

SWAP HOSTING 101: PART 1

By Dana Driscoll

Hosting swaps can be a fun and exciting step for any Mail Artist to take, although the logistics of hosting a swap can be challenging! As someone who has hosted over forty swaps, I've provided examples, instructions, and suggestions for how to make your first hosting experience a success. This article walks you through hosting a Mail Art swap with suggestions and tips to keep you organized. In this two-part article series, I'll cover how to choose a swap theme, write clear swap guidelines, storing and organizing cards. In the second part, I'll cover swapping cards out, mailing cards, and possible problems that can arise in swaps.

Why Host a Swap?

A number of reasons exist for why people host swaps, including the “fun-factor,” the ability to build a collection of cards, and the community connection.

First of all, hosting swaps are a lot of fun. I love coming up with new themes, and then getting to see all of the cards that people create! To me, seeing the new cards alone is worth the commitment of swap hosting. It's fun to see how different artists interpret a theme or how swap participants can use the same medium so differently. I also really enjoy posting challenging and fun swaps!

The second reason to host is that you are able to build a collection of themed cards. I often host swaps for themes that I am interested in collecting—like trees, a favorite theme of mine. When the cards arrive, I will get to see all of the wonderful inspirational trees and also pick out some of my favorites.

A third reason to host the swap is that it contributes to the mail art community and helps you build relationships with other traders. I have many participants who have joined swap after swap that I run, and through this I have gotten to know them and their art quite well. I enjoy building friendships through swap hosting.

Choosing a Swap Theme

Mail Art swaps come in all shapes, sizes, and themes! You can run a few different kinds of swaps, but the two most frequent types are media-specific, theme-specific, and technique-specific swaps.

Media specific swaps can include pen and ink, mixed media, collage, watercolor, encaustic, acrylics, fabric, and so much more! Theme-specific swaps can include whimsy, colors, animals, nature, cityscapes, landscapes, houses, birds, and many more! Technique-specific swaps might include Impressionism or working in the style of a specific artist. Other types of swaps exist, often with a sense of play or fun to them. For example, you might choose to explore a specific word, like “love” or you might ask players to dig through their purses and pull out the junk and make mail art! Anything and everything is possible.

For your first few swaps, try to keep the swap theme simple and make it something you are comfortable with. For example, if you really love the color red, run a Red Swap! As you grow more experienced as a swap host, you might combine themes and ask for birds in blue, or painted landscapes, or handmade paper quilts (three swaps that I have run in the past).

Of course, you also think about the type of swap you want to run. Do you want to start with ATCs? Inchies? Chunky books? I recommend starting with an ATC swap because they are easy to mail and easy to store (more on this later). Chunky books, charms, skinny books, and other such artwork often requires more postage and are hence, harder to swap and package to send out.

Committing to Swap Hosting

When you host a swap, you are making a commitment of time, energy, and money. It is important that you understand the commitment you are making up front to ensure that a swap is successful for both you and your participants.

Time & Energy: Swaps require time and energy. At Atcsforall.com, IllustratedATCs.com, and Mailartworld.com, you are required to update your swap at least once a week. This includes letting your participants know whose cards have arrived and giving them updates on deadlines and other information. I suggest, however, that you aim to update your swap every 2-3 days at the least. Once you are ready to swap your cards, expect to take 2-5 hours for swapping, packaging, leaving iTrader for participants, and mailing.

Money: Swaps also take money. If you live in the US, give participants good directions on including an SASE (self-addressed stamped envelope), and limit the number of international participants, often you may only spend less than \$10 to mail out a swap. However, if you are overseas, the costs can be much higher.

Organizational Skill: Finally, swaps take some organizational skills. You need to find a safe place to store the swap cards while you are waiting for the swap to end.

This includes keeping the cards out of the way of pets or small children. You need to keep track of who sent cards, who signed up, and when the swap is due. Once the swap is complete, you need to be prepared to swap the cards in an efficient manner (there will be more on how to do this in the second part of this article in the next issue).

The CAT and the PAT

If you've spent any time at a mail art site, you may have seen "PAT" or "CAT" style swaps. PAT stands for Pick-A-Theme and is a swap where participants are put into groups of 4-6 people. Each person in the group chooses a theme, "Trees" for example, and then the other participants in the group each make a tree card. Each person in the group ends up getting a set of cards made by the other group members on their chosen theme. In a CAT, or Choose-A-Theme swap, participants are again put into groups but this time, they choose the theme of the cards they will make.

We recommend that you spend some time hosting "regular" swaps before committing to a PAT or CAT swap. These swaps represent unique challenges for new swap hosts.

Writing Clear Swap Guidelines

Once you have a theme picked out for your swap, you should spend some time writing a clear set of guidelines for participants. First, go take a look at other swap guidelines that are posted. Look at several, noting which ones seem more effective. Use those swap guidelines as a template for your own!

Here are questions you should answer in your swap guidelines:

What is the swap theme and swap type? Be clear on what the theme is; provide definitions if necessary. Tell your players if they are swapping ATCs, Inchies, or other types of mail art.

Do you have any restrictions or stipulations on the swap? If you are going to limit the number of players who can sign up out of the country, list this so. If you want only one type of media, list this as well. Are you going to ask players not to send in bulky cards?

Can you provide examples of what you were looking for? Give some scans of artwork that fits the kind of cards you are looking to be created in the swap.

What are the due dates for the swap? Give participants a reasonable amount of time to sign up and turn in cards—8 weeks from start to finish is a good ballpark figure. Look at your own calendar and make sure you aren't having the swap due when you are on vacation or are otherwise too busy to commit to swapping the cards.

Are participants required to pay for postage? If so, how? You can ask participants to send in loose stamps, pay via paypal (for larger items, like chunky books), or send well-concealed cash. For ATC swaps, ask participants to send a SASE (Self Addressed Stamped Envelope) for their returns.

Do you have any special mailing instructions? I often ask my players to put their contact information on the back of their cards and also write their User ID on the back of their envelopes. I ask that if participants are sending bulky cards, they send additional stamps to cover the returns.

Number of Players in a Swap

There is a direct relationship between the number of players in a swap and the time, energy, and money it requires to complete a swap. A swap with 10 players is much easier and less time-intensive to swap out and mail than one with 60 players! I suggest keeping your swaps small and gradually increasing the number of players over time.

Posting Your Swap

Once you post your swap, you can begin to seek out participants. Usually, participants will see your thread and be interested. Sometimes, however, hosts have trouble filling all of the spots in your swap. Contact your friends, trading partners, or those you know would be interested in your swap to recruit more members if necessary.

Receiving Cards in the Mail and Storing Cards

Within two weeks of sign ups for your swap, you can expect to start receiving cards in the mail. Here are the steps I follow to keep organized and make my life as a host easier when receiving and storing ATCs for an ATC swap. Some of these steps are modified for mail art swaps, especially those with bulky bubble envelopes.

Once I get the mail for the day, I'll open up all of the mail and set the swap cards aside. I will go to the thread where the swap is posted, and update the swap, letting participants know that their cards have arrived. Some swap hosts also elect to leave participants iTrader feedback at this point (although I usually wait to leave it all at once at the end of the swap). Because all participants are sending a SASE, I will remove the swap cards and SASE from the original envelope. I check the address, then put the swap cards in the SASE. On the back of the envelope, I write the participant's User ID and number of cards they sent (minus any hostess gifts they may send). I have a plastic bin where I keep all of the swap cards; I simply place the cards in the bin and keep adding new cards to the bin as they arrive. If the participant did not send a SASE, I will write their address (or use an address label) on a new envelope and put it in the bin.

Writing the participant's name and number of cards they are to get in return helps you during the swapping process and also will help you identify which cards belong to which envelope if they accidentally fall out when you are moving or storing them.

If You Get Behind

If you find yourself overwhelmed or have family emergencies that keep you from fulfilling your hosting commitments, seek out help! Experienced hosts are always willing to take over a swap that you are unable to complete. Participants are usually very understanding if you need an additional few weeks to get your swap out of the door. The most important thing to remember is to keep communicating about the swap and to not think that you are alone in your situation.

Conclusion

This article has presented a first look at hosting mail art swaps. I encourage you to start thinking about and planning to host your first swap. Join us next time when we'll cover the logistics of swapping and mailing cards in the second part of this article.

