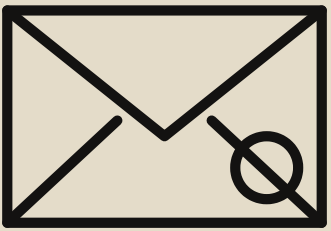
ZINE / 1986



DEAD LETTER OFFICE: MAIL ART FROM NOWHERE

Edited by Marguerite Sallow

APOCALYPSE CULT

READING COPY AC-0103

DEAD LETTER OFFICE: MAIL ART FROM NOWHERE

Edited by Marguerite Sallow, 1986

A NOTE FROM THE ORGANISER

This is an exhibition of failures. Every object in it set out for a destination and did not arrive. I think it the most successful show I have been involved with.

The idea came from a habit of mine. For some years I have sent mail art to people who do not expect it: a name from a telephone directory, the occupant of a house I have passed. It is the purest form of the practice. You make a thing, you give it to the post, and you never learn what became of it. It is the opposite of a gallery, where one stands beside the work and watches people fail to look at it.

Then it occurred to me to wonder what happens to post that cannot be delivered, and I discovered that there is an office for it. Every postal service keeps one. It is staffed by people whose work is to open what cannot be delivered and look for a clue. They are, I suppose, the only civil servants employed to read other people's letters with kindness.

I wanted to make an exhibition for them. So I wrote to everyone on my list and said: send something to nowhere, and let us see what the post office makes of it.

What it made of it is on the walls. I ask you to look at the backs as carefully as the fronts. The stamps and the pencilled notes, tried here,

not known, no such street, are the collaboration. Dozens of sorters in a number of countries handled these, puzzled over them, and passed them on with a comment. None of them knew they were making art, which is how one can tell that they were.

THE RULES OF THE SHOW

- No jury. Everything that came back is shown.
- No fee. It cost the price of a stamp, and in several cases not even that.
- No returns. When the exhibition closes, each work will be put into a fresh envelope and posted to a stranger.
- No originals. If you like something, copy the idea. That is what it is for.

FROM THE CATALOGUE

1. To the Person Who Lived Here Before. A postcard of a seaside promenade, addressed to a house number that the street does not reach. On the back, in green ink: "I am sorry about the garden." Returned with the endorsement *no such number*, and beneath it, in a different hand, *tried next door*.

4. Letter to the Year 1999. A sealed envelope addressed to "The Future, c/o the Present." Postmarked three times. Somebody at a sorting office has written across it, neatly: *insufficient address, also insufficient postage.*

9. Forty Stamps. An envelope entirely covered, front and back, with stamps of the lowest denomination, leaving no room for an address. It

was delivered to the organiser because her address was on the single stamp that had been drawn by hand. The postal service cancelled every one of them, including the forgery.

15. To the Lighthouse Keeper, Inland. Addressed to a lighthouse in a town two hundred miles from any coast. Returned after eleven weeks with a typed slip regretting that the establishment could not be traced, and a pencilled postscript: *we did ask.*

22. Map of the Route. A sheet of card on which the sender had drawn the journey he expected the item to take. It came back with the drawing corrected in ballpoint by an unknown hand, and the correct route added.

31. Complaint. A formal letter to "The Department of Undelivered Things," complaining that nothing sent to it had ever been acknowledged. It was not acknowledged. It was, however, returned, which the sender has accepted as a reply.

38. For Whoever Opens This. An envelope addressed to the dead letter office itself, containing a pressed flower and the words "thank you for looking." This is the only item in the exhibition that reached its destination. It came back regardless. Someone had put a second flower in.

47. Blank. A card with nothing on either side except the return address. The post office stamped it *undeliverable as addressed*, which is, when you consider it, a philosophical position.

53. Chain. A letter instructing the recipient to copy it six times and send it on, or suffer misfortune, addressed to a street that was

demolished in 1961. Returned marked *gone away*. The sender reports no change in his luck.

60. To My Father. Addressed by name only, with no place. The envelope is very worn. It has eleven separate endorsements, from as many offices, and the last reads simply: *sorry.* We have hung this one by itself.

RETURNED TO SENDER

A list, compiled from the backs of the works, of the reasons given.

- No such street
- No such number
- No such town
- Not known at this address
- Gone away
- Deceased
- Refused
- Insufficient address
- Address illegible
- Tried, failed
- We did ask
- Sorry

AFTERWORD

I have been asked whether the exhibition is a joke. It is partly a joke. Most serious things are.

What I notice, looking round the room, is how hard it is to send something nowhere. The system is built to deliver. Give it the least excuse, a legible name, a plausible street, and it will try, and go on trying, with a persistence nobody thanks it for. These hundred and twelve objects are evidence of an enormous quantity of anonymous effort on behalf of messages that had no possible recipient.

I find that consoling, and I do not think I can explain why. It is something to do with the fact that the effort was made anyway. A great deal of what any of us says is addressed to nowhere. It is good to know that there is an office for it, and that someone there will open the envelope, and look, and write *sorry* on the back.

When the show closes these will go into the post again. If one of them reaches you, you will know what to do.

ABOUT THIS TEXT

TITLE	Dead Letter Office: Mail Art from Nowhere
AUTHOR	Edited by Marguerite Sallow
DATE	1986
TYPE	Zine
PUBLISHER	Self-published to accompany the exhibition
EXTENT	16 pages, photocopied, with one rubber-stamped page
LANGUAGE	English
SOURCE	Transcribed from a copy with the rubber stamp intact. The catalog describes the works; it does not reproduce them.

Mail art is made to be posted. Since the 1960s an international network of artists has exchanged small works, collages, stamped cards, altered envelopes, through the ordinary mail, on the principle that the network is the gallery and that nobody is refused. The usual rules of a mail art show are three: no jury, no fee, no returns.

In 1986 Marguerite Sallow proposed a variation. She invited contributors to address a work to a place that did not exist and to give her own address for the return. What the postal service sent back would be the exhibition. She received, over five months, one hundred and twelve items, each bearing the stamps, stickers and handwritten notes of sorting offices that had done their best.

The catalog she produced is a zine of sixteen pages. It lists a selection of the works and prints her short introduction, which remains one of the clearest statements of what mail art is for. The pieces themselves were dispersed after the show, in accordance with the rules, by being posted on to strangers.

See also Signal to Noise, on the cassette network that used the same routes.

COLOPHON

This reading copy was prepared by Odalys Venn for the Apocalypse Cult library and is cataloged as AC-0103. It may be copied and shared freely for study, criticism and private reading.

The same text can be read online at https://apocalypse-cult.org/library/dead-letter-office/

Apocalypse Cult is an independent archive. The authors, presses and publications it catalogs are fictional, and any resemblance to actual persons or organizations is coincidental.