

distribute larger and more complicated contributions. Sometimes the contributions resemble fine press books. Sometimes they are stapled photocopies. Sometimes the “books” are three-dimensional objects. Compared to traditional publishing, these periodicals depended on relatively rigorous artisanal techniques even while they engaged directly with issues highlighted by film and electronic media. Focusing on the conceptual work about how we understand contemporary culture and communication systems, a critic might easily overlook the handmade quality of many of these works.

Intimate Bureaucracies

Many of the key figures of contemporary art participated in assemblings, especially during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Theorists have ignored these works in spite of the fact that writers like Marshall McLuhan (*see illus. opposite preface*), John Cage, Roland Barthes, and Susan Sontag produced important work for these publications, as well as guest editing or designing individual issues. Andy Warhol’s participation in a special issue of *Aspen* (41, *see illus. page 4*), for example, indicates that these periodicals played a role in Pop art as well as Fluxus and other art movements. The more noticeable and remarkable emergence of this form appears in the avant-gardes of the late 1960s and 1970s. Later, in the 1980s, the form became more widely disseminated. These serialized collections of books and experimental art reached maturity in the 1990s with two trends. Some serializations, like I.S.C.A.’s (International Society of Copier Artists) “artists’ books” serials (27) attempt to mass-market these works, while

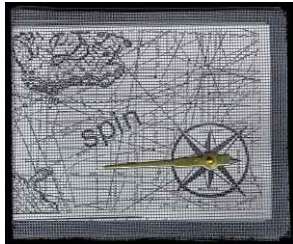


TOP *Blast*. (44)

CENTER Contribution to *Blast*. (44)

BOTTOM Quote from inside folder-cover contributed to *Aspen*. (41)

Music, Man, That’s Where It’s At!



All the items above are from *I.S.C.A. Quarterly*. (27)

TOP "A Marine's Life His-story" by Yve Morse.

BOTTOM Cover of "Spin" by Stephanie Regan.

another periodical in a box, *BLAST* (44) produces aesthetically and conceptually-oriented collections according to themes, produced with great care in very limited editions.

Assemblings often use advertising images, mass-media images, and bureaucratic norms and procedures. Instead of a dismissal of modernity for some transcendent escape from the society of spectacles and red-tape tangles, the artists involved pushed these quintessential forms of our bureaucratized lives to new interpretations of contemporary and future cultures. The artists' assemblings implicitly claim that "the only way out is through"; hence, their work resembles parodies of these processes and procedures as well as parodies of mass media images and combinations. Often, in works like *BLAST*, *Aspen*, or *Commonpress*, the tone is neither pastiche nor parody. It is the tone of fascination with contemporary sociocultural systems. The tone is indicative of what I call "intimate bureaucracy": a mobilization of modern forms for other ends.⁸

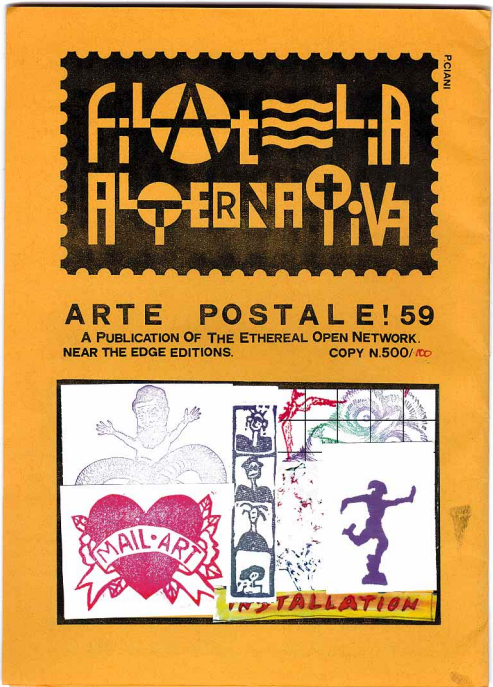
The networks of distribution common to mail art, assemblings, fanzines, and world-wide-web magazines perform the processes, rituals, and trappings of bureaucracies. These alternatives to mass media distribution networks recuperate the fascination and use of systems now common in big business. As assemblings developed and took on a more conscious awareness of the networks involved, the artists' work began commenting on these systems. They applied bureaucratic activities and the visual trappings of those activities (official rubber stamps, forms, questionnaires, icons, corporate logos and slogans, etc.) to art. These networks of xerographers, montage mailers, visual poets,

8/Craig Saper, *Big Dada is Watching: Assemblings and Artists Periodicals Since 1950* (unpublished manuscript).

and media activists began emulating, in often parodic fashion, the look and activities (if not the intent) of commercial advertising, bureaucracies, and corporations: everything a romantic notion of art supposedly rejects. Because of the parodic tone, one could dismiss these emulations as merely a criticism of mass media and corporate culture. On more careful examination, these assemblings have a more complicated relationship with the trappings of systems of mass organization, distribution, and production than simply dismissal.

The rubber stamp art found in most assemblings often employs not only a self-referential style, but also allusions to the bureaucratic procedure of authenticating, taxing, canceling, or inspecting via the use of these rubber stamps. Of course, this becomes particularly evident in references to the U.S. mail system as in the *Arte Postale!* on “Alternative Philately” (37). Some of these stamp projects have run into legal troubles with the postal service because the use of certain styles of canceling stamps are strictly regulated and limited. Not only does the postal service depend on stamps, the postal worker’s or machine’s canceling stamp is the identifying mark of that bureaucracy. The authentication of a letter depends on this stamping. The assemblings often use similar looking stamps to both mock large bureaucratic mechanisms and to suggest an alternative authentication. For example, in *Arte Postale!* rubber stamp imprints are often stamped directly on each individual edition instead of photocopying examples. The actual stamping of each and every edition points directly to the network of artists and compilers involved in these assemblings. In issue number 59, the editor, Vittore Baroni, stamps the cover of the issue with stamps

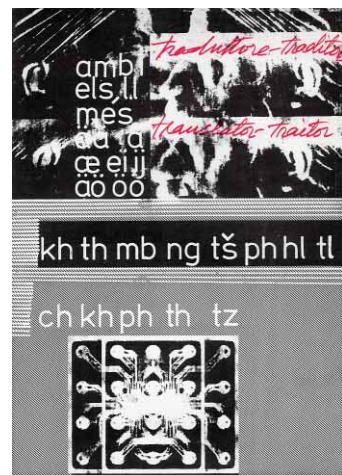
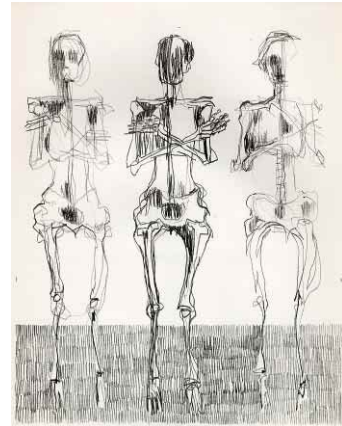
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Arte Postale! (back cover) (37); detail of stamp sheet from *Arte Postale!* (37); *Arte Postale!* (5)



from the contributors. This ornamentation also points to the conceptual question of authorship; Baroni has made his own replica versions of these stamps to use on the cover of each edition. Not only does this allude to the connections among specific artists, but also to conventions of authorship and ownership of images.

This appropriation of bureaucracy’s trappings also includes instructions, questionnaires, and form letters. A questionnaire from *Assembling*, “Complete Form and Submit to Yourself for Evaluation” (1967) by Ely Raman, who later went on to edit the assembling *8 X 10* (22) for example, includes a form number and code, and imitates exactly the bureaucratic look to ask questions that mock the efforts to empirically capture specific facts about an individual. It asks for an unusual assortment of information including: “Pseudonym,” “Destination,” “Avocation,” “Size of Shadow,” and “What was your number when you stood up to be counted?” It also has spaces for: “Corporate Clan, Tribe, Etc.,” “Depth of conviction” (in feet and inches), and other parodies of psychological test questions. Other intriguing, if odd, questions suggest something besides parody; these questions hint at an alternative world view: “Are games related more closely to art or to life?” “What did you play the last time you played?”

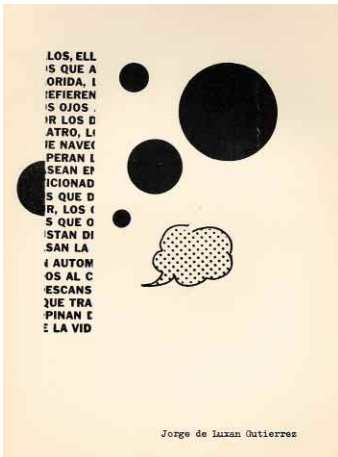
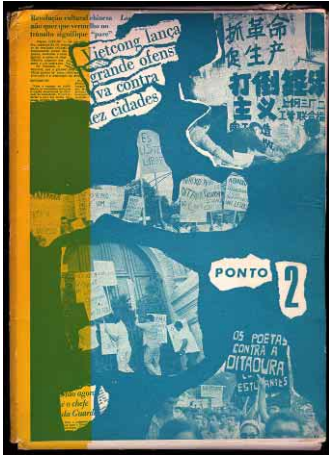
Official tickets also become grist for the mill in, for example, Mark Axelrod’s “ticket to ride,” a ticket to the Nixon impeachment with “performance canceled” stamped on the ticket. This official looking ticket appears in *A* compiled by Jeremy Adler. Adler explains that the assembling accepts everything, but all of the pages came from people who attended the Visual Poetry Workshop at the National



TOP Unsigned contribution to *8 x 10*. (22)

BOTTOM Contribution by Chelsea School of Art: Department of Graphics to *A*. (21)

LEFT Contribution by Davi Det Hompson. to *8 x 10*. (22)



TOP Cover of *Ponto*. (49)

BOTTOM Contribution by artist Jorge de Luxan Guttierrez to *Ponto*. (49)

Poetry Center in London. Most of the contributions use type or calligraphy as a graphic medium similar to Letterist work, typewriter art, or micro-graphia. For example G. Norwicha's creates the image of folding shapes from a micrographic description of landscapes. These types of work appear together with the works concerned with official forms of communication. Peter Myer in the premiere issue of the assembling (no. A, 1971-1972) includes his "Boredom of the Motorist" with graphic street signs inside comic-strip thought-balloons.

Neither merely satirical nor dismissive of bureaucratic performance, these appropriations of officialdom are a loving parody that work through these procedures and signs in a way similar to the way the British Mods wore traditional white collar business clothes. The mods would wear the suits common to mid-level managers and bureaucrats; from a distance they looked as if they were on their way to work; a passerby might smile at the nice young man. The Mods pushed this tidy, respectable look to an extreme. They would tuck in their blazers or sweaters. This obsessive neatness bordered on paranoia. In a similar way, these postal-like stamps, corporate identities, networking procedures imitate the trappings of bureaucratic performance to the point of absurdity.

Typographic Experiments

There is a direct historical link from the Bauhaus and Constructivist concerns and strategies to the Concrete Poetry movement and, then, to the concrete and visual poetry that appears in many assemblings. In fact, concrete and visual poetry is a common and