In the second half of the twentieth century, artists, writers, and printers started many alternative distribution networks for their experimental art and literature. They circumvented 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, one of the most important aspects of this distribution network depended on the periodic mailings of very small editions, 50-500 copies, collected in folios, bound volumes, and boxes of original artists’ prints, texts, pages, books, and textual-objects. Many of these collections consist of one page or object from each participant. 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 the participants. These magazines are sometimes called “assemblings” alluding to the editorial policy of compiling without editorial exclusions original artworks for each issue as well as to Richard Kostelanetz’s influential compilations called Assembling (3).

The contents of assemblings include: visual and concrete poems; rubber-stamp art; xerography; small three-dimensional found-art; fine-press printing; recycled or détourned cartoons and advertisements;1 mock examples of mass produced printed objects; hand-drawn scribbles and pictures; etc. Because of this mixed content, it is difficult to describe assemblings as one would a single medium like painting or film. Assemblings’ multifaceted forms also blur the distinction between

1/ détournement is a term coined by the Situationists to describe a method of redirecting a cartoon or advertisement. Typically the Situationists would change the voice bubbles of the characters and insert theoretical statements on cultural rebellion. The Situationists began from a branch of the Letterist group and had a direct impact on many assemblings, ‘zines, and artists networks.
craftwork and artwork. Furthermore, the practices of allusion and parody require reference to a network of other works and participants. The trappings of this networking often appears as recipes, scores, instructions, questionnaires, forms, and manifestoes.

Except for one notable exception, Feuillets Inutiles (30), that issued compilations from the late 1920s through the middle of the 1970s, most of the assemblings began as part of the underground art scene in the second half of the twentieth century. With the emergence of a neo-Dada sensibility in the 1960s and 1970s, art groups once again used the collaborative periodical as a method of distributing their poems and art. General histories of underground, experimental, and neo-avant-garde activities during the 1960s and 70s only include peripheral discussions about these crucial distribution systems.

Democratic Spirit

The attitude of “everyone an artist” appears in the conceptual work of Fluxus, the art group that helped motivate the emergence of mail art networks and assemblings. For example, the editor of ART/LIFE (7), 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 models 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 Drucker suggests this socio-political dimension of publication and distribution practices by coining the phrase “democratic multiples.”