



## Joe Cardella's ART: Major Influences

Cardella had many influences over his long career as an artist, and not all are compatible with each other. Part of the pleasure of Joe's art is discovering its contradictions, which he exploited for fun and his own creative evolution.

### Fluxus

The principles that guided much of Cardella's work took off from the famous *Fluxus* 1960 manifesto by George Maciunas. He called for a revolutionary, non-elitist art that could be made of anything and anyone could do it. Such art should have no commodity value and allow one to experience the creativity and joy of making things without the weight of art history or academic schools.

Fluxus was an anti-art movement. What was left behind from the fluxing or purging of mainstream art was "concrete art," the real and the ready-made (and certainly not "abstract" art). Duchamp, John Cage and George Brecht reduced art to these ordinary essentials. Cardella borrowed Duchamp's fascination with ready-made objects, such as the famous urinal as sculpture placed in a museum, again a way of forcing the question, "What is art?"

Much of Cardella's work consists of "weapons" for breaking things like traditions, rules and constraints on the imagination. They seem at the same time threatening and tame when placed in a frame or on a wall.

<http://georgemaciunas.com/about/cv/manifeto-i/>



Joe Cardella, Phil Taggart, Michael Row with Friday Gretchen after finishing another ART/LIFE assembly

## Joe Cardella: Perpetual Innovator

Joe Cardella (1945-2018) was a prodigious artist. He made over 400 works in many media, including sculptures, assemblages, collages, mobiles, balances, jewelry, and hundreds of drawings, watercolors, and paintings. He was also an exacting artist/publisher, organizing 10,000 individual multi-media works on paper for the complete set of his ART/LIFE Journal, with 275 monthly editions over 25 years.

This exhibit presents many of his personal works and numerous issues of ART/LIFE. The Museum of Ventura County has brought together this retrospective in collaboration with the ArtLife Foundation Board of Directors, tasked by the artist with perpetuating his work and inspiring other artists. The reading of poems published in ART/LIFE adds to our understanding of Cardella's interdisciplinary approach to many art forms, especially image/text poetry.

This short guide to the movements and trends represented in Cardella's works can provide a preliminary understanding of how to see, interpret, and enjoy this engaging and challenging artist. He deserves full scholarly analyses and discussions of his works. This will evolve over time.

(The recent exhibit of ART/LIFE Journals by his long time friends and patrons at the Five Points Museum in Houston TX, Jim and Ann Harithas, and the catalogue commentary by Prof. Sophia Kidd begin serious study of his work.)

## Assemblage, Joseph Cornell, Found Objects

Cardella was an inveterate collector of all kinds of objects—bottles, balls, jars, labels, miscellaneous machine parts, palm fronds, cuttlefish bones, statuettes, icons, game pieces, as well as photographs, newspaper clippings, and wire. He was something of a hoarder and saved these tossed away bits and pieces of consumer society to construct his multi-media sculptures, assemblages, and box-like collages.

Cardella obviously admired Joseph Cornell and his dream boxes, though Joe made nightmarish collages and did not follow Cornell's rejection of surrealism's violence and eroticism. His assemblages contain his most suggestive juxtapositions of these "found objects," conveying an overt but often comic sexuality. <https://www.theartstory.org/artist-cornell-joseph.htm>



cuttlefish sculptures

## Conceptual Art

Conceptual art values the intellectual idea over the object. A diagram or instructions for making something could hang on a wall as a plan for a work that exists only in the mind of the artist—pure concept. It can share with "found art" the use of ordinary objects. However, Cardella was not a conceptualist: he was very meticulous about both the product and the concept behind it.

One potentially conceptualist work was his "Flag Project," where he and travelers photographed the black and white ART/LIFE flag in famous places throughout the US and the world. The journey itself with the flag fulfilled the artistic concept of carrying through a plan over vast stretches of time and space.

## Italian Futurists

Cardella shares some of the delight in violent imagery and smashing traditions with the Futurists, who prefigure Fascism. Many of his works feature blades, saws, nails and spikes, and the brandishing of slings and arrows against the conventional, the tired and tame. But he did not share Futurist obsessions with aggressive speed and aerodynamic streamlining. He never eulogized war, never glamorized violence, and was a progressive peacenik at heart.

<https://www.unknown.nu/futurism/manifeto.html>

## Mail Art : the ART/LIFE Journal

Cardella discovered mail art and took it to a new dimension. Seeing the international and national mail systems themselves as a medium, artists exchange images over long distances, using this public system of communication as a cheap and mobile kind of absentee gallery.

Cardella decided to modify this process by collecting and publishing mailed pages of art in a regular monthly magazine, and kept it going for 25 years.

The Journal accomplishment can overshadow Joe's own art works, but it itself is a Fluxus production, both in its conception and operation, with an anything goes attitude to what artists can submit. These often take the form of assemblage and collage, with 3-D objects bulging the pages.

Opening an issue received in the mail gives one the distinctive pleasure that a bundle of unique riches in color and form await one, and that someone is looking at your page as you are looking at theirs. It creates a community in that issue, as well as through the frequent repeat submissions of a number of artists. They can create a sequence of related pages over a few months, or collaborate on an individual page, often with an image/text poem.

This excitement expresses itself in the high energy of the images and the endurance of the project. This is a unique interdisciplinary work, almost unclassifiable.

<http://mailartprojects.blogspot.com/>



## Productive Conflicts: Understanding Cardella's Art

A series of useful tensions usually create the necessary energy for a work of art to engage us, and Cardella's art seems to swirl around these creative polarities:

### Clutter vs. Shipshape

Cardella's home studio seems a mass collection of all kinds of objects—hanging, shelved, potted, piled, and laid out in a seemingly jumbled array. But as in his individual works, objects remain distinctive, spaced, separated, with clear outlines and borders. Cardella's experience in the Navy as a very young man may have led to this shipshape organization of various-shaped objects. This concern for boundaries and borders gets insinuated into his individual art works, as well as in the fundamental form of the book that the Journal imitates.

### Handmade vs. Manufactured and Ready-Made

Cardella refers to his art as "Evidence of the Hand." He makes and draws hands repeatedly, often with the eye of vision in its open palm. For the first issue of ARTLIFE he drew his right hand with his left hand. The three implements reoccurring in his work are the pencil, the hammer, and the trowel. These harken back to his working class origins and signify basic tools of both artists' and builders' work, which he connects.

At the same time, Cardella employs all sorts of manufactured objects in his creations, the ready-mades that dominate his collages. For Cardella the hand made and the mechanically made cooperate to make hybrids that express our continuing struggle with and dependence on both.

### Found Objects vs. Assembled Icons

This is a very characteristic tension in Cardella's art. The common, worn surfboards he finds in our beach town shops, he carves into elongated shrines to Venus and sea goddesses. Nothing should go to waste that could be used to make a transformative image and cause the material itself to shift into the spiritual.

For information regarding tours, exhibits, sales, and support contact:  
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Directors: Robert Chianese, Nello Panelli, Jonell McLain, Curtis Cormane

Website <http://art-life.com/> Blog <http://joecardellalegacy.blogspot.com>

## Classicism vs. Mysticism

If speed is the key to Futurism, Cardella stressed balance, reflection, and the value of the past, particularly the classical world of ancient Greece. Attic classicism valued logic over emotion, but its originals always grasped for emotional abandon and mystical transcendence. Cardella's Greece was the islands of Mykonos and Delos with their brilliant light and blue clear water and the remnants of mystery cults to Apollo and Artemis. Order and regular form often serve to open one to something magical and transcendent in Cardella's work.

## The Sexual Creative of Aphrodite vs. the Maternal Protective of Mary

This tensed duality pervades Cardella's work. Woman's sexual allure gets embodied in explicit body-part imagery or cloaked in metaphor and symbol. Aphrodite/Venus serves as his frequent muse and creative mistress.

Almost simultaneously, Catholic Mary hovers over his work, a source of peace, mystery, and maternal healing. Cardella's reverence for the mythological resting place of Mary in Ephesus links her proto-European spirituality with Greek isle goddess figures.

Absent from Cardella's art are children. His frequent trips to Delos and other ancient shrines, especially the baptismal fonts under ancient altars, result in fountain imagery and healing waters he actually did seek in his last days. Perhaps he always saw himself as a child of many gods trying to locate the center of his own believing heart.



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