

Giorgio Amico

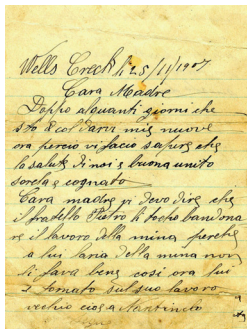
From mail coach to mail art: a two-centuries-old dream.

Nowadays, as the old letter/postcard system seems irremediably supplanted by ever new forms of electronic communication, we have almost forgotten the revolution, first occurred during the nineteenth century in Europe and USA, which was represented by a postal service that was managed by the Country through its tax system.



The Postal Service is the first true public service and it allows everybody who can afford the modest expense to purchase a stamp to do what was earlier a privilege of monarchs and aristocrats.

King's couriers, who had dominated the roads for centuries, are now replaced by mail coaches.



It is a real revolution. The letter becomes the usual way to communicate in a world that becomes increasingly interconnected. For emigrants, those millions of people who are moving to America, it is the instrument to preserve the memory and the affections.



Mail coach becomes synonymous with adventure. It is a myth that was born in the Wild West. The mail

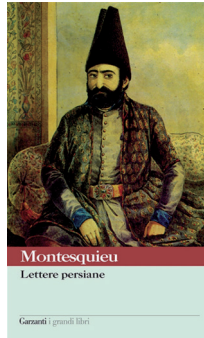
must arrive at any cost to the small communities of the frontier, although the hidden dangers of an hostile territory, such as bandits and Indians. Receiving mail means to participate in a civilization, although lost in that wild territory, and to contribute to the birth of a Nation. It is the epic of "Stagecoach", the great film of John Ford, which since 1939 never fails to make us dream.



In a Country/Continent like the United States the circulation of mail becomes the representation of the everyday life, of the enjoyment of the human rights, of the freedom. The postal service is the cornerstone of the system. Kevin Costner tells us about it in a 1997 film, "The Postman". In a post-apocalyptic centuries regressed America, after a nuclear disaster, in which the violence dominates all and the only law is the law of the jungle, a man begins to deliver the mail, so that he brings back hope in a everyday life which becomes in that way possible again.

However, the letter is first of all a deep expression of the ego, a privileged instrument to reveal love and passion. In this way the letter becomes a literary form, high culture, novel.

The heir of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel, that already in the erotical and existential anguish forewarns the arrival of Romanticism,...



... is the nineteenth-century bourgeois novel, in which we can see the triumph of the letter, its real undisputed protagonist. Stolen, lost, unexpected letters, that disrupt families, break up marriages, upset the apparent monotony of bourgeois life. In 1845 "The Purloined Letter" of Edgar Allan Poe has even given birth to a new literary genre, which was destined to great fortune: the detective story.

Because the letter is the intrusion of an elsewhere, that can be positive or negative, but it is always a powerful factor of change, and it is also hope and expectation, wish of something that could change our life, even if it does not correspond to the expectations and dreams. It is a wait and expectation that is often disappointed, like in the sad Valentine of Charlie Brown, to whom the red-haired girl is cruelly determined not to write.



of their fears, of their feelings.

But is it really possible to talk about love? Is there a language which can faithfully represent the feelings? Snoopy says no.

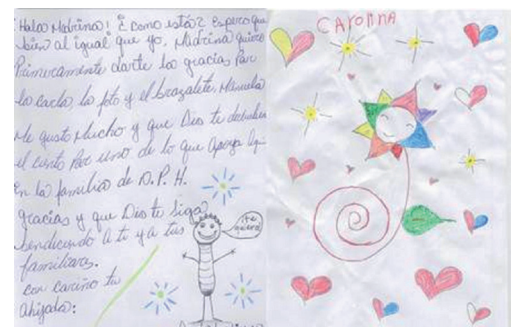
But is it really so? Maybe there is a way and kids know its secret.

Kids? Yes, exactly kids. They are able to put alongside the words the immediate and spontaneous graphical representation of their dreams,



"As also art has its primordial origins – Paul Klee writes in 1911 – it is more likely to find those origins in an ethnographic museum or at home, in the nursery (don't laugh, dear reader), in fact even children can make art. The more inexperienced these children are, the more instructive their art is." Because "the practical purpose is unknown to the child, who sees all with his still naive eyes and he still owns the undimmed ability to absorb the thing itself... Every child's drawing, without any exception, reveals the inner sound of the thing itself with absolute spontaneity."

I say it without any fear: the most authentic mail art is to be found in the letters of children!



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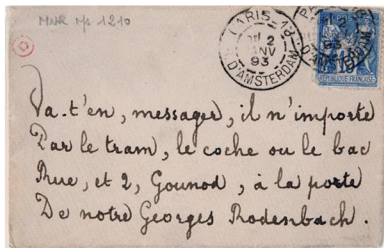


Even some particularly sensitive adults, of course, discovered this secret. This is the case of an official, whose identity is still unknown, but of which there is a very beautiful letter, that he spent from Pas de Calais in 1837.

Writers and poets understood it too and, of course, also artists. The letter becomes a unique and unrepeatable work of art.



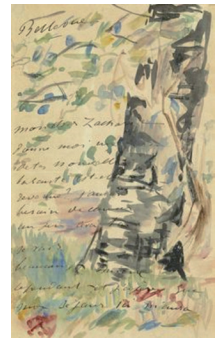
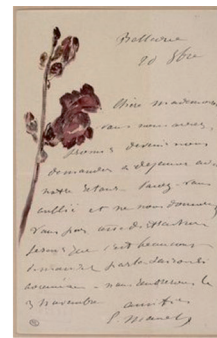
Victor Hugo



Mallarmé (1893)

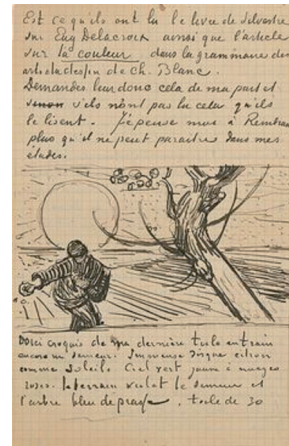
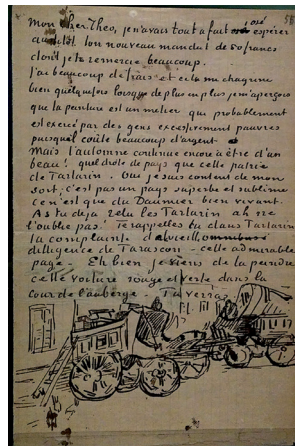


Edouard Manet



Please notice how in this letter of Manet words intrude into leaves without distinction of sign.

The artist that most and best of all uses the means of letter to communicate his art is Vincent Van Gogh, who writes almost daily to his brother Theo and he reproduces in detail the works of art he is creating in that moment.



During the twentieth century, the century of the avant-gardes, the artists that give further impetus to this kind of art will be the futurists. Marinetti, of course... but above all Balla.



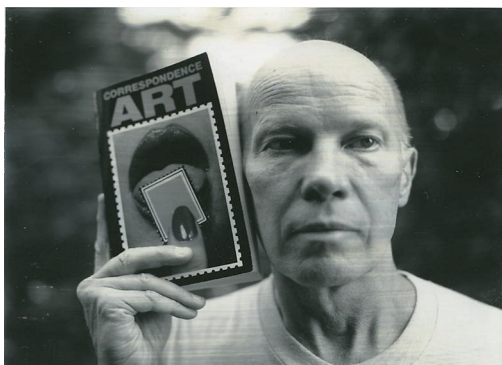
A lot of artists do this. We find, among the others, Matisse and Picasso and Prévert.

But we must wait until the beginning of the sixties to find an artist like Ray Johnson to theorize the mail art as a real artistic movement.



According to Johnson mail art is an anarchic artistic practice, it is totally free, without rules and it is for everyone.

The goal is to allow the artist to be free from the dictatorship of the gallery system, to tackle the problem of commercialization of works of art by resetting the market value, to allow maximum circulation of ideas and works. And, first of all, to overcome the split between art and life. For the homo ludens art is play, art is everyday life activity.



"I'm an artist – Johnson writes - and a, well, I shouldn't call myself a poet but other people have.

What I do is classify the words as poetry. ...[...] is all my writings, rubbings, plays, things that I had given [...] which I mailed [...] or brought [...] in cardboard boxes. [...] So when the book appeared the book stated, 'Ray Johnson is a poet,' but I never said, 'this is a poem,' I simply wrote what I wrote and it later became classified."

Arthur Rimbaud would have agreed.

