

# The Possible Correspondence Introduction

By Max Goldberg

Before THE POSSIBLE moved into the museum, it lived in the mail. I set about collecting previously published letters by artists and authors as a tribute to the intensive correspondence underlying this exhibition, evidence of which can be found elsewhere in this library space.

One doesn't tend to read a book of collected correspondences from beginning to end (perhaps the idea of a life contained between covers is simply too much to bear). I often find myself opening to a letter written on that day—a simple way of observing the link between the respective moments of writing and reading that seems basic to the intimacy of letters. Accordingly, I have gathered at least one letter for each day of THE POSSIBLE so that visitors can experience their day being overlaid with one prior.

I accessed this material through my local public library, packing out books of collected correspondence five or six at a time. While the library's collection necessarily limited my options, I found more than enough to fill the days. Certainly, reading through a published correspondence is a very different experience than

encountering the actual documents firsthand, though as I photocopied individual letters, scattering them out of context, I found I was paying more attention to the form of writing rather than the individual personalities involved.

An unanticipated benefit of drawing from the library was the folded pages and marks that were signs of earlier reading. That is to say, I took my place in a long line of unintended recipients. The letters were written to close a gap in space; later, it's time that's traversed. Of course it's always both at once: long months separate Darwin's letters home from the gossip replies he surely devoured. I began to wonder why I found so many letters clustering around certain days: February 23rd, for instance. Some of this is attributable to chance, but I began to wonder if my difficulty in covering May wasn't simply a case of spring fever.

Rimbaud wrote his famous "seer letters" in May of 1871. Almost exactly ten years later (February 15th, 1881), long since departed to Harar, he wrote to his family requesting practical books rather than a derangement of the senses: titles like *Metalworking and Dictionary of Engineering, Military and Civil*. Perhaps someone can hunt these down for inclusion in this library.

In her essay, "Remarks on Letters," the poet Mary Ruefle writes,

*Smoke signals are perhaps the most beautiful form of letter ever to be evolved. For what is a letter, but to speak one's thoughts at a distance? Which is why poems and prayers are letters. The*

*origins of poems, prayers, and letters all have this in common: urgency. They each originate in the pressing need to make a message directed at something unnear, that the absence of the unnear be made to appear present—that the presence of absence be palpably felt—that consciousness create consciousness.*

*Correspondence:* how fitting that the same word should define an affinity and an exchange of letters when the best letters so often speak that same affinity.

Henry James wrote, "The best letters seem to me the most delightful of all written things." Virginia Woolf wrote to a friend that her brain "rings and swings" reading James's epistles.

There are many instances in which the sender, being human after all, does not comport with his or her mythic aura. William Carlos Williams describes T.S. Eliot as "that shit ass." Chekhov tells his bride that he wishes to "turn you upside down, then give you a shake or two, then hug you, and bite your ear."

There are signs of the times: Charlotte Bronte allowing to a scold that "You only warn me against the folly of neglecting real duties for the sake of imaginative pleasures." Oh how that *real* stings.

There are instances in which we catch glimpses of our own reading all these years later. "It was pleasant to learn that you expected our correspondence to be read in the international salons and boudoirs of the future," Guy Davenport wrote New Directions publisher James Laughlin in 1951.

The editor of Emerson's letters notes that his letters were often passed between friends. Thoreau describes one of his letters to Harrison Blake as a "spiritual foot-ball."

There are the geographic anomalies: Italo Calvino writing from Los Angeles, Frida Kahlo from San Francisco. I read one that Père Teilhard wrote from the Hotel Durant, just across the street from the museum, but unfortunately it did not fall during the desired range of dates. Based on my utterly unscientific research, I would say that the most common way to begin a letter is to apologize for not having written sooner. Henry James could fill an entire letter begging indulgence for the time that had passed since his previous missive. There is also a tendency for the sender to observe that she or he cannot possibly say everything that is to be said in the letter. "The real [letters] are never committed to paper," Marina Tsvetayeva wrote to Boris Pasternak. Finally, the reading of old letters is always shadowed by the knowledge that it is in the nature of letters to go missing. Published correspondences are usually incomplete and typically one-sided. Photocopied pages were mislaid even as I carried out this project.

The melancholy of reading a collected correspondence is in knowing that there is a last letter. This project admits no such thing.

— Max Goldberg, 30 January 2014