

Ros-en-velopes: envelopes and enclosures by James Rosen

There couldn't have been a more perfect means invented for the transmission of James Rosen's thoughts and ideas, written or drawn, than the paper envelope. In many other ways Rosen can be easily envisioned living in earlier epochs; I see him as a painter on the road from Siena to Florence in the late 1300s, having dodged the plague but then somehow abruptly dropped into New York, ca. 1958, where his *Trecento*-ness merged with the diverse concerns and approaches of another transitional moment in the history of art. But the stamped postal envelope as we know it is a 19th century invention and so his arrival really had to follow its appearance. The double-entendre *envelope/envelop* reflects a duality; an object-conveyance as well as an action, very much like Rosen's paintings, which are objects that enclose, but that also act to *disclose* their contents in a process of unveiling in the presence of a reader or, in Rosen's words, a "capable observer". Rosen does not intend his paintings to be self-expressive; he sees them as visual event-fields - locations for the coincidence of experiences and ideas - giving rise to new experiences and thoughts in the viewer. (Imagine a broad, diffuse cone of such ideas and experiences, narrowing as it reaches the picture plane from behind, like light striking the ground glass of a viewfinder, then widening, emanating outward toward the viewer from its narrowest point at the canvas surface.) The envelopes and their contents, however, offer a closer view of Rosen's personality than his paintings do, and allow him to express his thoughts as directly as he can, which is still, quite often, with obliquity. I've never asked him, but I'd guess that he would say the process by which his readers (and viewers) work their way through his veils of language and paint is a critical part of "getting it", and as obscure as those words and images sometimes are for us at first, they are irreducible and "prime" to him.

Rosen says, "I do enjoy the idea that each envelope carries the care, judgment and dexterity that I give to (all) my work ... (they) were sent with no other 'interested motive' than getting *that* message to each recipient." This personal focus distinguishes his postal-conveyed art from that of Ray Johnson, who is credited with beginning the Mail Art movement which developed roughly parallel to Rosen's work in the mid-1950s (but apparently without either artists' awareness, although their worlds in New York briefly shared boundaries). Johnson and other mail artists utilized pop sources in idiosyncratic ways, sometimes engaging in sequential sendings and manipulations by each recipient, where the concept of ironically recycling works and images, and the very action of doing so through the medium of the post, constituted much of their meaning. *Ros-en-velopes* are characterized by their unselfconsciously intimate nature, of being addressed to a single recipient and containing images and ideas specifically for them. The web of the trajectories traced by these mostly one-way flights is not a primary consideration for James Rosen; it's a result rather than a *raison d'être*, although one that adds complexity to this "body of work". And while *Ros-en-velopes* are *centripetal*, Johnson and his peers engaged in a communal, centrifugal, extroverted enterprise, with a more socio-politically "interested motivation" than Rosen.

Receiving a piece of mail from anyone these days is notable. Getting one from James Rosen is always a pleasurable occasion; a compelling or beautiful object almost miraculously arrives via

a dying system of information delivery. It elevates the mundane act of sending and receiving “physical” mail, something that has been practically synonymous with civilization for centuries but is disappearing in the process of our collective virtualization. The letters are filled with tidings and potent ideas. They sometimes contain drawings, exhortations, poems, or aphoristic thought-fragments that read like poetry. The images are, inside and out, often delightful, or humorous, and sometimes surprisingly realized. But receiving one of his letters can also evoke a certain trepidation. The ideas transmitted by his distinct and deliberate hand, are, like that calligraphy, themselves beautiful, but often difficult to decipher. The contents can sometimes be involuted, but also nearly urgent in their acuity, vehemence, or affection. These missives are generous reminders that gifts carry weight and responsibility. If nothing else, the recipient of a letter from James Rosen quickly realizes that he/she is unlikely to be able to reciprocate with the same level of visual eloquence (which doesn’t stop some of us from making occasional attempts).

I managed to get my first *Ros-en-velope* from a mutual friend very soon after I had been introduced to James Rosen. Others, sent directly to me, soon followed. The envelopes are remarkable works in their own right, regardless of what they contain, with carefully arranged stamps and their cancellations (not all of them of current issue but sometimes pulled from some vast store of more sensitively designed ones from the past), as well as drawings - both playful and serious - along with honorifics, funny bits torn from advertisements, even chunky collaged things. Occasionally the envelopes are reused; in another process of involution they are completely opened up and re-folded and glued inside out. And all of these made it to their destination, even with slightly skewed addresses or wrong zip codes, thick things poorly adhered and complex ad hoc closures (I have joked with him about this). Occasionally, I have gone back into some of his envelopes and found an overlooked bit clinging or hiding inside. With the envelopes, James Rosen takes the opportunity to indulge his interest in, along with drawing and the arrangement of shapes, the elements of writing and design; letterforms, script, typefaces, puns and wordplay, for visual pleasure as well as their embodiment of meaning. The envelopes are not simple objects, and in that way are perfectly reflective of their sender.

At some point I found out that Rosen formed relationships with postal workers, and would charm or coerce them into cancelling the stamps according to his “suggestions”. I actually witnessed this in Trepassey (Newfoundland), where the trip to the post office was a momentous and almost daily event. The women there fawned over him, and he got the ubiquitous circles placed to his satisfaction. So, many of the envelopes are in fact collaborative works of design, and also of accident. Things happen in the mail. Other codes and labels are attached, items are partially torn off and folded back down, letters are misdirected and recovered; the travails of something that is handled, spun through sorters at high speed, kept with lesser mailings from politicians and discounters, shoved in bags, thrown into airplanes and trucks, and delivered in rain or snow. An envelope from James Rosen is an experience; by the time it reaches you it generally has had one as well.

At first you feel are the Only One who could have received something as singular a letter from

James Rosen. Then you get another and another, and you realize, as literally unique as they are, there are many of these traversing the globe at any given moment. And rather than diminishing the experience of receiving them, it enriches it and causes one to pause and consider that this enormous production exists beyond his studio endeavors. While not intentionally created to be, these multiple correspondences form a large, ongoing, convoluted work of art organically weaving in space and across time - a *diachronic* work, as Rosen might say. It resembles the music of two composers who interest Rosen; Morton Feldman and John Cage, in a conflation of their approaches, where time is elastic and where interesting things happen in the intervals between intentional events. The time it takes for a letter to make the transit from James Rosen to one of us seems to allow a "transition", a necessary gestation; for understanding any of Rosen's work, whether paintings or envelopes, (or indeed the man himself), takes time and effort proportional to the ideas and processes behind them.

The *Ros-en-velopes* we've selected to present in this exhibition, from the thousands extant, were at first limited to those sent to me, Gianni Cestari, Gianfranco Goberti, Claudia Gross, and Leigh Ann Hallberg; a group of artists whose trajectories have crossed in Ferrara, Italy, with an association with James Rosen as our nexus. Leigh Ann Hallberg and I showed some of Rosen's "Missives and Enclosures" at our studio in early 2011; we did not realize until recently that Gianfranco had been considering doing the same in his Ferrara studio for at least a few years. (As Claudia reminded me, it's likely each of us have previously entertained the idea of exhibiting the envelopes.) We initially planned to select up to 25 envelopes each, which could then be then further adjusted by the curators at each venue. But the project expanded, involving more envelopes from a far greater number of people. While it is important to understand that none of these "missives or enclosures" were created for anyone other than the recipient, and certainly without the intention that they would be exhibited publicly as a group, I have sometimes felt as if Rosen had some unspoken plan that he would reveal only through occasional indirect suggestions, with the ultimate goal of having everyone important to him coalesce, however briefly, in one place. This convergence of *Ros-en-velopes* only partially and metaphorically achieves that. But it does connect us as fortunate recipients, revealed through these peripatetic fragments of Jim's thinking, his seeing, his making, even beyond our personal relationships and associations with him. It is hoped that these relationships - of people, images, words and ideas - will likewise pleasurably entangle the viewer.

"...I'd like to think the form-components *become* the envelope - as *being inseparable from the envelope*. I... do not see the forms as an enhancement of the surface; rather, as having *become* the surface."

James Rosen

Paul Bright
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