

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: The Fine Art of Collecting
Subject: Mail Art Collector John Held Jr.
Discipline: Visual Arts

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Mail artist and collector John Held Jr. contemplates a blowfish he received in the mail.
Still image from SPARK episode, January 2004.

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

EPISODE THEME

The Fine Art of Collecting

SUBJECT

Mail Art collector John Held Jr.

GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts & Language Arts

OBJECTIVE

To introduce students to the visual art form and interactive phenomena of Mail Art, including its history, culture, and various forms, and to provide opportunities for discussion about and engagement with Mail Art.

STORY SYNOPSIS

Back in the 1960s, Mail Art was considered a disposable and democratic art form on the far fringes of conceptual art. It was precisely that throwaway aesthetic that appealed to pioneering collector John Held, who saved every scrap of Mail Art he received, day after day, for almost thirty years. SPARK spends the day with Held as he continues to build his collection, one piece at a time.

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

- To introduce students to the concept of Mail Art as a cultural, artistic practice
- To introduce students to the idea of Mail Art as an expressive medium
- To introduce students to the art produced by Mail Artists
- To inspire students to find creative outlets for self-expression using Mail Art

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Individual and group research
- Individual and group exercises
- Written research materials
- Group discussions

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

- SPARK story about Mail Art collector John Held Jr. on DVD or VHS and related equipment
- Computer with Internet access, navigation software, speakers and a sound card, and color printer
- Audio recordings and audio equipment, such as a tape deck or CD player

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Paper and envelopes
- Paper (regular and heavy weight)
- Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
- Stamps (postcard and regular letter)
- Colored pencils, pens, markers, rubber stamps, ink pads, and ink
- Old magazines, newspapers, posters, and flyers
- Scissors and paper cutters
- Other ephemera, such as tickets, maps, programs, paper containers, wallpaper samples, gift wrap, wrappers, and colorful packaging

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

- Linguistic – syntax, phonology, semantics, pragmatics
- Intrapersonal – awareness of one’s own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
- Bodily-Kinesthetic – the ability to use one’s mind to control one’s bodily movements
- Spatial Intelligence -- the ability to manipulate and create mental images in order to solve problems.



See more information on
[Multiple Intelligences at
www.kqed.org/spark/education.](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education)

SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

During a trip to Europe in 1975, the artist and librarian John Held Jr. found a store in Amsterdam that sold visual rubber stamps. He bought several and began using them in the pen and ink drawings that he had been doing at the time. After returning to New York, he discovered that rubber stamps were being commonly used in a burgeoning network of underground artists involved in Mail Art.

The variety and heterogeneity intrinsic to Mail Art makes it difficult to define the practice exactly, however the term generally refers to a range of artworks that are exchanged through the postal services. The act of mailing the artwork is an essential component of the work, which seeks to establish a network or community of individuals for the exchange of objects and ideas. Many Mail Art artists address social and political concerns, including examinations and critiques of the fine art world, its institutions and traditional channels of circulation. Some of the objects exchanged in Mail Art include postcards created by or modified by artists, non-official artist-made postage stamps (called artistamps), decorated envelopes, found objects, and one of a kind or limited edition artist's books.

In the SPARK story about John Held Jr. - "P.O. Box 410837" - Held takes viewers through some of his expansive collection of Mail Art, one of the most extensive in the world. For over twenty-five years, Held has been collecting art sent to him through the mail, amounting to well over 30,000 pieces. He has since donated part of his collection to various art institutions, including New York's Museum of Modern Art, The J. Paul Getty Foundation, and the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, but Held still keeps much of his collection of correspondences.

Since the only way to receive Mail Art is to produce it and send it to others, at its core Mail Art is about

communication, exchange, and the creation of a kind of virtual community of participants. In this sense, Mail Art anticipates the cyber communities founded on the internet. It is not surprising then that Held and others believe that the internet has extended the possibilities and scope of Mail Art. But even as new technologies transform the practice, introducing email lists, message boards, and online exhibitions, Held contends that Mail Art continues in its material, postal form, renewed by and working hand in hand with new means of digital communication.



Mail artist and collector John creating a piece of Mail Art.
Still image from SPARK story, January 2004.

At the heart of Held's interest in Mail Art is the way the art form merges fine art with the experiences of everyday life. With more traditional forms, art objects are exhibited in galleries and museums--places far removed from people's daily experience. By using the post office as a means of circulating their works, Mail Artists sidestep the usual means of artistic distribution, effectively turning a regular aspect of daily life—collecting and opening mail—into an opportunity for an artistic encounter.

In this spirit, many artists find similar ways of turning aspects of their everyday life into works of

art. SPARK follows Held to the home of friend and collaborator Diana Mars, who has hosted a dinner every week for ten years, turning the meal into a means of generating art objects. Mars, who is also involved in Mail Art, produces materials relating to her dinners each week, including invitations, artist's postage stamps, photographs, a guest book, and other kinds of documentation of the event. The dinners themselves are also catalysts for collective performances, which are then also documented by Mars.

THE BIG PICTURE

Mail Art finds its root in the Dada movement that emerged in Europe after the First World War, which initiated the avant-garde project of merging fine art with the experience of everyday life. The Dadaists used absurdist performance, visual poetry, collage, poster making, and other activities to make political and social commentary. Perhaps more importantly, the Dadaists deliberately avoided the traditional means of exhibiting their works, opting instead to host exhibitions in alternative spaces, like cafés, clubs, and cabarets. Dada had a profound impact on the art that was to follow, and many artistic groups and movements have taken Dada as inspiration and important touchstone.

But it was not until the 1950s, when the artist Ray Johnson put together a network of like-minded artists to distribute works of art through the postal service that Mail Art officially came into being. Johnson, who had been working in a variety of Dada-inspired modes, often in collaboration with artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, and members of the international neo-Dada Fluxus group, began to develop a specific kind of collage technique: first he cut a coherent image into strips and then rearranged them either using the strips as constitutive pieces or layers for new collages, or by sending them to friends and acquaintances.

It was from here that Johnson started to understand the dissemination of artworks through the mail as an art form in itself. Poking fun at critics and historians that divide art into “schools” of artists so that their work may be better packaged to museums and collectors, Johnson founded the New York Correspondence School (NYCS), a group of artists

dedicated to the production and circulation of Mail Art. Though Johnson officially ended the NYCS in 1973 by publishing an obituary for the organization in the New York Times, the group continued under many different names, including The Buddha University and the Taoist Pop Art School.

Mail Art gained more widespread currency in the 1960s and 70s, connecting it to other newly emerging artistic practices, such as Performance Art, Conceptual Art, Process Art, Happenings, and Pop Art. All of these movements in some way attempted to challenge the values central to established art practices, and Mail Art is no exception. Undermining the demand that a work of art be original, Mail Artists depend on techniques that promote reproducibility, using rubber stamps, photography, and photocopy in their art.

The originality of a work of art is further questioned in that often pieces of Mail Art are not the production of a single artist, but collaborations between many individuals. Johnson established a common practice among Mail Artists by sending a correspondence with the instruction that the recipient add to the work and send it on. And because participation in Mail Art does not require formal art training or institutional recognition, it is a highly democratic form of art. The Mail Art network is accessible to anyone willing to invest the time and energy to become involved. Because of this, Mail Art is inherently an open system: its concerns and issues are defined directly by its participants, who may be anywhere where postal service is available.



Mail artist and collector John Held Jr. sifts through a day's delivery. Still image from SPARK story, January 2004.

RESOURCES – TEXTS

Carrion, Ulises. Second Thoughts. Amsterdam: VOID Distributors, 1983.

Crane, Michael & Mary Stofflet, eds. Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity. San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1984.

Danet, Brenda. Cyberpl@y : Communicating Online. New York: Berg, 2001.

Donna De Salvo and Catherine Gudis, ed. Ray Johnson : Correspondences. New York: Flammarion, 1999.

Held, John Jr. Mail Art: An Annotated Bibliography. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1991.

Mail Etc., Art: A Traveling Correspondence Art Exhibition. Boulder, CO: University of Colorado, 1980.

Patrizio, Andrew. Networking: Art by Post and Fax. Manchester: Cornerhouse Publications, 1997.

Posey, Sandra Mizumoto. Rubber Soul: Rubber Stamps and Correspondence Art. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996.

Thompson, Michael. The Stamp Art and Postal History of Michael Thompson and Michael Hernandez de Luna. Chicago: Badpress Books, 2001.

Welch, Chuck, ed. Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995.

RESOURCES – WEB SITES

Art Pool – The art and biography of influential Mail Artist Ray Johnson. – http://www.artpool.hu/Ray/RJ_title.html

Artist Stamp Inc. - Web site that documents and illustrates artiststamps from around the world. Contains gallery, history, and an artist's database. - <http://www.artiststamp-inc.com>

Black Specs - The Mail Art of Dutch artist Jeroen Teunen. – <http://www.blackspecs.de/mailart.html>

Carla Cryptic – Gallery of Mail Art and stamps. – <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~cjatkings/cryptic/artistamps.html>

Diplomacy - A Web site devoted to Mail Art, including a gallery of Artiststamps, lists of Zines, and links to other Mail Art Web sites. - <http://knoph.com/diplomacy>

Electronic Museum of Mail Art – A program of the University of Texas (EMMA) than includes an on-line museum with samples of Mail Art and links to other sites. - <http://www.actlab.utexas.edu/emma>

Fan Mail - A Web site from a printer in Luxembourg including an extensive listing of galleries, information on artists, and worldwide calls for Mail Art. - <http://www.phi.lu/mailart.html>

InfoMuse – Section of library and information science Web site including the Joachim Frank Mail Art Archive. – <http://www.infomuse.net/kristina/courses/605pathfinder/index.shtml>

Jenny de Groot – The on-line exhibition of Jenny de Groot's FeMail Art, including information and links. - <http://www.esthan.demon.nl/index.html>

John Held Jr.'s Mail Art Alphabet – http://www.vorticeargentina.com.ar/escritos/mail_art_alphabet.html

John Held Jr.'s Web site - Writings and information about Held and other Mail Artists. - <http://www.geocities.com/johnheldjr>

Mail Art by Dutch Mail Artist Ruud Janssen. - <http://www.iuoma.org>

MailArtist.com - A Web site devoted to information about Mail Art, including photographs of Mail Art and links to other sites. - <http://www.mailartist.com>

JCM Artiststamp Gallery – An on-line exhibition of artist stamps from around the world. – http://jas.faximum.com/jas.d/jcm_asg.htm

BAY AREA RUBBER STAMP RESOURCES

California Stampin'
5480-2 Sunol Blvd.
Pleasanton, CA 94566
(925) 417-8420
www.castampin.com

Stamper's Warehouse
101 G Town & Country Dr.
Danville, CA 94526
(925) 362-9595
www.stamperswarehouse.com

All Stamp Rubber Stamps
41 Wharf Circle
San Rafael, CA
1-800-694-7826
(custom stamps only – no retail)

Burlingame Stationers
1320 Burlingame Avenue
Burlingame, CA 94010
(650) 342-6272

Stamp Garden
1510 Stafford St
Redwood City, CA 94063
(650) 364-4311

Village Stationers
310 S California Ave
Palo Alto, Ca 94306
(650) 326-7970

Strawbridge's Stationers-Gifts
86 Throckmorton Ave
Mill Valley, CA 94941
(415) 388-0235

Instant Printer-Zenith
1419 Grant Ave
Novato, Ca 94945
(415) 897-0454

Only the Best
The Oaks Shopping Center
21267 Stevens Creek Blvd.
Cupertino, CA 95014
(408) 255-2556

San Francisco Rubber Stamps
938 Howard Street
San Francisco, CA 94103
(415) 495-0323

City Rubber Stamp Co Inc
557 Howard St
San Francisco, CA 94105
(415) 957-5813

Oakland Rubber Stamp Co
316 14th St
Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 451-0553

Berkeley Stamp Co
1680 University Ave
Berkeley, CA 94703
(510) 845-5685

Gooday Stamp Company
1721 Rogers Ave
San Jose, CA 95112
(408) 441-8833

Accurate Rubber Stamp Co
6892 Soquel Ave
Santa Cruz, CA 95062
(831) 476-5645

Fremont Rubber Stamp Co Inc
44820 S Grimmer Blvd
Fremont, CA 94538
(510) 656-8891

BAY AREA MAIL ARTISTS

Bay Area Dada (some listed below)
Bill Gaglione
Monte Cazzaza
Patricia Tavenner
Tim Mancusi
Mail Art Consortium (now defunct)
Anna Banana
Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951-1982)
Bill "Zippy the Pinhead" Griffith.
Steve Caravello

SECTION III – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND WORDS AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Artist’s Book

Unique or limited edition book produced by an artist that may include both textual and visual material

Artistamp

Combined word for an artist made stamp; a Mail Art piece

Circumvent

To avoid or bypass by artful maneuvering

Collage

An artistic composition of materials and objects pasted over a surface; the artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque are often credited with having produced the first collages

Collection

A group of related objects to be seen, studied, or kept together

Conceptual Art

Movement begun in the 1960s that favors the concept involved in a work of art over its physical production

Correspondence

Communication through the exchange of letters

Curator

One who manages or oversees a museum collection or a library

Dada

A European artistic and literary movement (1916-1923) that flouted conventional aesthetic and cultural values by producing works marked by nonsense, travesty, and incongruity

Disposable

Temporary, designed to be discarded after use

Ephemera

Printed matter of passing interest

Logo

A name, symbol, or trademark designed for easy and definite recognition, especially one borne on a single printing plate or piece of type

Mail Art

The name of an art form coined in the 1950s by artist Ray Johnson that involves the production and postal circulation of aesthetic objects

Marginal

Considered to be at the fringe of a culture or mode of production, outside of the mainstream

Participant

One that shares, or takes part in something

Pop/Pop Art

A form of art that depicts objects or scenes from everyday life and employs techniques of commercial art and popular illustration

Practitioner

One who is engaged in the actual use or exercise of any art or profession

Validation

The act of pronouncing something valuable, confirmation

Visual Poetry

Poetry that visually conveys the poet's meaning through the graphic arrangement of letters, words, or symbols on the page

SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Creating Mail Art

After watching the SPARK episode about John Held Jr. and his Mail Art collection, invite students to create a piece of Mail Art to send to a friend or family member out of town. Before beginning, talk about the different types of Mail Art mentioned in the story and in this Guide. Show examples using the Internet or books. Encourage students to use one or more of the techniques used by Mail Artists, including rubber stamps, collage, Photocopying, drawing, and visual poetry.

Remember when creating Mail Art that the US Postal Service has particular specifications that must be followed for the postcards to be acceptable mail, namely, size and weight. According to the US Postal Service standards, postcard sizes must no smaller than 3½" x 5," and no larger than 4½" x 6." The cards must also be thicker than usual paper, such as a heavy weight paper, being at least .007 thick but not thicker than .016. Many paper and printer companies such as HP and Epson make pre-made postcard stock, available at office supply stores. The postcards are usually perforated on a heavy weight matte white paper. For a full description of the USPS standards, visit <http://www.usps.com>.

For all Mail Art projects using glue (such as collage), it is a good idea to coat the postcard with a medium (such as gloss medium or matte medium) or seal it in sticky plastic so that the imagery does not dislodge during transit.

Mail Art can also be created using email. Invite students to create their own Mail Art network by sending Mail Art emails to one another. Each recipient must add a bit of found text or imagery until everyone in the class has participated. Print out the correspondence and discuss the results with the class.

Creating Mail Art Envelopes

Invite students to create Mail Art envelopes. To begin, they need to open a pre-made card envelope at its seams, lay it flat, and trace the shape onto a scrap of reused paper such as a page of a book, magazine, wrapping paper, colored paper, newspaper page, comic, or a piece of wallpaper. Next show the students how to cut around the template and then fold in the same manner as the envelope, gluing it like the original. Now the envelope can be embellished with imagery, or mailed as is. Students can write the address on the envelope or use a mailing label. Remember, that just as with postcards, envelopes that are heavier than the standard USPS may require additional postage beyond the standard first class stamp.

If it is not possible for students to make their own envelopes, they can be obtained from a number of sources. Many discount stores and gift shops have unsold cards and envelopes after holidays. The stores usually return unsold cards to the manufacturers and receive a credit, but they are not required to return the envelopes. Approach a local chain or independent shop and inquire about a donation of envelopes. In addition envelopes that arrive at the school or at student's homes with junk mail can be reused, but any logos or addresses should be covered with stickers or imagery.

The envelopes can be decorated with colored pencils, markers, collage, rubber stamps, or pen and ink. Consider devising a theme for the Mail Art envelopes, such as a holiday theme or a theme related to the curricula.

Display the Mail art envelopes in the classroom or another location.

Making Mail Art Collages

Mail art collages can be made on envelopes, postcards, boxes, or any other form of object that can be mailed. To begin, choose an idea or theme for students to use as a guide. Provide old magazines, books, newspapers, and other recycled flat materials such as photographs, drawings, soda straw wrappers, empty packaging, brochures, maps, tickets, programs, and paper containers (bags, boxes, etc). Students can also use any unusual items they might have at home, such as a small piece of driftwood or other three-dimensional object provided they can be mailed through the postal service.

Another way to approach the project is to document a place visited by the students or by the class, such as a class fieldtrip, a summer vacation, etc. In this case, the students can include images of landmarks, particular shrubs or plant life, animals, and colors particular to that place or region. To represent different states, students can use maps, shapes of the state with the place highlighted, or they can cut out the letters to spell the name of the place. And again, remember that for all Mail Art projects using glue (such as collage) it is a good idea to coat the postcard with a medium (such as gloss medium or matte medium) or seal it in sticky plastic so that the imagery does not dislodge during transit.

Creating a Class Collection

After watching John Held Jr. talk about his Mail Art collection on the SPARK story, ask students what they collect. Talk about collecting and the different reasons that they or others collect. Invite students to bring in samples of the items they collect and talk about their reasons for collecting, including where they find their objects, which are their favorites, and how they support their collecting "habit."

Encourage students to assemble a class collection. As a group, ask students to decide what types of objects are going to be collected and the budget available to spend.

Challenge each student to propose an idea for the collection, by asking them to:

- Research their choice
- Explore the historical and financial background of the objects/artworks

- Present the arguments as to why the class should invest in these objects.

Ask each student to make their "pitch" to the group and invite the class to vote on the proposals.

Afterwards, arrange a visit to a local museum or collection. If possible, arrange a tour or talk with a curator or person involved with the collection. What is on view at the museum? What is not on view (that is, what percentage of the museum's collection is on view at any given time)? Who decides what is shown? How are the works/objects presented? What does the institution tell the public about the work? How does this change the way the work is viewed?

RELATED STANDARDS

VISUAL ARTS

Grade 3

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

1.4 Compare and contrast two works of art made by the use of different art tools and media (e.g., watercolor, tempera, computer).

1.5 Identify and describe elements of art in works of art, emphasizing line, color, shape/form, texture, space, and value.

Grade 5

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

1.3 Use their knowledge of all the elements of art to describe similarities and differences in works of art and in the environment.

5.0 CONNECTIONS, RELATIONSHIPS, APPLICATIONS

5.2 Identify and design icons, logos, and other graphic devices as symbols for ideas and information.

Grade 8

ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

1.1 Use artistic terms when describing the intent and content of works of art.

Grades 9-12 (Proficient)

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

2.1 Solve a visual arts problem that involves the effective use of the elements of art and the principles of design.

Grades 9-12 (Advanced)

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

1.8 Analyze the works of a well-known artist as to the art media selected and the effect of that selection on the artist's style.

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

2.4 Demonstrate in their own works of art a personal style and an advanced proficiency in communicating an idea, theme, or emotion.

3.0 AESTHETIC VALUING

4.5 Construct a rationale for the validity of a specific work of art artwork that falls outside their own conceptions of art.

SPARKLERS:

* A class postcard project is a great project to set up with another school in a different town or state - if another school or location is willing to participate. Mail Art postcards can carry artwork and also information about the school, town, state, country, or student(s).

John Held Jr. is open to accepting mail art works that are class projects (not individual student projects as the number would be too great). Class mail art projects can be sent to John Held Jr. at P.O. Box 410837, San Francisco, CA 94141.

* Consider the dictum “the medium is the message” (Marshall McLuhan) or at least the medium’s impact on the message. Is art viewed differently if it arrives by mail rather than being exhibited in a gallery or museum? How does the way art is distributed or exhibited affect the way it is viewed?

RELATED STANDARDS LANGUAGE ARTS

Grades 9 & 10

1.0 LISTENING AND SPEAKING STRATEGIES

1.1 Formulate judgments about the ideas under discussion and support those judgments with convincing evidence.

Grades 11 & 12

1.0 WRITING STRATEGIES

1.9 Revise text to highlight the individual voice, improve sentence variety and style, and enhance subtlety of meaning and tone in ways that are consistent with the purpose, audience, and genre.

1.0 LISTENING AND SPEAKING STRATEGIES

1.3 Interpret and evaluate the various ways in which events are presented and information is communicated by visual image makers (e.g., graphic artists, documentary filmmakers, illustrators, news photographers).

1.10 Evaluate when to use different kinds of effects (e.g., visual, music, sound, graphics) to create effective productions.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at <http://www.kqed.org/spark/education>.



For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/index.asp>.