YOU’VE GOT MAIL: THE ART OF MICHAEL MORRIS, VINCENT TRASOV, ERIC METCALFE AND KATE CRAIG OF IMAGE BANK

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“If we weren’t permitted to play the game that then defined the art-world, we were not obliged to play by the rules of the game.”

This exhibition, a foray into conceptual Canadian art of the 1960s and 1970s, focuses on mail correspondence practices. Mail art as a marginal mode of communication parallels the development of artist-run centres and the rise of alternative art forms of art as a source of institutional critique.

The works of Michael Morris (b. 1942) and Vincent Trasov (b. 1947) who founded Image Bank in 1969, and Eric Metcalfe (b. 1941) in collaboration with Kate Craig, are indebted to the earlier manifestations of correspondence art. This was initiated by Fluxus, the Nouveaux Réalistes, and more directly, the New York Correspondence School promoted by the American artist Ray Johnson in the mid 1960s. Operating on the margins of the art circuit, Morris, Trasov and Metcalfe in conjunction with Kate Craig were part of a large—albeit private—network of artists that included the members of General Idea, Anna Banana in “Canadada” and a number of international artists such as Robert Filliou from France and Dana Atchley from the United States. This vibrant community was, as American Fluxus artist and author Ken Friedman writes, “characterized by a trenchant sense of privacy [and] a specific reaction against the exclusionary façade of art history and [its] exclusive attitudes.”
Stemming from my previous virtual exhibition, which was concerned with art and text, and how the digital transposition of text-based work can operate to heighten its original potential, this second exhibition is concerned with the use of a means of communication—the mail—as a viable artistic medium to further the exchange of ideas and visual material across geographical boundaries. By the same token, mail art functions outside the traditional tropes of art production and exhibition. The initiative responded to a real need for personal and direct contact among artists in Canada and abroad.
Michael Morris

*The Problem of Nothing*

1966

152.4 × 137 cm

Acrylic on canvas

Vancouver Art Gallery

Michael Morris’ *The Problem of Nothing* (1966), situated in its art historical context and analysed in light of the artist’s conceptual artistic practice, can be interpreted as a reaction to the lack of content in abstract painting and the dominance of hard-edge abstraction in North American art. Working in this non-figurative realm, Morris humorously renders the problematics of the abstract aesthetic associated with the American art critic Clement Greenberg who advocated the supremacy of form over representation. With the empty, or rather saturated speech bubble, the painting destabilizes the principles of abstraction championed by Clement Greenberg’s protégés. Furthermore, the title reinforces Morris’ intent to reject the art system as it was functioning at the time.

After encountering Morris’ *The Problem of Nothing* in the magazine *Artforum*, Ray Johnson of the New York Correspondence School contacted Morris, noting their shared interest in “nothing.” Johnson informed Morris that he had done Nothings while everyone else had done Happenings, purposefully contrasting his work with the popularity of American artist Allan Kaprow who was creating social situations for the audience to engage in. Johnson’s Nothings were in fact fictional meetings that never took place in the physical world, but rather functioned as conceptual intentions. About Johnson’s practice, Clive Phillpot, former director of the MOMA Library, writes: “Even when he is invited to participate in a group show, he is as likely as not to exhibit, or to declare that his contribution will be a Ray Johnson nothing.”

This early painting by Morris is included here for the effect it had in motivating early mail art practices in Canada. Morris’ correspondence with Ray Johnson can be positioned not only as the first step that integrated the Canadian postal service as a means of communication into his artistic practice, but also as the conceptual ground for Image Bank.
## Image Bank

Page from *The Image Bank Annual Report*

1972

28 x 21.5 cm

Offset print, published in a special issue of *File Megazine*

Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia

The mail correspondence of Michael Morris and Ray Johnson set in motion Image Bank, a Canadian network similar to the New York Correspondence School. The founders explain that “Image Bank always existed in the mind. There were never any of the charters, boards of directors or societies that came later with the parallel galleries. Image Bank was telepathic. It read the pulse and tapped into the subliminal. Image Bank motivated events, created structures, questioned and redefined roles, and was always open to new ideas.”

What is shown here is a page of the Image Bank Annual Report of 1972, published in a special issue of General Idea’s File Megazine. It lists image requests sent to Image Bank by artists. By providing postal addresses, the report allowed artists to correspond amongst themselves, thus creating an alternative route of connection. Interestingly, both works by Eric Metcalfe included in this exhibition were executed from the leopard images the artist received in response to his request through the Image Bank Correspondence Exchange.

Image Bank, renamed the Morris/Trasov Archive in 1992, is now housed at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. The archive is both a collection of art works and a research tool for art historians. It encompasses Morris and Trasov’s collaborative art practices from 1969 to 1974 as well as their individual works and other items they collected by artists who participated in Image Bank. The catalogued objects include postcards, books, magazines, sound recordings and a wide variety of found objects. Image Bank's incentive to collect and document is embodied by the Morris/Trasov Archive. The archives preserves these objects and demonstrates, through them, the collective’s determination to make works that distort the conventional boundaries of creative consciousness.
Eric Metcalfe (Dr. Brute) and Kate Craig (Lady Brute)

*Untitled*, from the *Banal Beauty Inc.* Series

1972

28 x 21.5 cm

Published in the *Image Bank Annual Report* in *File Megazine*

Morris/Trasov Archive, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, UBC

Artist Eric Metcalfe, once widely known as Dr. Brute, was involved in Morris and Trasov’s Image Bank projects from 1968 to 1979. About the constructed, fictitious identity of Dr. Brute, art historian and curator Scott Watson writes: “Dr. Brute was an armature against society and its demands. It was about setting an agenda for alternative lifestyles and alternative art in a world where traditional forms of high art had become irrelevant.”

Clearly, the persona of Dr. Brute came to represent Metcalfe’s aspirations, both social and artistic. His alter ego was part of the Brutopia duo he formed with his wife Kate Craig, then known as Lady Brute.

*Untitled* from the *Banal Beauty Inc.* series was published in the 1972 *Image Bank Annual Report* as a special issue of General Idea’s *File Megazine*. All the images used in this series were the product of a year's accumulation of visual material sent from across the country. The requests for leopard images was “a way to locate and document Brutopian imagery in the world of image circulation.”

Craig had started using the leopard motif in 1970, and it quickly became the recurrent theme and motif of their collaboration. This photograph reflects their obsession with the leopard, combining the kitsch motif with a voluptuous, scantily dressed, pinup-like woman. The aesthetics of this image, pushed to the limit of absurdity, are related to popular culture and stereotypical ideas of the feminine propagated by the media.
Eric Metcalfe (Dr. Brute)

*Untitled*

1973

Painted facade at the Vancouver Art Gallery, during the exhibition *Pacific Vibrations*, 1973

*Untitled*, from 1973, is another project permeated with the ubiquitous Brute animal skin print. Metcalfe was asked to “activate” the façade of the Vancouver Art Gallery for the exhibition *Pacific Vibrations: A Free Festival of Exhibitions and Events*. Alongside Evelyn Roth’s video installation of a woven fabric which hangs in front of the main entrance, Metcalfe painted the adjacent facade with his famous leopard spots. In this venue the leopard spots are less associated with the animal-female connotations of the *Banal Beauty Inc.* series. Instead, this application of the spots is more telling of Metcalfe’s interest in “a different kind of utopian potential […] a space on the border between culture and nature.”

This use of a recurrent motif in a public space began in 1971 with the *Leopard Realty* series. These were ephemeral, triangular leopard spot paintings installed and photographed by Metcalfe in different urban landscapes. For the *Leopard Realty Postcards* (1971-2), started that same year, Metcalfe altered photographs of Vancouver skyscrapers with his signature yellow-and-black treatment and produced postcards that he mailed. The intensive use of an animal motif, first used as mail art in a tongue-in-cheek manner, became a signifier of Dr. Brute and Lady Brute’s collaborative practice. What is interesting about this seemingly ironic depiction of leopard spots is the multi-layered meanings this motif assumed in different works spanning a period of three years.
NOTES

6 Morris.
8 Watson, 20.
9 Watson, 24.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


