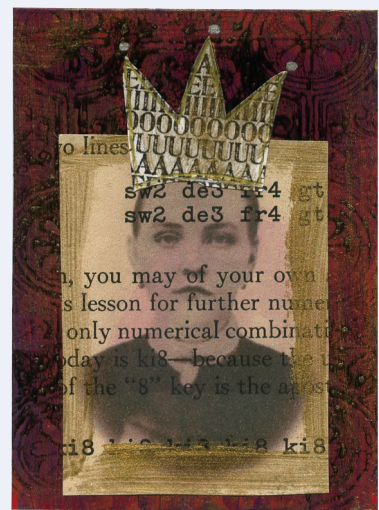




POCKET ART

BY ANDREA TOMKINS

Artist trading cards (clockwise from left): "Untitled" (photograph of the artist's grandmother, copy of one of her letters, her prayer card); "For the Want of a Petal, a Love Was Lost" (tulip petal, crayon, watercolour, art paper); "The Garden of My Mind" (paint, old French textbook, eyelets, rubber stamp, pen); "Moth-eaten" (copy of vintage apron pattern, marker, buttons, embroidery thread); "She Was the Queen of All Typing Teachers" (vintage typing workbook, archival photo, acrylic paint and pen).



Art, in the professional sense, is beyond the reach of most regular folk. It's perceived as being expensive and intimidating, housed in galleries and guarded by people in uniforms. Purchasing a piece is a major decision; it's a commitment that forces you to ask some tough questions about capital-A Art: "What is art?" "Have I amassed enough knowledge to truly appreciate it?" and, to the horror of artists and critics alike, "Does it match my sofa?"

For those of us trying to avoid those questions, there is a way to dabble in art acquisition that is cheap, easy, democratic and potentially addictive: artist trading cards.

ATCs are miniature pieces of art. They can be one of a kind or made in limited numbers. They can be painted, illustrated, rubber-stamped or sewn. They can be made from a limitless variety of collaged materials including wire, buttons, eyelets and ribbon. In other words, they can be anything as long they adhere to these four basic rules:

- ATCs must measure 64 by 89 millimetres—the same size as hockey or baseball cards. This is the cardinal rule that can never be broken.
- Any design technique is permissible, as long as the result is original. This rule is subject to interpretation. In my opinion, anything goes as long as the person has put effort into their work. There are ATC pur-

ists out there who claim stickers, glitter glue and computer-generated designs are strictly verboten.

- The ATC must be self-made.
- ATCs must be traded—never sold.

Artists have been creating miniatures for years, but it was Swiss artist M. Vänçi Stirnemann who created the concept of ATCs and ATC trading in 1997. Stirnemann, inspired by the community of sport-card trading, created an exhibit of over 1,000 ATCs and invited people to create their own cards in exchange. That was the first of many live trading sessions around the world, and although some enthusiasts argue that this is the proper way to exchange cards, most of the trading actually happens by snail mail.

"Art is a pretty solitary pursuit," says Jennifer Olson, a thirty-one-year-old graduate student and fellow artist who lives in Toronto. "And ATCs allow artists to meet other artists both in person and online."

This is true—there are entire sites, Webrings and message groups dedicated to ATC discussion and trading. But, for some people, it's not just about meeting new people and acquiring new pieces. There's something very Zen about all that sketching, painting, cutting, pasting and the outpouring of energy that goes into each ATC. It's the perfect outlet for pent-up creativity.

Interested in starting your own collection? For more information about ATCs, visit Artist-trading-cards.ch, Atcards.com or Nervousness.org.