Correct Postage, Greetings from Quarantine, an Introduction

On Monday, March 16th 2020, the University of North Carolina-Charlotte campus closed due to COVID-19. Similar to the majority of schools and universities, all of UNC-Charlotte's classes were moved on-line. While this announcement was drastic, I was able to address my classes in-person, the week prior to the closure, to discuss possible contingency plans. I told my students that if they had any unfinished assignments, they should summit them ASAP, …because if campus closed, I was "calling" the semester and would be grading them for the work they had completed thus far. My plans for an early conclusion to the semester were quickly snuffed when the announcement came the following week of our campus's closure, and I discovered that I was required to continue teaching until May. To my students' credit none of them held my earlier words against me and we began fluctuating to a remote version of a studio art class.

While I had never taught on-line before I understood that I would have to reconfigure my classes to work "remotely." A typical studio art class presupposes a traditional, physical space for display and dissemination of artwork (i.e. a framed print, on a wall, in a gallery). Gallery space is a facility and customarily artwork is created to function within that facility. With COVID-19 rendering the emblematic art gallery moot, it was imperative that my students and I examine non-traditional and atypical formats for making and disseminating art. In addition, I was aware of the anxiety my students felt and I was resolute that whatever we studied and made for class, it would have to be playful.

When I think of "playful" art I think of Fluxus. Fluxus is an art movement that began in the 1960's with artists George Maciunas, George Brecht, Alison Knowles, Yoko Ono, and Allan Kaprow (just to name a few). Fluxus actively worked against traditional forms of art, embracing populist forms including performance, ephemera, multiples, and mail art (see fig. 1. *Fluxpost (Smiles)*, 1978, Offset-lithograph on gummed and perforated paper, 11 × 8 ½", courtesy of Galerie Michael Hasenclever, reproduction for educational purposes only). Fluxus is deeply influenced by the avant-garde artist/musician John Cage who endorsed "chance operations" and is notoriously known for his score *4'33"*. Chance operations uses modes of chance or fortune (like dice throwing) with an established set of parameters, to direct the making of an artwork. This approach relegates the significance of the artist and engages the audience/viewer. Movements like Fluxus have been pivotal to the development of contemporary art, setting the stage for many future art movements and practices including Conceptual Art and Relational Art.

Fluxus artists produce many different kinds of artwork from performances to sets of readymade and fabricated sculptural multiples (called Fluxus boxes) to posters and ephemera. A notable production by Fluxus artists are "event scores." Inspired by John Cage the Fluxus event score is a written, creative prompt in just a few lines. Event Scores are a form of artwork that proposes a challenge to be completed creatively. In their original form the event scores are a kind of poetry that may become a work of art through interpreted enaction. With the remaining portion of our spring semester my Print Media 1 class began studying Fluxus and event scores.

For their first project from quarantine my Print Media 1 class was to create a video documenting an original performance based on George Brecht's event score entitled *Exercise*:

Determine the limits of an object or event.
Determine the limits more precisely.
Repeat, until further precision is impossible.
(circa 1961)

Event scores vary and are conceptualized and characterized by their artist/author. Like Zen Koans, event scores promote critical thinking and typically focus on the metaphysical or ephemeral. For example, Yoko Ono's event score, "Painting to See the Skies" is more didactic than that of George Brecht's "Exercise" but remains focused on the transient:

Drill two holes in a canvas.
Hang it where you can see the sky
(Change the place of hanging.
Try both the front and rear
windows, to see if the skies are
different).
(summer 1961)

Using event scores as a model, the Print Media 1 class completed the semester with the mail art project cataloged within these pages. Mail art is a populist form of art that was actively practiced by Fluxus artists and is still practiced today by all kinds of artists. Mail art exploits the postal system as a platform/venue to exchange physical art. Mail art visually incorporates its means of display/dissemination using envelopes, postcards, and letterhead as a substrate/canvas. Mail art is democratic, it is subversive, it is a method for artists to work outside of an established, elitist system. While the contemporary practice of mail art was most popular through the 1960's, 70's, and 80's, the decoration and illustration of envelopes and stationary dates back centuries (with notable ephemera from the Victorian era). While mail art is arguably not a specific movement, it is a very particular form of art and a vital precursor to other ephemera arts like Zines.

One of the first examples of mail art was a slyly defaced postcard reproduction of the Mona Lisa by Marcel Duchamp, created in 1919 (see fig. 2, reproduction for educational purposes only). Entitled *L.H.O.O.Q.* Duchamp created a pun from the pronounced abbreviation which in French sounds like "Elle a chaud au cul," which translates to "she has a hot rear-end." Similar to the memes of social media today, *L.H.O.O.Q.* and mail art engage the recipient/viewer in a kind of game or play. Examples of this kind of engagement can be seen in the artwork of Ray Johnson (see fig. 3 Ray Johnson's mail art. Photo: Courtesy the Ray Johnson Estate. reproduction for educational purposes only). In his mail art Johnson used spliced designs and perforated lines, along with the phrase "please add to and return to…" to encourage his recipients to alter and return the artwork. Mail art requires artists to strategize, plan, and produce in novel, non-traditional ways that correlate to other professional modes of thinking and planning (e.g.

community and public relations). Mail art challenges artists to openly share their skills and ideas in an effort to directly engage and communicate.

The following publication is documentation of the mail art project completed by my Print Media 1 class during the spring 2020 semester's mandated, class hiatus. To begin this project each student was tasked with creating 3 different scores/prompts as directions for completing the front of a postcard. They were to write their 3 prompts on the back of 3 separate postcards and address and mail to a randomly assigned set of 3 different peers (leaving the front of the card intentionally blank). As with the scores by Brecht and Ono enumerated above, the prompts found in this catalog reflect the times they are made in (see Julius Shumpert's prompt):

This is the end.
Record it.
Then give it Life.

Students completed this project, responding to the prompt addressed to them on the back, by creating a drawing, painting, collage for the front of each card they received. In the following publication you will find that the back of each postcard is shown first, with the front of the postcard aligned on the following, reverse page (as if you were flipping the postcard over). This layout is in-keeping with the projects' directions and acknowledges the prompts' import in relation to the imagery created. Thus, the catalog of this project is organized by the author of the prompts with each cards' address identifying the artists whom created the picture on the front. While somewhat convoluted, the layout preferences the back/address-side of the postcard to convey the sequence of communication integral to the creation of each image. In some cases, both text and image have been used to motivate their recipients (see the prompts authored by April Martin and Alan Boger). I was compelled to create this publication based on this class's efforts and their connection to the material. I am grateful to this group of students for being so open-minded and engaged despite the circumstances.

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-Erik Waterkotte, Associate Professor of Print Media, Department of Art & Art History, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Charlotte, NC. June 01, 2020.