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.”

Situationist work. In assemblings we see this spirit everywhere.3

In Arte Postale! (37), Vittore Baroni’s introduction states that “the only way to get a copy of “arte-postale” is by sending a mail art work or publication in exchange. Special contributors send one hundred words and get a free subscription to five issues of the “magazine.” One very influential assembling, Commonpress, is named after this effort at producing work by “common effort.” The coordinator of the assembling, Pawel Petasz, even invites readers to volunteer to edit special issues.4 In an interview, Baroni confesses that he started his assemblings because he “needed something readily available to trade with other networkers”; so he followed the lead of other mail artists and started his periodical.5 A slogan for ART/LIFE captures the democratic spirit by offering the participant to “become a page in art history in your own time.”6

The association of industrial production techniques with the urge for democratization of art-making fueled the alternative art scene in the 1960s. Fluxus member George Brecht staged mail art events similar to the more famous Happenings. As the works increasingly engaged with conceptual work rather than work bound to a specific medium or a traditional form, the artists looked for alternative forms of expression. By definition the printed book cannot be an original in the same way as an oil painting. Johanna Drucker notes that with the relatively wider audience, the conceptual artists had to confront the problem of an audience left “baffled by the esoteric and complex conceptual terms” (Drucker 80). In fact, she argues that the artistic vision of some of the artists’ books never quite came to terms with their

3/For an historical account of the development of CoBrA, Letterism, and Situationism see Peter Wollen, Raiding the Ice Box: Reflections on Twentieth century Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993). Although Wollen focuses on the social history rather than aesthetic strategies, he does mention the importance of the “play of calligraphy” for the Letterists (144). He also mentions the leader of the CoBrA artists’ strong criticism of Max Bill, who went on to influence the formation of Concrete Poetry.

4/Paweł Patasz mentions that in Poland the censors would stamp each and every proof page of a publication on the back side of the proof. With these kinds of absurd controls, one can imagine why Commonpress began investigating these stamps of authentication.


ideal of liberating the body politic. The conceptual book artists needed to make and find an audience.

The artists attempted a solution to this problem of making an audience by starting institutions such as: Printed Matter, which sells mass produced multiples of books and periodicals with over 100 copies; Franklin Furnace, originally the archive of record for artists’ books; the Visual Studies Workshop, founded by the important book art critic Joan Lyons; NEXUS Press in Atlanta; and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, which has helped publish a number of important conceptual book works. Many printers and conceptual artists also looked to assemblings as a distribution and publicity system. For example, one editor of an assemblings introduced a compilation by writing that “neither the editor nor the publisher feels this project will make any money, but it might well attract some press attention.”

Provoked by infrastructural problems in making and reaching an audience and by the desire to democratize art-making, artists turned to new distribution systems like assemblings. These distribution systems came to resemble a new form of art in itself — networked art.

Naim June Paik expresses Fluxus’ concern to democratize networks by playing on Karl Marx’s world-changing phrase, “seize the means of production,” by exclaiming: “Marx: Seize the production-medium. Fluxus: Seize the distribution-medium!” This attitude led to great interest in mail art systems. The best example of mail art is Ben Vautier’s “postman’s choice” which consists of a postcard with two identical sides. The sender fills each side with two different names and addresses. The postman then has the choice of delivery. This work uses the open structural parameters of a system, the postal system, to run a humorous experiment.
Since the early 1990s, the popular and underground press has focused much more attention on artists’ magazines and various distribution systems. The attention to artists’ magazines and electronic online ‘zines has further encouraged the growth of these works and networks. Chuck Welch estimates the number of mail art participants at around six thousand in 1993; that number does not include the many more who buy ‘zines at newsstands or access the electronic versions. Because these magazines inherently offer a forum for discussions about this type of work, most of the secondary literature exists within the community of these artists. For example, in an issue of Arte Postale! (6), Vittore Baroni has written one of the more complete histories of mail art. Inevitably, from this self-promotion emerged a flirtation with more ambitious summaries, analyses, and definitions from among current participants. The special issue of the popular RE/Search magazine dedicated to “ZINES!” also includes a détourned photograph of the editor of one magazine, Mystery Date, with the cartoon-like voice balloon exclaiming, “SURRENDER TO THE INCREDIBLY STRANGE URGE . . . TO CREATE YOUR OWN ZINE!” This issue as well as Mike Gunderloy’s earlier The World of Zines: A Guide to the Independent Magazine Revolution, marks the increasing interest in low-budget self-produced magazines as well as the crossover of the coverage of these works from within ‘zines, networks, and assemblings to a wider audience.