

CALLING AND RESPONDING: A MAIL ART COLLABORATION

by Clare Yow for Artists for Kids & the Gordon Smith Gallery

What is Mail Art?

Mail Art is an art movement that began in the 1950s. Artists created postcards or small-scale artworks of poems, drawings, or collages to exchange with friends through the mail service, instead of exhibiting these artworks in typical venues like an art gallery or museum. Envelopes, postal stamps, and mail markings and other signs of the mail art's journey (folds, dirt, becoming lost) all become part of the work. The appeal of this medium is that it is inexpensive, flexible, and participants do not require any formal training.

What is a Call and Response?

Call and Response is a form of communication where a speaker and a listener interact. The speaker makes a statement or offers an idea ("call") and a listener replies directly ("response"). This technique is used, for example, in jazz and gospel music, and in chanting at public demonstrations.

Examples

Since 2017, Vancouver-based artist Clare Yow and Berlin-based artist Lena Oehmsen have been collaborating on a monthly mail art project using a variety of mediums.



Above, Lena has used candle wax ("call") while Clare used breastmilk ("response") as she had just had a baby. Their works are a response to the other artist's card received in the previous month and what is happening in their lives and the world at that time.

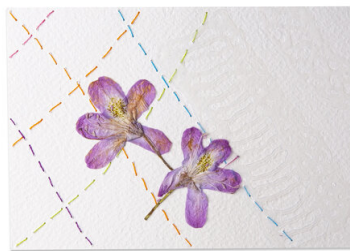
On the reverse of their cards, Lena and Clare both write a few words or phrases that inspired them when making their pieces. These become prompts for the other artist.

In the [Enveloped](#) project, these works were created by artists in the Lower Mainland responding to the theme of “Imagining New Worlds or Eras” while socially distancing. The project was facilitated by United Aunties Arts Association and Clare Yow in 2021-2022 and was designed to create community connection through collaboration.



Call: Illustration

Response: Embroidery, pressed flowers



Call: Drawing with watercolour paints

Response: Collage



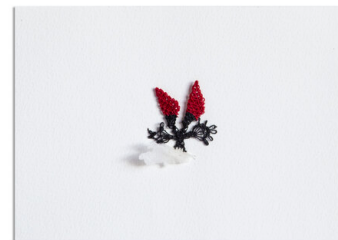
Call: Collage with found papers, illustration

Response: Painting



Call: Poem on paint

Response: Embroidery



Artists could be as abstract or specific as they liked when interpreting the theme and worked in any medium of their choosing. **What elements from the first artist’s “call” do you see in the “response”?**

Activity (in Classroom)

Students across grades and school districts will be paired and using a prompt, the first person — from a younger grade — will create the ‘Call’ and the second person will provide the ‘Response.’ Students will use a variety of art materials to create their artwork and collaborate with another young artist.

Inquiry Questions

- How can we have a conversation with another person through making art?
- What might we learn from this conversation that is different from a spoken or written conversation?

Materials

- White 17.5cm x 13cm postcard (watercolour paper)
 - The back of each card will be labeled with a unique code, indicating whether it is a Call or Response. This is so that when students are matched up, card 1C can be paired up with 1R, 2C with 2R, etc.
- Variety of art materials:
 - Pencil
 - Eraser
 - Watercolour paints and brush
 - Markers
 - Wax crayons
- (Optional) Materials:
 - Colour pencils
 - Oil pastels
 - Magazine cut-outs
 - Variety of decorative papers or fabric
 - Thread, yarn
 - Glue
 - Tape

Artmaking Prompt and Ideas to Consider

- Growing roots and travelling routes
 - Home/neighbourhood/faraway places, family/friends/ancestors/identity, connection, care, gardening, seasons/time/slowness, staying/going/belonging

Sample Artwork

The artworks, below, are an example of a Call created by a 13-year-old artist and a Response created by an adult artist. Both artists responded to the theme of Growing Roots/Travelling Routes. Differing mediums were used.

- What differences and similarities do you see between the two artworks?
- How did each artist respond to the theme of Growing Roots/Travelling Routes?
- What elements from the Call artwork were incorporated into the Response artwork?



The Response artwork, above, provides an example of how the Response artist can draw upon visual elements used in the Call artwork – while developing their own imagery and unique exploration of the Growing Roots/Travelling Routes theme.