected moments when disparate cultural, social, political and economic forces come together, shaping practices and processes and impacting the course of history. Hall, following Althusser, refers to this undetermined process as articulation (Grossberg, 1986; Hall, 1985). In relation to technology, this process suggests that culture might fuse with technology or social practices borne from technological developments, even when cultural activity is far removed from the origins of technology.

Several scholars have argued for a cultural perspective in the examination of technology and social change. In his broad discussion of technology and its relationship to social change, Winner (1986) claims that social and economic circumstances of technology influence its development, deployment and use. Central to his analysis is the concept of political power. For example, technology reflects the visions and interests of the powerful and privileged classes, such as when officials created boulevards throughout post-revolutionary Paris as a defensive architecture to prevent future uprising, or when tomato harvesting displaced the handpicker and increased the profit margins of farm owners. Overall, Winner moves beyond a uses-and-tool framework to one which accounts for political factors. Like Winner, Sterne (2001) is interested in the prehistory of technology. Sterne probes the cultural milieu of sound reproduction technologists of the 19th century and suggests that the study of the ear influenced the objectification and disembedding of hearing from its biological context. In other words, operational and philosophical principles already existed in culture before newer, refined technologies succeeded in disembodiment of the voice. Thus, Sterne corrects a historical narrative that assumes the newness of disembodied sound in 20th-century innovations.

Edwards (1989) advances a related argument, when he considers how 'special interest' and situational norms and values insinuate themselves in the design, deployment and use of technologies. Taking the case of computers and postwar USA, Edwards argues that the military's embrace of computing did not depend on the usefulness of computers; rather, computers possessed both an instrumental and symbolic-metaphorical value for the military. The Cold War saw the rise of a 'closed world discourse' characterized by 'tools, techniques, practices and language which embody an approach to the world as composed of interlocking systems amenable to formal mathematical analysis' (Edwards, 1989: 138). Computers represented symbols of power and metaphors for science, helping to inspire further development and deployment of computer technology for military purpose.

In addition, culture has emerged as an important site of inquiry in the study of the internet and virtual community. For example, Turner (2005a) investigates the social history underpinning techno-utopianism or 'digital libertarianism'. Turning to the Hackers' Conference as a site of active exploration, debate and even disagreement on the economic orientation of digital technologies, he excavates the social work that shaped and would eventually propel the libertarian outlook into popular discourse on digital technologies. Turner (2005b) also studies the WELL, one of the earliest virtual communities lionized and promoted by WELL member, Howard Rheingold. Again arguing that digital technologies do not ahistorically produce meaning about themselves, their possibilities or their techniques, Turner shows how the cultural values and practices of people centrally involved in the creation of some of the earliest forms of sociability online shaped the understandings and uses of digital technologies (see also Turner, 2006).

When applied to art, the argument for a cultural approach to the study of the history of technology requires clarification. Although artists, collectors and art historians have written about intentional collaboration between artists and technologists (Kranz, 1974; Lee, 2004; Wilson, 2002), the interest of this article lies elsewhere, with the undetermined process of articulation between artists' milieu and the 'milieux of innovation'. That is, it examines artistic movements invested in understanding information, communication, social change and social relations, and artists whose *métier* is creating cultural meaning and exploring the symbolic. It sees artists as cultural workers, exploring the meanings of technologies for not just for innovators, inventors or enthusiasts, but also for society as a whole. Thus, the cultural-historical approach to studying technology illuminates how artistic movements can manifest social practices that technology instantiates.

Three art historians who have questioned the more indirect, unintentional links between art, technology and social change in symbolic terms are Nicholas Bourriaud, Craig Saper and Annemarie Neumark. Bourriaud (2001) advances a theory of relational art and aesthetics and explains social sculpture:

performance and conceptual-based art practices that arise in relation to profound changes in technology, communication and society. As society complexifies, artists try to recover the social connections that advanced post-industrial capitalism and communication practices have destroyed. In other words, artists judge works of art according to the human interrelations that they comprise, produce or cause, and create relational art: 'an ensemble of artistic practices that takes as its theoretical and practical starting point the whole of the human relations and their social context, rather than an autonomous and privatized space' (Bourriaud, 2001: 14; author's translation).

Like Bourriaud, Saper views social sculptural practices as a reaction to the complex currents of society and technology. Saper's (2001) investigation focuses on contemporary artists' concerns for social relations, links, interactions and experiences that breathe life into an otherwise homogenized, mechanized and de-personalized society. Saper develops the concept of the 'intimate bureaucracy' and claims that following the Second World War, mail artists and other artists similarly invested in social sculptural practices made poetic use of bureaucratic systems, signs, symbols and language. While these faux bureaucracies commented on and parody mainstream mass society, they also celebrated the systems and invert impersonal bureaucracy into a personalized, artisanal craft.

Neumark (2005) takes a nuanced position on social sculptural practices, or what she and Annemarie Chandler categorize as 'networked arts'. While arguing that artistic practices arise in reaction to developments in society and technology, she also considers the possibility that networked arts have determining effects, even when unintended. On the one hand, similar to the contextual and culturally informed view of technology that occupies Winner, Edwards, Sterne and Turner, Neumark understands the ability of symbolic forces to affect the shape, content and power of technology: 'What is possible in technology depends on the particular cultural imagination and individual subjectivities, while in turn cultural imagination and individual subjectivity are produced by these technologies' (Neumark 2005: 10). On the other, Neumark acknowledges the views of Saper and Bourriaud and examines the power of technology to produce a cultural imaginary or a set of cultural signifiers for technology that ultimately construct the meaning and experiences of technology in everyday and artistic settings.

Taken together, these works reinforce an idea introduced earlier: art helps to clear the ground for the onset of new social and cultural metaphors and practices related to the use of technology. Art can presage techno-social change, moving in a direction that technology will, in time, enable. Through art and the dissemination of artistic practice, metaphors seep into other domains of social life and, occasionally, become part of the symbolic resources that help society construct meaning and experiences with technology.

NETWORKED ROOTS: MAIL ART BEGINS

Although Dada, futurist and surrealist art movements dabbled with social connectivity, art and technology at the beginning of the 20th century (Berner, 1967), the 1950s ushered in mail art, a unique expression of those ideas. Intersecting with contemporary anxieties about technocratic society, the early mail art pioneered by Ray Johnson foreshadowed the ways in which online communities would be envisioned and experienced. This moment in mail art history represents a period before the merging of, or articulation between, artistic and technological milieus.

Ray Johnson introduced mail art to the downtown New York arts scene in the 1950s (Held Jr, 2005; Jones 1997; Ray Johnson Estate, 2004; see *How to Draw a Bunny*, dir. John Walter, 2004), just as the art world was beginning to explore themes of technology and society more avidly (Lee, 2004). As a young and promising artist, Johnson attended Black Mountain College in North Carolina, where he studied under the German *émigrés* and Bauhaus painters Josef and Anni Albers, as well as the Cubist sculptor Ossip Zadkine, abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell and abstract sculptor Mary Callery. During this time, Johnson also encountered the musician and conceptual performer John Cage, dancer-choreographer Merce Cunningham and sculptor Richard Lippold.

After Black Mountain, Johnson shared an apartment with Cunningham and Lippold in the same building that housed Cage and other avant-garde artists (Jones, 1997; Ray Johnson Estate, 2004; Walter, 2004). Although Johnson focused first on abstract painting, he eventually burned all his paintings and shifted course (Walter, 2004; personal interview with John Held Jr, 21 May 2005). This move planted Johnson squarely in the *mêlée* of the New York avant-garde. His participation earned him affiliations with the conceptual art group, Fluxus, of which Cage was a prominent member (Friedman 1995a; personal interview with John Held Jr, 21 May 2005), pop art and the Andy Warhol scene (Ray Johnson Estate, 2004; Walter 2004), performance artists and the emerging tradition of social sculpture (personal interview with John Held Jr, 21 May 2005).

In the mid-1950s, Johnson began producing an art form which would later become known as mail art.¹ Fascinated by collage and communication, Johnson began to compile artists, art historians, art connoisseurs, other members of the downtown New York arts scene and even celebrity figures whom Johnson could locate in the phone book. He used the list as participants in a postal network or letter chain. With this list, he would attempt to 'sculpt' them into an intimate network that participated in his art performance pieces (Held Jr, 2005). The members of Johnson's list were inaugurated into the network when he sent them collage art through the postal system. These handcrafted collages, known as 'moticos', commonly

featured a mix of cut-up imagery from magazines, adverts, packaging, photographs, other mass media or consumer artifacts, original drawings or paintings and text (Held Jr, 2005, nd). Frequently, Johnson played with variations on the correspondence theme and would instruct individuals on his mailing list to 'add to' or contribute to the collaged piece that he had created originally, then 'forward' or pass on the artwork to another person on the list (De Decker, 2005; Saper, 2001; Welch, 1995; Wilson, 1966).

Johnson's 'moticos' also took on a performative dimension. Working from the palette of his address book, Johnson sent out fastidiously detailed invitations (complete with seating arrangements indicated) to individuals in his network to participate in carefully scripted and themed events (Held Jr, 1991, 2005, nd; Saper, 2001). Topics ranged from the Paloma Picasso and Marcel Duchamp fan club meetings to 'nothings', a reference to both performance art's 'happenings' and John Cage's experiments in silence (Cotter, 1995; Daniels, 1994; Danto, 1999; Held Jr, 2005, 1991, nd; Ray Johnson Estate, 2004; Saper, 2001; Walter, 2004). Present at these events were people such as John Cage, Yoko Ono, Andy Warhol, On Kawara, Jean Tinguely, Chuck Close and others (Saper, 2001; Walter, 2004). To a certain extent, Johnson and his mail art functioned as invisible glue in the avant-garde scene. His mail art emphasized a relational aesthetic and the co-creative process of art-making in both embodied and disembodied forms.

In 1962, this relational aesthetic would expand with the founding of an intimate bureaucracy, as Saper would call it: the New York Correspondance School. The name poked fun at the seriousness of the abstract expressionists and played with notions of performance art. The 'a' in the misspelled word, 'Correspon-dance', stood for action, movement and fun (Cotter, 1995; Daniels, 1994; Danto, 1999; Wilson, 1966; personal interview with John Held Jr, 21 May 2005). In all, the New York Correspondance School attracted participants to the mail art mix, broadening the practice of sending art through the mail. Moreover, the School had the effect of clarifying the mail art practice, its revaluation of the postal system and the envelope.

In all, mail art at this time signaled three important features of the movement. First, while Johnson created a mailing list of more than 200 affiliates of the downtown scene (Held Jr, 1991; personal interview with John Held Jr, 21 May 2005), he eschewed individual attention. While he served as the primary node in the network, he avoided attention and, to a degree, recognition for his role in initiating this form of relational art. His correspondence-as-performance pieces were individually attentive, intimate and fundamentally based on meaningful exchange – meaning which he accorded to the collective, rather than to himself. Second, Johnson was fiercely opposed to the controlling nature of the art business. He deliberately tried to escape the formalism of the museum or gallery and create art whose

value could not be commoditized. Johnson's art was meant to be ephemeral and experience-bound. In this sense, Johnson etched away at the hierarchical configuration of the art world and placed art and artists on equal ground with art critics, viewers and appraisers. Third, he illustrated an intense passion for, and devotion to, information and communication from a decidedly human perspective. From the use of the post office, itself a longstanding institution of impersonal sendings and receivings, in an intimate cause (Neumark, 2005; Saper, 2001), to the subject matter of Johnson's collages, themselves steeped in mass media imagery and iconography, Johnson's mail art is a testament to personal care. The fastidiousness with which he constructed material and immaterial 'moticos' clearly reflect this human investment in communication and information.

By virtue of its self-effacing quality and its simplified yet persuasive commentary on technology, bureaucracy, power or establishment and modern social conditions, Johnson's mail art stands apart from other art forms in the 1950s and 1960s. Mail art functions as social sculpture, bringing together artists, sharing in a common concern and common search for play and intimacy. An elegant synthesis of the modern condition, mail art, would become much larger than the 'nothings' initiated by Ray Johnson.

MAIL ART COMES OF AGE

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, mail art moved from a Johnson-centered phenomenon to one that other artists embraced.² Participants in New York and beyond replicated the dynamic form of interchange that Johnson pioneered. Institutions, including many new, alternative art museums and galleries, staged mail art shows, and new publications arose and drew attention to the movement. These developments circulated the network ethos for a wider artistic community: an ethos which eventually would pervade and inspire other networked arts. In this second, later period, mail art practices remained disconnected from the development of digital technology and technosocial practices.

In 1971, *FILE* magazine emerged as one of several key mechanisms in the mail art movement (Friedman, 1995b). The magazine itself was an outgrowth of a new artist collective in Toronto, called General Idea, which had served since its inception as a sounding board for Canadian conceptual artists. Among other activities, General Idea planned satirical art events, including a mock beauty contest praising local conceptual artists, the Miss General Idea Beauty Pavilion. It was in this spirit that General Idea created *FILE* magazine, a publication which served as a platform for the offbeat conceptual arts scene in Toronto and beyond (Banana, 1995; personal interview with John Held Jr, 21 May 2005).

FILE promoted the relational aesthetic by regularly compiling and publishing an artists' directory and request list for artworks. The magazine first borrowed the idea for a directory from mail artist Ken Friedman, who had collected names as a continuation of Johnson's work. In conjunction with another Canadian arts organization, Image Bank, Friedman added to the directory's rolls, growing the list to 1400 names (Friedman, 1995b, 1999[1973]; Held Jr, 2005; personal interview with John Held Jr, 21 May 2005).

As a new, energetic small format publication, *FILE* acted on the opportunity to continue Friedman and Image Bank's efforts. With its third issue of the first volume, *FILE* reproduced nearly half of the Image Bank directory. Readers of *FILE* – whether newly initiated to, or veterans of, the mail art community – had public access to connect and interact with others. Different from the proprietary nature of the mainstream art world, each individual counted as one among equals. In the directory, established figures, such as Joseph Beuys, Judy Chicago, William Burroughs and Marshall McLuhan stood as equals alongside the hundreds of other unknowns and less well-known. Participants used playful pseudonyms as well, adding to the egalitarianism of the network. A pseudonymous artist such as 'Manwoman', 'Comet Nirvano' or 'Mr. Peanut' was just as important as any other 'real' artist. Thus, *FILE* facilitated a process and served as a vital resource, communicating the importance of equal access to, and participation in, the mail art movement.

As a companion to the directory, *FILE* published an artist request list. Formatted in a manner similar to the directory (alphabetic, last name, first name, address), the list served as a sort of classified advertisement, featuring particular 'wants' of individual artists. Requests were varied, particularistic, bizarre, but seemingly intentional. For example, image requests from the fourth issue of the first volume included:

- anything fishy;
- beware of dog signs;
- ceilings of mosques;
- gross things;
- information on hippos;
- Jesus-oriented information;
- Ludwig II King of Bavaria;
- people carrying umbrellas;
- 'race' images and items;
- the Statue of Liberty;
- thin nostrils;
- the Titanic sinking; and
- words.

By listing the requested images, *FILE* further facilitated artists' contact with like-minded individuals. Furthermore, it was a process premised on free

exchange: access to the directory or request list was a vibrant barter economy of artistic ideas and goods.

In addition to artists' directories and request lists, the magazine actively reinforced the values and meanings of networking in an information-rich and communication-laden society. In the second volume, *FILE* displayed mail artworks organized by Image Bank. A two-page spread featured a photograph of an urban wasteland. In the middle of the wasteland sits a billboard, which contains a superimposed 1950s image of a couple landing in a spaceship on a foreign planet. Over the top of the spaceship door is the year '1984'. In the lower left corner, collaged over the top of this doctored photograph, is the picture of a suited gentleman urinating onto a bush.

Presented in this fashion, the image invites interpretation of both its meaning and its process. The collage references the decline of a utopian, futurist ideology or Marcel Duchamp's famous toilet sculpture, *Fountain*. However, on another level, the spread generates curiosity about the selection and placement of images. As an extension of Bourriaud's writing would suggest, the collage represents the social relations or associative 'work' taking place behind the art's final display. Moreover, no one 'sender' is named or credited in the spread. As stated in the text accompanying its collages, Image Bank wrote: 'In many ways much of what Image Bank is doing is providing[,] initiating [and] reinforcing a cross-referencing system of discrete items of description, the terms of a system of correspondences.' In other words, Image Bank aimed to make information available and propel network relations; information begs an aesthetic response, personalized interaction and intimate social formation.

Mail art's love for information, communication and connection is evidenced in the magazine's ironic embrace of mass-media tropes. Appropriating the celebrity-obsessed convention of news reporting in magazines such as *Life*, *FILE* served as an instrument of publicity. A typical issue contained many of the sections found in a conventional mainstream magazine: letters to the editor, editorials, book reviews, brief updates on art events in the mail art network, brief profiles on Canadian artists or art collectives, art reviews, feature layouts of an artist or art collective's work and feature interviews. Advertisements also dotted the pages of the magazine.

Nevertheless, *FILE* purveyed a style of content distinct from typical media fare. It claimed to offer a more authentic and substantive account of people's life stories, experiences and relationships. Read one editorial: '*FILE* is LIFE out of hand, a handy map of scenic networks lacing the globe for you. Our tribute to LIFE passed by.' *FILE* could reflect the real substance of human existence noticeably absent from *Life* magazine or other mainstream media: it fashioned a space for personalized activity and allowed individual artists the freedom to participate, interact on their own terms and collaborate rather than compete.

Through analysis of *FILE* magazine we can see the values of openness, participation, collaboration, networking, love of information and communication, play, egalitarianism and freedom from economic constraint congeal in the substance and method of mail art. The magazine promoted the creation of a barter system for artistic ideas and goods, use of pseudonyms, collective authorship and appropriation of mainstream techniques of representation. *FILE* helped to grow mail art, promoting the movement within and outside of its pages, and spreading the network ethos to a wider set of participants.

NETWORKED ARTS, VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AND ARTICULATION

Eventually, as popular interest in mail art grew to more than *FILE* could manage, the magazine ceased its role as a central provider of mail art concepts and techniques. In 1973, the magazine published the commentary of photographer Robert Cumming and performance artist Hudson Marquez (of Ant Farm), which was invective describing mail art practice as mindless, copycat work. A *mêlée* followed, pitting some 'diehard' mail artists against others. The magazine's founders, General Idea, and other members of the mail art scene turned to other art forms, leaving the movement to its own devices to find new avenues for publishing and exhibition.

Two trends resulted in the aftermath. First, the mail art community grew in size and became even more distanced from mainstream art communities. As Crane (1984) noted, mail art activities – exhibiting, publishing and information exchange – surged after 1973. By 1976, an international movement was underway. Mail art shows took place in more than 16 countries, including Australia, Japan, Poland, Switzerland and Venezuela (Held Jr, 1986). One mail art event drew more than 20,000 contributors (Friedman, 1999[1973]), although the shows were more likely to draw a couple of hundred contributors (Held Jr, 1986).

Second, as mail art flourished, it became part of a larger repertoire of networked arts – a development that would lead to the articulation between art and technology. Mail art's direct exploration of the network appeared in other art forms concerned with the condition of information and communication saturation in an increasingly impersonal society. This expansion of the relational aesthetic to a wider set of artistic practices occurred not only through the movement of mail artists through other art scenes (Lumb, 1997), but also through the establishment of art collectives that experimented with multiple art forms (personal interview with Darlene Tong, 16 May 2005). By the mid-1970s, mail art was incorporated into an ensemble of networked art practices that examined social connections and performed and played with notions of distance, time, technology and connection through various different media (Broeckmann, 1997; Drucker, 2005; Osthoff, 2005).

This ensemble of networked art practices included book arts, video art, cable art, cassette art, telematic art and, later on, internet art. Book arts – an art form most closely related to mail art due to its use of the printed medium and the control it granted to artists in the distribution of information – moved away from the centrality of the post office and further refined the practice of collaboration (Perkins, 1997, 2005; Sumner Carnahan, 2005). Video and related variants redressed the command-and-control model of mainstream broadcast media and experimented with audiovisual representation of social connectedness (Minoy, 1990; Tong, forthcoming). Telematic art, also known as telecommunications art, spotlighted ways to link individuals and/or communities in geographically dispersed areas (Ascott, 2003, 2005; Couey, 1991). Internet art emerged as a new aesthetic practice which interrogated the disembodied quality of art while emphasizing new modes of communicating (Daniels, 1994).

As these different art forms evolved, they often coalesced through the structure of an art space or collective. One site that committed to exploring the relational aesthetic was La Mamelle, an organization based in San Francisco, CA and founded by Carl Loeffler and Trudi Richards in 1975. In its inaugural press release, the group explained its name:

Translated from the French language, La Mamelle conveys the concept of a nourishing source. The nourishment is provided in the form of contemporary art information and support of contemporary art activity. La Mamelle is an artists' support network established and maintained by and for artists. It is oriented towards the presentation of contemporary art activities to other artists and the public at large. La Mamelle looks upon itself as a vital complement to the existing art support systems. Unlike museums that maintain an historical concern or galleries that rely upon the saleable quality of the art they present, we aspire to support those activities and work which, although unsuited for museum or gallery presentation, are currently molding the shape of history and will become tomorrow's traditions. (La Mamelle, 1975)

Overall, the gallery welcomed a wide range of art activities, emphasized collaboration, cross-pollination and aesthetic exploration, particularly relational aesthetics.

To fulfill this nourishing role, La Mamelle followed two strategies. On the one hand, it functioned as a physical space in which to conduct experiments in arts. On the other hand, it served as an informational space through which to disseminate information about the arts. Most of the work was ephemera and committed to time-based activities, first including video, sound and performance art. It crafted an environment of entertainment and play, transforming the gallery into an art cabaret theater-like environment, welcoming artists such as Bill Gaglione, Monty Cantsin, Chip Lord, Chris

Burden and Lynn Hershman (personal interview with Darlene Tong, 16 May 2005; Tong, forthcoming).

The exploration of the relational aesthetic was embodied in most of La Mamelle's work. In 1980, for example, La Mamelle and Art Com organized 'Artists' Use of Telecommunications', a multi-city conference which brought together artists from Boston, Hawaii, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, Vancouver and Vienna by implementation of an IP Sharp APL Timesharing Network for a two-way video link. According to Braun (2005), the piece demonstrated the development of a specific community in and through digital technologies: a new type of social engagement. With La Mamelle, participants could explore communicative practices and enact utopian ideals fully.

La Mamelle also acted as an information provider and became a leader in alternative art publications (personal interview with Darlene Tong, 16 May 2005). The gallery produced a number of anthologies, including a history of performance art in California and *Correspondence Art*, which became a source book for mail art, its history, philosophy and practices (Friedman, 2000; personal interview with John Held Jr, 21 May 2005; personal interview with Darlene Tong, 16 May 2005). Another central facet of its publishing activities included book arts projects, magazines (*La Mamelle* (1975–6), *Art Contemporary* (1976–81), *Art Com* (1981–1984)) and audio and video 'zines (Tong, forthcoming).³

In 1986, La Mamelle's interest in art publishing merged a commitment to cutting-edge or outsider arts, relational aesthetics and information provision into one project. Art Contemporary Electronic Network (ACEN) formed as an electronic-based discussion platform, information exchange and exhibition space. Technically speaking, it was a conference (e.g. subject area) that lived on the WELL, a bulletin board system that was instrumental in fostering communalist ideals of the internet (Turner, 2006). As Carl Loeffler, La Mamelle/Art Com founder and director, stated:

The success of a project such as ACEN is not based solely on the existence of an electronic network. Success is best determined by the users, what they bring to the network and the quality and quantity of interaction that takes place among them. (Quoted in Tong, 1987: 12)

Like its mail art directories and request lists, the spirit of egalitarianism pervaded the project. However, different from before, ACEN was situated in larger setting that included not only artists doing networked or relational art but also members of the wider WELL community. On the one hand, ACEN existed for artists and readily experimented with art publishing and even early net art. On the other, it was driven by the dynamism of the wider WELL community, bridging boundaries between ACEN member and WELL members (Truck, 1997, 2005).

Two events, Das Casino (online conference) and Das Casino Nights (parties), illustrate how artistic worlds collided in unexpected ways, and with unintended consequences, with technologists' ones. The WELL placed great emphasis on conferences which had members and rewarded popular conferences with free hosting. In 1987, conferences were monthly, ranked on a number of users basis. Moreover, '[i]f your conference fell below a certain number of users, you lost your space' (personal interview with Fred Truck, 27 May 2005).

To attract more members (and get the free conference space), Loeffler came up with Das Casino, a thread in the ACEN conference. The idea was simple: invite conference-goers to participate in a text-based online performance based around a one-game (roulette) casino. Designed so that anyone could join (not merely artists), the first window allowed people to establish their characters, places their bets (valued by imaginary money or otherwise) and play roulette:

Gambling appeals to a lot of people and gambling without losing anything, except fictionally, is even more appealing. People could assume characters and some people assumed more than one ... [One individual] got so far into debt he decided to go to work for Das Casino as a janitor. People were betting their houses, their wives or husbands. It really got interesting. (Personal interview with Fred Truck, 27 May 2005)

In the second window was a 'status report', a place where people could post updates about themselves.

Das Casino was a success for ACEN. The conference drew electronically connected artists as well as technologists and avid members of the virtual community, such as WELL marketing director, David Hawkins ('Dhawk') and prominent WELL user John Coate ('Tex') (for a discussion of prominent WELL figures, see Hafner, 2001; Turner, 2006). Participants relished the opportunity to invent new personae, wager bets and connect, cavort and create with others. Its success prompted Loeffler to host 'Das Casino Nights': fundraiser events for La Mamelle that drew from the WELL user base. As Tong recalled:

These people from the WELL were – it was just funny. They were very hippy and techie and interested in communication and they weren't necessarily interested in art. They weren't part of visual poetry [or part of any other] aesthetic. But ... what made it fun was the exchange of cultures ... we created money with Marcel Duchamp ... Famous Melissa [dressed up] with a kimono made from computer chips. We had tap dancers ... that was the WELL's exposure to the arts scene. (Personal interview with Darlene Tong, 16 May 2005)

Online personalities met in a physical space that was permission: a space where each could act out quirky interests and pseudonymous identities and

materialize the network ethos (personal interview with Anna Couey, 20 June 2005).

This communion between networked artists from La Mamelle and members of the WELL brings us back to the discussion of how culture makes available metaphors and practices, in addition to how articulation works in this process. The meetings between ACEN conference goers and WELL types did not have a significant impact on how digital technologies were evolving at that time in the 1980s, but it did serve as a productive, if not unexpected, clash of cultures. Contact between the WELL and networked artists aided, validated and expanded the networking ethos that would come to define virtual communities.

ART CLEARS THE WAY

This article has examined the mail art movement as a cultural form that evolved a relational aesthetic well before digital technology made networking and virtual community possible. Beginning in the 1950s, Ray Johnson developed an artistic practice that focused on personal connection and communicational intimacy amid an information-laden, media-saturated society. By the 1970s, seen in the pages of *FILE* magazine, this art form refined its practices to define further the process by which mail art was produced, distributed and shared among a community of artists who valued openness, participation, connections and collaboration, who aimed for collectivity, egalitarianism and freedom from monetary constraints, and who celebrated information and communication in playful and irreverent ways.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the mail art movement became a part of other relational arts that were interested in exploring the idea of the network and the practice of networking. The techniques of communication would themselves become more sophisticated, engendering new technologies from video to telecommunications and, eventually, to the internet. Created as a response to systems of control and management symbolized by the technology of bureaucracy, mail art made available metaphors and practices that complemented other networked arts.

As the last section of this article has reinforced, the process by which mail art merges with technosocial practices is far from a deterministic one. To the contrary, art cultivates symbolic resources from which to draw when constructing social understanding vis-à-vis digital technologies. When art clears the way, it is a slow and suggestive process that becomes animated when in relation to other contexts that explore similar themes. While not predestined, the articulation between art and technology is productive, adding to the ways in which technosocial practices unfold. In all, this article speaks to the need to take into account not only technological accounts of history, but also cultural ones that point to the complex relationship between technology and social change.

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Notes

- 1 Examples of Ray Johnson's mail art can be found at: http://www.artpool.hu/Ray/RJ_correspondence.html (consulted September 2008).
- 2 For examples of mail art inspired by and, in some cases, in collaboration with Ray Johnson, see: <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/emma/Links/links1.html> (consulted September 2008).
- 3 For images of La Mamelle, see: <http://web.archive.org/web/20050909182014/http://www.library.sfsu.edu/dtong/default.html> (consulted September 2008).

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