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Networks, Assemblings, Ephemera: East European Mail Art as Performance 1971-1994

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Comparative Literature

by

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The dissertation of Margarita Petrova Delcheva is approved.

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"Endre Tót: Zer0 Messages in 1970s Hungary." Dissertation Writing Workshop. Graduate Center for Literary Research, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, 2023.

Selected Conference Papers:

"Somatic Rootedness: Artists Transform Bureaucracy in Unofficial Art's Stamps and Imprints in Poland and Czechoslovakia." *Liberation*, Association of Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies, virtual panel, 2024.

"Dismantling and Affirming Hierarchies in Decentralized Publication: the Mail Art Network's Assembling Magazine *Commonpress*." *Decolonization*, Association of Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies, Philadelphia, 2023.

"Walking the Landscape as Water-Trauma Witnessing in Anishinaabek Culture." *Landscape & Garden in Art, Literature, and Film*, The Graduate Center for Literary Research, UC Santa Barbara, 2023.

"'Glasnost? Zaumnost!': Rea Nikonova and Understanding Mail Artists through the Historic Avant-garde." *Precarity*, Association of Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies, Chicago, 2022.

Discussant for the panel "Subverting the Official: Unofficial Russian Art from the 1950s to Present Day." *Precarity*, Association of Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies, Chicago, 2022.

"Construction and the Score's Again: Re-enacting Dance in the Work of Christopher-Rasheem McMillan and Trisha Brown." *Theatre and Performance After Repetition*, The American Society for Theater Research. San Diego, 2021.

"The 'Zero-Ending' and Negation as Destruction in the Work of Daniil Kharms." *2021 REECAS Northwest Conference (ASEEES Affiliate)*, The Ellison Center for Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies, University of Washington, 2021.

"Minimalism and the Revelatory Tool of Apocalypse in Ben Lerner's Novel *10:04* and Béla Tarr's Film *The Turin Horse*." *Climate Fictions*, The Graduate Center for Literary Research, UC Santa Barbara, 2020.

"Transforming Bureaucracy: The Rhizomatic Mail Art Network and its Artistic Practices in Cold War Eastern Europe." *Belief*, Association of Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies, San Francisco, 2019.

"Aesthetic Memory: Poetry, Witness, and the Early Childhood Self." *Memory and Movement*, The Graduate Center for Literary Research, UC Santa Barbara, 2019.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Selected Anthologized Poetry and Performance:

"Another Recipe for Getting Lost." *While You Wait: a Collection by Santa Barbara County Poets*, edited by Laure-Anne Bausselaard, Gunpowder Press, 2021.

"Great of Praises." *Brooklyn Poets Anthology*, edited by Jason Koo and Joe Pan, Brooklyn Arts Press, 2017, p. 59.

"The Drug of Childhood." *Emergency Index: An Annual Document of Performance Practice, Vol. 6*. Ugly Duckling Presse, 2017.

"Harmonic Drops." *Emergency Index: An Annual Document of Performance Practice, Vol. 10*. Ugly Duckling Presse, 2022.

OTHER PRESENTATIONS

Interviews:

Delcheva, Margarita et al. "The Editors on Paperbag." *Poetry Society of America*, 2014. https://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/site_visits/paperbag/. Web.

Stoynov, Nikola. "Hello, Bulgaria: Interview with poet Margarita Delcheva." *NOVA T.V.* Sofia, Bulgaria. March 25, 2010. T.V.

Choleva, Silvia. "Interview with poet Margarita Delcheva." *Attention! Literature! Bulgarian National Radio*. March 25, 2010. Radio.

Dikova, Petya. "Interview with Margarita Delcheva." *ART TRAFFIC. PRO.BG*. Sofia, Bulgaria. March 24, 2010. T.V.

Sungarska, Katya. "Sunday with VTV: Interview with poet Margarita Delcheva" *VTV*. Sofia, Bulgaria. March 21, 2010. T.V.

Plays (authored and directed):

Jose and the Muses. Experiments & Disorders Series. Dixon Place Theater, New York, NY, 2009.

Curatorial Work:

Conceptual Crafts. An exhibition of College of Creative Studies student mail art works. 2018.

IsoMailArt. An online exhibition of UCSB student mail art works. 2020.

Unmailed Pixels: Correspondence from the Hybrid Classroom. An online exhibition of UCSB student conceptual and mail art works. 2022. https://unmailedpixels.wixsite.com/mailart.

EDITORIAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Networks, Assemblings, Ephemera: East European Mail Art as Performance 1971-1994

by

Margarita Petrova Delcheva

This dissertation focuses on Eastern European mail art practices from 1971 to 1994. In particular, it explores how the intermedial mail art work in Eastern Europe can be studied as a Network *performance*, how the isolation of Eastern European mail artists catalyzed the formation of collaboration rituals and community-building through participatory projects, and how specific mail art practices corresponded to the cultural and political situations of artists in each country. The chapters focus on works that are grouped according to their practices: performative works that use language, collaborative works that apply Network participation as part of their concept, rubber stamps and artistamps that involve the body, and concrete poetry in assembling magazines.

Considering mail art's disinterest in the production of aesthetic objects, this dissertation explores mail art's hybridity as object, documentation, and performance. It intervenes in current scholarship to study the temporal qualities of mail art, including eventual archivization: duration, process, collaboration, and activation through an audience. The Deleuzean lens of the deterritorialized rhizome helps in understanding the mail art network's resistance to the Eastern Bloc's purposeful geo-political isolation. Groups of nonofficial artists in the Network built self-sustaining publishing projects, including the

assembling magazine *Commonpress*, which featured different editors for each issue and functioned in a way that reflects a decentralized model of distribution.

This dissertation consists of a series of case studies of archival materials from collections in Santa Barbara, Plovdiv, and Berlin. These case studies will analyze mail art actions like Paweł Petasz's intermedia booklets and conceptual crowd-sourced textile projects from Poland, Ewa Partum's kiss-print stamped images, also from Poland, J.H. Kocman's stamp activities from the former Czechoslovakia, Vesselin Sariev's visual poetry assembling *SVEP* from Bulgaria, and Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay's performances and magazines, from the Soviet Union, which allude to the historical Russian avant-garde. The mail art themes of somatic experience, unrealized travel, officialdom, and bureaucracy emerge in these studies where artists employ inventive communication strategies that prove that the Iron Curtain, to a great extent, was a permeable barrier and that connections to the rest of the world were established despite the presence of some surveillance and material condition challenges.

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Introduction

In 1983, a New York magazine editor, J.P. Jacobs, was compiling photographic work for a mail art exhibition titled "Mail Art and the Law: Censorship East/Censorship West." He was so struck by the differences in the works he received that he expressed his "fascination with the East European countries and the subtle responses to the idea of censorship… as opposed to the scathing, loud and often oppressively sexual responses from Western artists" (Welch 42). Jacobs's idealization of Eastern European artists might have been influenced by the West's fetishizing gaze on Eastern Europe, and his view should not compromise any interest in Western mail art, which has produced many significant works. His words, however, do illustrate the existence of a unique and unmistakable style in Eastern European mail art during the Cold War era, one that grew out of a tense historical atmosphere where the simplest gesture could be interpreted as politically suspect. Studying mail art in general, but especially works that come from countries in the Eastern Bloc, is especially enriching due to the unique communication strategies developed by its practitioners. As a unique system of art-driven communication and distribution, mail art from both (and sometimes in between) East and West counts as an analog precursor to electronic communication, and thus deserves the attention of scholars.

I define mail art as a spectrum of postwar artistic practices that used postal routes to perform message exchanges between participants in a network. The focus of the movement was not so much on creating objects worthy of admiration. Rather, as I argue in this dissertation, mail artists were focused mostly on performing acts of communication. For this reason, questions of authorship became less critical, while collaboration and the feeling of

being part of something larger defined many mail art exchanges. At the same time, mail artists were less concerned with aesthetic object production (as in other visual arts), and they often consciously and critically distanced themselves from the art market and art institutions. In this sense, mail art can be considered a form of performance. In this context, I distinguish between *performance* and *performance art,* where the latter applies to works meant to be witnessed by a gathered audience, while the former is a more general term. As performance, mail art differs from art objects in that it has certain temporal qualities (duration, beginning, and end, including eventual archivization).

American Fluxus artist Ken Friedman traces mail art and its diverse practices back to Dada, Nouveau Réalisme, and the Russian Futurists (4). The movement arose from Fluxus during the 1960s in the US, thanks to Ray Johnson's initiative to start The New York Correspondence School (NYCS) (Friedman 4). Ray Johnson was an artist whose collages, conceptual works, and wavy-eared bunny signatures touched many who corresponded with him. His insistence on including his own life in his art ended with the final tragic joke he played on his friends when he turned the rumors he had been spreading about his own death into a reality by ending his life in 1995. Johnson sent humorous letters to his friends beforehand, causing them to think the news of their loss was just another of Johnson's frequent jokes. Through his active participation and connections, Johnson created a correspondence community that spread beyond what he might have intended. The works exchanged between artists from the NYCS were "highly personal" and "highly crafted" in its initial stages, but also included unlikely, bulky, or unwrapped objects, which would never meet postal regulations years later (Friedman 4).

Like its counterpart in the West, Eastern European mail art practice is steeped in *intermediality*. The work is an inextricable amalgamation of performance, literature, and visual art. Being short-form and multilingual (poetry, letters, manifestos, etc.), mail art rarely requires translation, as it is already targeted for an international audience. Beyond reading and visual literacy, mail art requires *intermedial* literacy, and some scholars have compared its text-image juxtapositions to proto-memes. It could be said that the mail art network nodes were the correspondents, or it could be noted that the nodes were the instances of contact themselves. To understand the culture of mail art, it is essential to understand the importance and the structure of the Network, a growing and changing entity that to a large extent was independent of official hierarchical routes of art circulation. As Simone Osthoff puts it, "The Mail Art movement bypassed the market of artistic commodities, as well as the salons and biennials that treated art exhibitions like beauty pageants" (262).

Reading about Eastern European artists' accounts of frustrated travel might give the impression that the Iron Curtain was absolute and impermeable, an idea proven relative by the very existence of mail art. This supposed rigidity has also been questioned by artists and scholars. Amy Bryzgel has called the curtain "decidedly porous" (1). The curtain repeatedly allowed for cultural exchanges to pass between its two sides. Just as the Hungarian artist Endre Tót managed to travel to Blackburn in 1973, the Czechoslovakian artist Milan Knížák traveled to the United States in 1968, finding California more similar to Eastern Europe than New York since young artists in the warmer state leisurely convened together at artistic gatherings to listen to music, drink, and take drugs (Kemp-Welch 57).

My dissertation focuses on Eastern European mail art during the period from 1971 to 1994, when mail art activity was widespread in Eastern Europe, especially on the Bloc's

Western side (Poland, ČSSR, GDR). In fact, 1971 marks the year when Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski's momentous and far-sighted manifesto *NET: An Open Proposition* was created, signed, and mailed out. While not serving strictly as an instance of mail art, the single-page list of propositions outlines nine basic rules in a network of exchange (discussed in Chapter I). During the period covered in this dissertation, J.H. Kocman in Czechoslovakia and Paweł Petasz in Poland designed conceptual rubber stamps while Ewa Partum, also in Poland, made the presence of women's bodies a conscious choice in her mailings. Guillermo Deisler sent out concrete poetry from Bulgaria and organized assembling magazines in East Berlin, where Robert Rehfeldt called for collaboration between art workers in his slogan-filled mail art newsletters. In Hungary, Endre Tót wrote seemingly contentless conceptual telegrams and letters by typing zeroes, and Czechoslovakian Sonia Švecova from the *Aktual* group sent out *object poems* in small packages. In 1989, Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay were the first to send mail art works in the Soviet Union.

The political situation in Eastern Europe during the 1970s and 80s was marked by changing conditions in regard to the opportunities to create art freely. A tightening or loosening of restrictions in one part of the Bloc did not necessarily affect the rest of the states equally. Artists worked around these conditions creatively and occasionally responded to them in their mail art. Since the 1960s, the *nonofficial art*[1] scene in Eastern Europe had already been saturated with *actions* and *activities*, the Eastern Bloc terms for *happenings* and performance art. Performance art suited the times because it "could provide means to directly address politics in which the instantaneousness of the live act outpaced the bureaucratic

[1] *Nonofficial art* in Eastern Europe (sometimes referred to as *unofficial art* by scholars) includes works and practices that state institutions did not condone. This type of art was not officially sponsored or exhibited, and the state frequently did not even consider it *art.* Some examples are conceptual art, performance art, and mail art.

mechanisms of censorship" (Fowkes & Fowkes 100). These often spontaneous events could be traceless if so desired (though they frequently were not) and happened too quickly for the authorities to be able to react.

While many political statements were made through mail art, not all condemned socialism. Some artists, like the East German networker Robert Rehfeldt, were devoted socialists who also advocated for freer working conditions and collaboration among the states in the Bloc. Others were less interested in politics and explored cultural and aesthetic issues in their art. In any event, the arrival of mail art letters and packages was not always certain, and artists knew that. Whether the mail was read by secret police or kept in artist files or whether it was simply lost, some of the mail art archive in Eastern Europe is absent. This absence is due not only to political but to material conditions, which were also acknowledged by artists in the practice of mail art itself.

Mail art was certainly not a homogenous phenomenon, and its practices varied among different regions, artist groups, periods, and cultural and political circumstances. While Shozo Shimamoto from Japan was sending uncovered postcards in conceptual shapes to Iosif Király in Romania in 1986, a decade earlier, Paweł Petasz from Poland had sewn his envelopes shut to prevent tampering. In the meantime, Anna Banana, a Canadian artist, asked correspondents to send her banana images and banana-themed artworks. Even with its broad spectrum of activity, what is unique about mail art is that it consists mainly of artist-to-artist communication. Apart from the rare shows, the general public had no access to the materials exchanged in the Network. Because of this direct artist-to-artist connection, mail art often refers to itself rather than the works found outside of its circuits. The themes of mail art sometimes involved *mail art* itself or *art* itself, but this was an art freed from the pressures of

being found in museums and worshipped as the cultural apotheosis of society. These artists did not see their low-entry-barrier (and low-cost) *practice* as separated from other daily activities and saw it as being performed in a community.

Compared to other art movements, mail art is hard to define and is only a *movement* in the sense that thousands of people took part in it. Otherwise, it is better seen as a practice that is performed in community, and speaking of it as a style seems irrelevant because of its highly diverse practices. It was collages, rubber-stamped works, conceptual art, artistamps, postcards, and booklets that were most often circulated, but so was information about the Network itself, lists of artist addresses, manifestos, and calls for collaborations or participation in exhibitions. Mail art is a very medium-conscious practice where every choice is geared towards communication, including interventions in postal channels. Works were made on typewriters and hand-made paper, involved personalized postal stamps, and relied on intermedia, text-image juxtapositions. Mail artists used materials from everyday life, including mechanical copying methods, when those became available. Due to this diversity of activities, mail art is best discussed practice by practice, with each responding to specific historical, political, aesthetic, or societal circumstances.

The mail art network grew on the backbone of another network—the postal service. Media networks usually develop on the basis of a pre-existing infrastructure. Routes become roads. Then electric and telegraph wires are positioned along roads. Lisa Gitelman illustrates this point with an example[2] from New York City in the 1890s when Chinatown poles became

[2] Unofficially, residents started stapling leaflets with various announcements, including "gambling news" (Gitelman). The leaflets, ephemeral and illicit forms of communication, were torn off and disappeared. The clouds of staples remained, rusted to various degrees, attesting to the transmission of messages. The density and volume of the staple conglomerations, which must have been mostly at eye level, tell a story for network archeologists to interpret. It could be observed which pole received the most traffic or which one had the oldest messages and started the network; however, the stapled leaflet network is decentralized.

the base from which a new communication network grew out of need and use, not according to a plan or some overarching goal. This irregular growth flourished on top of the evenly spaced city poles. The mail art network built itself in a similar fashion, using the postal system as a foundation. In Eastern Europe, the postal service, the principal medium of mail art, was one of the main areas of contact between artists and the state, dictating artworks' means of transport but also censoring or even withholding individual letters. Some Eastern European works of mail art challenged the postal service rules by using unofficial stamps, employing oddly shaped cards and envelopes, or by switching the position of *to* and *from* fields in the addresses in order to bypass state interference.

The concept of *the Network* is another useful term when it comes to defining mail art, which rests less on the idea of an art object and more on the opportunity to make contact. With some exceptions, mail art objects were cheaply made. The vectors of their exchange point to the nodes in the Network: the artists' mailboxes. Of course, the mail art network was far from a traditional method of art exchange. Osthoff stresses its decentralized nature when she states, "networks have no centers, only nodes" (261). While art markets have centers, as do state-funded art systems, the mail art network was primarily a self-organizing phenomenon powered by one-on-one correspondence. There were hardly any network administrators, though some artists' roles appeared that way. "Each country had at least one especially dedicated artist who served as a contact person and passed along addresses, one of whom was Robert Rehfeldt" (Thurmann-Jajes). It is true that artists like Robert Rehfeldt in East Germany and György Galántai in Hungary created nonofficial art hubs and helped distribute information and address lists of recipients. Nevertheless, their involvement helped

but did not control the growth of the Network, nor did they hold any titles in relation to their roles.

Apart from existing in a network, Eastern European mail art practice also resulted in the formation of *communities*—groups of people who shared a common identity, built trust, and communicated about personal matters beyond the dimension of artwork exchange. Thus, while mail art responded to censorship and sometimes addressed the lack of freedom in the Eastern Bloc—Eastern Europeans, who suffered under many travel restrictions, used mail art to be able to share their artworks—the practice should not be reduced to a channel of complaints against oppression and isolation. The often-cited *total* isolation of Eastern European non-official artists is only partially accurate. Mail artists who actively participated in the Network managed to forge connections with artists in other parts of the world, especially in the United States, West Germany, and the United Kingdom. This is precisely what mail art managed to accomplish in parallel terms, with artists often exchanging correspondence more easily with the West but still managing to make connections internally within the Bloc.

How could scholarship about the performative practice of mail art be approached with respect to the values professed by the movement? Mail art research presents unique difficulties. Before attempting a scholarly project on mail art, the challenges of this area of study must be acknowledged. In her dissertation on mail art in Latin America, Zanna Gilbert outlines the obstacles:

> Approaching the subject is difficult: a chronological approach is anathema to networked art since its very structure suggests multiple connected temporalities rather than a linear history. Nor would a monographic approach fare much better because

> the artist as autonomous, isolated genius is one of the orthodoxies of the art world that mail art sought to undermine. (Gilbert 12)

That is why this project focuses on specific mail art practices and studies them as network rituals, where they are partly but not completely limited by their geographical region. While this analysis examines Eastern European mail art activity, the artists' correspondence with artists from South America, Japan, and the United States will also be explored.

Studying mail art in Eastern Europe is also situated in the larger area of scholarship about the region, which has its own positionality. The "gray zone of Europe," as Martina Pachmanová calls the former Eastern Bloc countries, is neither "part of the 'West,'" nor "different enough to be in the position of the postcolonial 'Other'" ("In?" 38). She claims that this is because Eastern Europe "lacks exoticism" and stands outside of postcolonial theory in the limbo of the "'Second' World"[3] ("Double"; "In?" 43). Yet, since Pachmanová wrote this analysis, armed invasions in Eastern Europe have brought decolonial concerns[4] center-stage in Eastern European studies as well. Other scholars view the external isolation of marginalized art from Eastern Europe as "ghettoization," an equally disempowering position (Pejić 20). The grayness and isolation of the region have been especially detrimental to the scholarship about the smaller nations whose languages and cultures have a limited presence at international events and conferences. There are few countries where this is more the case than in Bulgaria, a country that produced fewer works of nonofficial art compared to the

[3] The term *the Second World* has been used by scholars to signify a space between the Third World (or the Global South) and the First World (the Global North). The Second World has certain levels of wealth and standards of living present but not to extent that the so-called First World countries tend to have them.
[4] For example, the theme of the 2023 conference at the Association of Slavic, Eastern European, and Eurasian Studies was "Decolonization." This is being followed by a "Liberation" theme for 2024.

more central nations of the region, such as Poland or Hungary. It is for this reason that this dissertation also discusses the presence of mail art from Bulgaria in the Network.

A comparatively small amount of primary and secondary sources regarding mail art in Eastern Europe are available. Publications on mail art in Eastern Europe are few. Among them, the Schwerin Museum catalog for the "Mail Art – East Europe within the International Network" exhibition is notable for its dozens of short artist accounts on the practice and the Network. *Out of Control! Color Prints and Mail Art in the GDR* is an illustrated collection of articles with an entire section dedicated to mail art. Klara Kemp-Welch's monographs *Antipolitics in Central European Art* and *Networking the Bloc* and Pyotr Piotrowski's *In the Shadow of Yalta* offer some case studies of mail art and networking. Articles by Anne Thurmann-Jajes and Cordelia Marten explore mail art in the GDR, while Kornelia Röder has written about Ray Johnson and Eastern Europe. From the sources about the movement as a whole, Chuck Welch's collection *The Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology* contains artist essays by several Eastern European networkers. Kornelia Röder's theoretical monograph *Topologie und Funktionsweise des Netzwerks der Mail Art* is the only published full-length work on the Network in Eastern Europe, for which only a summary in English is available. This fact spells the need for more full-length studies on the topic, especially in English, the unofficial language of the international network.

Most importantly, since a staple for many mail art works is the use of different media, mail art is best examined using close archival research. This dissertation, too, rests heavily on archival research, including works never discussed in academic work before, and strives to prove the relevance of mail art in art, media, and communication scholarship. Collages, drawings, and small objects such as matches or hair are often combined with text and

symbols as a function of mail art's unique media synergy. In such works, text, object, and image are not merely placed next to each other, but work together to create an intermedia artwork where different media interact on conceptual, material, or semiotic levels.

This project significantly relies on Pat Fish's collection of mail art at the University of California, Santa Barbara Special Collections. Pat Fish is an American tattoo artist who participated in the international mail art network during the 1970s and '80s. Fish's correspondence was mostly conducted with American artists, but there is also a sizable international presence, including several notable artists from Eastern Europe. Fish and Paweł Petasz, for example, exchanged mail art for years, sometimes writing informal postcards to each other as well. Fish organized at least one exhibition in Santa Barbara that Petasz participated in—her Fashion Plate exhibit, discussed in Chapter I. One of the heaviest artist folders in her collection contains works specifically from Petasz, who was quite prolific in terms of the letters he sent to her. The fact that works from Eastern Europe made it to California numerous times underscores the wide scope of exchange that was possible and that the Iron Curtain was not an absolute barrier but rather a cultural and geopolitical construct that could be overcome.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter, "Mail Art: Performance as Communication," discusses the methodology of studying mail art as a communication performance and the definitions of *performance* that set the ground for this project. Inspired by Diana Taylor's critical work, this theoretical lens will center this investigation on the aspects of the mail art performance involving *doing* and *communal ritual*. In the Network, mail art is often defined by repeating communal collaborations where a sender may begin the activity while a recipient continues it

by completing the artwork through interactions with it. Mail is a performance that results in documentation as well. The envelope transports an intermedia message that travels through the postal system, incurring the journey's scuffs, marks, and stamps. After an interaction between artists or between an artist and the post office, there is an archivable document that scholars can study.

Three artists whose mail art performances engage *language* are discussed in this chapter. While Robert Rehfeldt employed conceptual postcard slogans to call for artist collaboration through ambiguity and to perform *officialdom* in East Germany, Hungarian artist Endre Tót reduced typewritten communication to his staple *zer0es*, stressing its forms and revealing the absurdity of correspondence surveillance in Hungary. Lastly, in Poland, Paweł Petasz involved his audience in an interactive performance of complicity by suggesting they undress a paper doll. In this way, he engaged with the temporal dimension of mail art performance and with gendered body politics. Petasz, who also mailed back to his correspondents the manipulated *ghosts* of their works, performed a de facto *reenactment*, a practice inclined towards virality.

The second chapter, "What is the Role of the Network?" explores metaphors and theorizations of the Network, along with examples of artworks whose central idea was inseparable from their performance in the Network. Earlier Network theorizations in the 1960s were inspired by Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School and Fluxus East and West. Mail art's rapid spread in the early 1970s, on the other hand, coincided with the 1971 manifesto "NET," sent to a number of recipients by the Polish artists Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski. However, one of the most essential theorizations of networked art for the collective memory of the mail art participants is Robert Filliou's

concept of the "Eternal Network." For Filliou, the Network itself could be seen as a work of art (Fredrickson 39). Furthermore, some scholars and artists see a strong connection between the *rhizome* and the development of the mail art network. Deleuze and Guattari's work on the rhizome's *deterritorialization* is an apt model for studying mail art, since its egalitarian principles and decentralized distribution encouraged nonhierarchical activity.

Among the more famous artist émigrés who contributed to the expansion and transformation of the Network was the Romanian artist Paul Neagu, who found a new environment in the UK. Neagu's idea of the body as a network of *cells* includes a letterbox as a cell in one of his mail art works, equating the postal exchange space with the make-up of the human body. Paweł Petasz also created works that borrowed or gave back to his network of correspondents. His collectively sourced mail art suit gathered fabric from many of his contacts, performing a new network fashion. At the same time, the layers of his multi-leaf self-portraits became dispersed among participants who might never have met, showing that the mail art work is a network-specific phenomenon.

The third chapter, "Stamping, Bureaucracy, and the Body," focuses on the somatically-entangled practices of hand-made rubber stamping and experimental artistamps from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Russia in the mail art of the 1970s, '80s, and early '90s. The Russian Futurists were the first to use rubber stamps in an artistic practice with the book *Мирсконца* (*Mirskontsa*; "Worldbackwards") (1912), followed by Marcel Duchamp in 1916. Decades later, shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian mail artists and *transfurists* Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay performed stamping on the human face, referencing current events but also *zaum,* the transrational language of the early Futurists, which aimed at a

universal way to communicate through an awareness of the materiality of non-referential words and sounds.

Various forms of stamping permeate mail art works as methods of communication, even prints from lips and fingers, stressing mail art's connection to materiality and the body. Polish artist Ewa Partum's lip prints became her staple *alphabet*. Partum turned a postal cliché around, claiming space for a woman's experience in the nonofficial scene. Czechoslovakian artist J.H. Kocman used rubber stamps in his mail art and his studies in tactility, where he left his fingerprints on tea ware and his face. Pawel Petasz's rubber stamp booklets brought stamped images to life in intermedia postcard flipbooks, which portrayed how humans could fly like birds—a metaphor for communication mobility and connection in the Network. From tactility in isolation to the appropriation of bureaucratic forms for artistic purposes, the stamp had the power to certify, finalize, or render void. It occupied major intersections between performance and document and can be seen as a *writing* practice and as a mechanism for automatic artwork creation, which nevertheless carries human touch through long-distance communication.

The fourth chapter, "Visual Poetry, Collective Authorship, and Assemblings," explores the visual turn in Eastern Bloc literature and the role of visual and concrete poetry in the genre of assembling magazines. Yet, these practices involve a pre-history. Concrete poetry's origins and gender dynamics date back prior to mail art, and some Eastern European artists have connected their work to the Russian historical avant-garde. It was not until the mid-1980s that mail art arrived in the Soviet Union. Russian mail artist Rea Nikonova and her collaborator and spouse Serge Segay composed performative visual and textual works

and founded the visual poetry magazines *Double* and *Transponans*, making numerous allusions to the early Russian avant-garde.

Created by Paweł Petasz, the assembling magazine *Commonpress* was an international collaborative publication that adopted the model of collective editorship. As a communal network performance, the magazine changed its volunteer editor-assemblers with every issue, a practice that supported a mostly egalitarian distribution structure. Yet, the misalignment of non-hierarchical mail art network theorization, on the one hand, and women's actual (non) participation in mail art and assemblings, on the other, was not entirely a paradox. Even novel networks can be built on pre-existing social infrastructures. The art historical and socio-political conditions positioned the women of mail art as marginalized, even in a participatory rhizomatic network.

Inspired by the work of the Chilean-born artist Guillermo Deisler, Bulgarian mail artist Vesselin Sariev founded the visual poetry assembling *SVEP*, and the two of them created the first mail art to travel in and out of Bulgaria and to be written in Bulgarian. Deisler established the connection between Eastern Europe and the longer tradition of concrete poetry in South America, represented by the Noigandres group of the 1960s and ’70s. In 1987, while living in the East German town of Halle, Deisler founded the visual poetry assembling magazine *PEACEDREAM PROJECT UNI/vers(;)*, which continued being distributed until 1995. Assemblings continued to be relevant through the first part of the 1990s even after digital communication began to replace many of the functions of the post office. The projects of network performance, from performance art itself to mail art actions, stamping experiments, and complex assembling distribution models will be discussed through a variety of Eastern European mail art examples in the chapters to follow.

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I. Mail Art: Performance as Communication

In 1982, Romanian artist Iosif Király and a few others staged a performance, *Contact. TRANS-IDEEA*, which involved several participants attempting to enter a giant envelope and mail themselves abroad. This figurative mailing humorously and poignantly summed up the urgency with which artists in the Second World of the Eastern Bloc reached for mail art to find a responsive audience. Király's work blurs the line between acts of mailing that are performance art[5] and acts of mailing that can be viewed as a performance. Its liminality exemplifies the complex position of mail art as a genre that both performs and produces compelling objects. In this chapter, I set out to argue that mail art in Eastern Europe should be studied as performance. To this end, I will clarify what the concept means in the section "Defining Performance."

This chapter primarily focuses on three artists who have made notable contributions to this networked practice, including the organization of other artists, throughout the 1970s and '80s. Robert Rehfeldt, an artist who chose to live in East Germany, became a very central organizer for the mail art network, with his activities including the distribution of newsletters and address lists. His conceptual postcards used carefully worded slogans to explore Dada-inspired ambiguity, to agitate for artist collaboration, and to expose the

[5] In Eastern Europe, mail art developed during an era when performance art was flourishing—the early 1970s. "The plein air retreat in Osieki in summer 1970… marked the moment when attention shifted from art objects and forms to the importance of the message delivered by the artwork" (Fowkes and Fowkes 79). Since the 1960s, the nonofficial art scene had already been saturated with "actions" and "activities," the Eastern Bloc terms for "happenings" and performance art. ("Actions" and "activities" were sometimes used in English and sometimes in the local language.) Performance art suited the times because it "could provide means to directly address politics in which the instantaneousness of the live act outpaced the bureaucratic mechanisms of censorship" (Fowkes and Fowkes 100). These often spontaneous events could be traceless if so desired (though they often were not) and happened too quickly for the censors to be able to react.

political system as a construct. Hungarian artist Endre Tót, whose concepts later assumed public manifestations, also employed conceptual text to develop his *zer0* artworks and typing performances, participating in a nonofficial, subversive gesture of pure communication whereby content is mostly context. Paweł Petasz from Poland, also known for his notable mail art objects, created a variety of mail art works with theatrical or performative connotations, including reenactments of the *ghosts* of mail artworks sent to him. The examples showcase three ways mail artists have chosen to engage with mail art as performance through *language*. Rehfeldt uses an official genre of communication (slogans) and conceptual language, Tót refuses to engage with alphabetic language and takes up the digit *0*, and Petasz employs intermediality in juxtapositions of image and language to stress the unfolding and time-based nature of mail art.

1. Defining *Performance*

There are varying approaches to defining performance. Jon McKenzie, for example, distinguishes organizational performance from cultural performance. The latter encompasses performance art along with protest and political theater, but also a more extensive "living reactualization of socially symbolic systems" related to the work of Richard Schechner (McKenzie 8-9). Cultural performance dwells in the liminal spaces between systems and has the power of subversion (McKenzie 9). Mail art is mainly a cultural performance, though it does not overlap significantly with performance art. In most cases, it tends to be live—i.e., involving a present human body (as in Király's 1982 performance). However, if mail art is to be studied as performance, who are the performers? Are they the object, the artist, the Network's vast chains of collaboration, or even the postal worker? As metaphorical tech crew and theater ushers, these agents contribute to the participatory and compound playing

out of the mail art cultural performance and system "reactualization." This dissertation will examine various facets of mail art cultural performance and how they set it apart from other artforms. First, it is essential to define performance in greater detail.

I am using the notion of *performance* as a methodological framework to uncover the most essential elements of the practice of mail art. I will explore the "IS/AS"[6] of mail art performance, the overlapping of these two categories, and the slippage between them. In the traditional sense, when something IS considered performance, it is a matter of *doing* rather than the finished products of such a process.[7] In art, this means that a live human performer and live audience may be involved, as is the case in performance art. On the other hand, considering something AS performance extends the idea of performance to art practices that are not considered performance in the sense described above. In this dissertation, I may interpret practices like mail art as *performative*[8] even where they do not fall under the *IS* definition presented here. Even when it does not involve live performance, mail art is performative in the sense that it emphasizes or privileges *doing* over the creation of objects, even as it still creates such objects. Therefore, mail art combines performance (*doing*) with an archivable object (*done*).

Additionally, the context of mail art adds to this definition. The action and process of mail art are additionally framed by the fact that they exist as part of a non-hierarchical network, a community of participants who exchange mail objects among themselves. This happens as part of a *ritualized* exchange: repetitive behaviors, such as sending, responding, collaborating, and collecting address lists, inscribe the mail art performance into a system of

[6] This dichotomy was developed by Richard Schechner and elaborated on by Diana Taylor (27).
[7] Diana Taylor discusses "doing" as one of the most basic definitions of performance (13).
[8] I distinguish "performative" as an adjective, as used here, from the specific use of "the performative" as a noun in J.L. Austin's speech acts.

communal rituals. This clearly distinguishes mail art from other types of correspondence. Moreover, mail art is a *networked ritual*. "Ritual" is one of the terms for group performance used by Diana Taylor who also defines participation or "doing" as "belonging" (19). Such belonging had a special significance in pre-1989 Eastern Europe, where the relative isolation of mail artists in the Eastern Bloc further emphasized the need for connection and an experience of doing things *together*. The *with* of mail art performance is especially important as no artist who works alone can be called a *mail artist*.

The mail art work involves a complex series of acts by multiple people involved in the production, contextualization, and transportation of a package. It engages in a play of the appearance and disappearance of its ephemera as it is engulfed by the postal box and appears in another box elsewhere. Zanna Gilbert argues that "[m]ail art's disappearance and reappearance in the post, its possibility of being lost, stolen or confiscated on its journey, suggests that it belongs to Kaprow's category of vulnerability, or precarity" (*Transgressive* 246). The disappearance of the ephemeral is partly the risk of never appearing again. In another sense, disappearance is also hiddenness, like a magic trick. There is an aspect of mail art performance that is not readily observable by its intended audiences. From the darkness of the mailbox to the institutional processing, the mail art work temporarily loses its individuality and joins a stream of other letters, to be picked out again at the other end and re-individualized through the touch of the human hand delivering it and the individual artist receiving it. This site of formal acceptance and recognition reactivates the elements of performance.

Furthermore, as in the case with the series by Paweł Petasz, mail art has another ephemeral form, verging on disappearance—*ghosts*, produced here through his reenactment

of others' works. Because mail art is also a practice in conversation, its themes and signs continue long after the original work has made its journey from ideation to archive. Through copy art, so-called *ghosts*, and manipulated responses, in the 1970s and '80s mail art went viral across the Network to the point that artists' mailboxes were completely stuffed with materials, sometimes on a daily basis. This broader significance and germination of the Network as communal performance will be discussed in Chapter II.

Works of art, events, and phenomena can be studied as performance, regardless of whether they are performance art or not and whether they are live or not. Yet performance art is a major reason for the expansion of Performance Studies scholarship, and this connection should be honored. Notably, many performance art works have been chiefly experienced not live but indirectly, through documentation, remnants, or reenactment. This experiential field expands performance into a larger domain of activity and renews contact with a performance's past and its afterlives (or ghosts). Christopher Bedford, for example, considers performance to be a continuous stream of events and commentary, which only *begins* with the original performance: an "extended trace history [is] the *viral ontology* of performance art" (78). Mail art's myriad performative qualities will be examined in this chapter's examples of artists from East Germany, Hungary, and Poland. While mail art can be considered a hybrid of object and performance, studying it as a performance makes it possible for its unique time-based, repetition-based, and process-based practices and implications to stand out.

2. Robert Rehfeldt: Performing *Contart* and Officialdom

Under Erich Honecker, from 1971-1989, the GDR leaned on its "anti-fascists' rhetoric," but had still not admitted responsibility for the Holocaust or experienced the de-Nazification that its Western counterpart had, thereby erasing its "collective memory" (Piotrowski, *Shadow* 369). Nevertheless, the 1970s was an era that offered some autonomy from propaganda, which also extended to artists (Piotrowski, *Shadow* 247). Piotrowski claims that the neo-avantgarde art scene was marked by "heroic efforts of unofficial, and in reality illegal and entirely or partly private, institutions," such as Gallery EP in Berlin (*Shadow* 245). There were about forty such independent galleries in East Germany at that time.

During the 1970s and '80s, regulations about exhibitions, artist gatherings, and publishing in the GDR were generally stricter than in Poland. Artists learned how to exploit aspects of the system, especially the post office. Eugen Blume suggests that "[p]art of the history of East German civilization was its reliable delivery of all things handed over a post office counter, where they were weighed and franked as necessary" (113). Kornelia von Berswordt-Wallrabe points to a case where artists could turn the absurd limitations of the system to their practical use (129). For a time, sending mail from Berlin (GDR) to Copenhagen was prohibited. Yet all one had to do was switch the sender and recipient's addresses. That way, officials would think they were looking at inappropriate mail from Denmark and would return it to what appeared to be the sender. This switching and feigned provenance was expert cultural performance in that disguising something in plain sight could act as camouflage. Artists designed these envelopes to perform (in the sense of *mimicking*)

foreignness and thus be ejected out of the GDR and sent back (actually sent *forward*) to where artists wanted them to go.

Mail art in the GDR also used mimicry to perform officialdom and thus reveal the system as a construct that could be performed. Performing political compliance, the work[9] of mail artist Robert Rehfeldt is an apt example of this type of cultural performance. Marked primarily by positive messages, his art slogans exhibited the semblance of the official spirit of camaraderie, performing as party-aligned rhetoric. Rehfeldt, who had spent part of his childhood with foster parents and worked in transportation and as a stonecutter's assistant, entered the realm of nonofficial art in East Berlin in 1963. Rehfeldt earned his living as a press draughtsman, photojournalist, and visual designer. He had a degree from West Berlin's Universität der Künste. He became internationally known in the mail art scene in the 1970s when mail art was already known to be a controversial medium, a bridge to Western ideas, or—even worse—a vehicle for connecting and mobilizing states within the Bloc. Rehfeldt's notable slogans took a more general position that was challenging to interpret in one single way. Anu Allas describes this tendency of the Eastern European neo-avantgarde:

> [T]he formalization of state rhetoric during late socialism created a habit of speaking and writing "between the lines": hidden messages were inserted into formally/ideologically correct texts and those were often read with an eye on what's "behind" the explicit agenda of the writer. (152)

Allas calls this "space for potential meanings," which was a crucial aspect of the communication, or "the performative efficacy of the text" (152). This performative posture

[9] Though simply designed, Rehfeldt's cards were unique and recognizable. The artist's statements, which were printed in thick, all-capital letters against a plain white background and featured no punctuation, greatly resembled propaganda slogans. One of Rehfeldt's practices was to appropriate bureaucratic code, and he diffused its political and institutional context into artistic communication.

was just the surface layer of Rehfeldt's complex work, which, when examined at a deeper level, reveals a core of artistic autonomy and a philosophical relationship with language reminiscent of Dada and Zen Buddhist thought.

The words "idea" and "art" were in many of Rehfeldt's conceptual slogans. One postcard reads, "DIESE KARTE TEILT IHNEN MEINE GEDANKEN MIT… DENKE SIE WEITER"[10] ("THIS CARD TELLS YOU MY THOUGHTS, PICK THEM UP AND CONTINUE THEM")[11] (1979) (Fig. 1.1). Berswordt-Wallrabe calls this kind of work "highly philosophical" and argues that "Rehfeldt reduced East German censorship to absurdity" (129). Rehfeldt made a big to-do out of *ideas*, but the postcard declines to say what the artist's ideas are. Philosophizing about unknown ideas and insisting on collaboration while sending postcards around the world, Rehfeldt performed artistic conformity while actually advocating for greater artistic freedom in the GDR. His multi-layered communication performance allowed him to continue his activities: printing postcards and newsletters, gathering artists in his apartment where Kriechgalerie[12] exhibits took place, and sending out address lists to those joining the mail art network.

The text in this card is markedly conceptual and points to the very act of performing mail art activity. First, it is self-referential because the sentence refers to itself as its object of discourse. Second, the statement is tautological since what can be *thought* (or "picked up," as the translation interprets) is the act of continuing the thinking further. Rehfeldt was not encouraging other artists to adopt his ideas but rather to keep the communication chain going

[10] The image of the postcard can be seen in Daniel Thalheim's *Artefakte* article "Humorvoll und verfolgt: Subversive Postkartenkunst in der DDR": https://artefactae.wordpress.com/2016/01/15/humorvoll-und-verfolgt-subversive-postkartenkunst-in-der-ddr/.
[11] This translation of Robert Rehfeldt's card slogan is the work of Berswordt-Wallrabe (129).
[12] A *creep gallery* space with a low ceiling clearance, used for nonofficial exhibitions by artists in Berlin.

from one artist to another. As artist-to-artist communication, mail art enjoys a status of relative autonomy from official art institutions, and its continuation depends on the actions of individual artists. When encountering the postcard, the viewer is passed on the creator's thoughts about how to forward the conceptual message. The forwarding itself is more important than the content of the message or the way it is printed on the postcard. In this process, the way the viewer is addressed changes from the formal second-person address to the informal, increasing the familiarity between the sender and receiver. Furthermore, the postcard commands that a task be performed—not for the recipient to simply read a message but to actively participate. An action is implied or, in this case, requested. This example adheres to the definition of mail art as *doing*. Mail art involves a sequence of actions in a network, ever moving and passing on the torch. This aspect of it is inseparable from the idea of the mail art *artwork*.

When he invented the neologism *contart*, frequently used in his newsletters and slogans, Rehfeldt amalgamated *contact* and *art* (Fig. 1.2). The word is, above all, a call to perform communicative action within the Network. In "Contart living in your mailbox," another of his slogans, the key word is "living." *Contart* is not an object or a package waiting in the mailbox. It is the *act* of making contact through art or making art through contact. It is a living and ongoing process that brings unexpected results out of the zone of contact activity, which is the mailbox space.

The word *contart* itself is Rehfeldt's one-word aesthetics manifesto. *Contart* could not be applied appropriately to archived, static artworks stored in the basements of art institutions. The contact of *contart* is something that needs to be continually reestablished in order to function. It needs to be *performed* in the *doing* sense of the word. In its broader

sense, *contact* or *contart* is a form of art networking[13] and collaboration emphasizing communication and continued correspondence. Rehfeldt sent calls to his correspondents to continue to stay in touch; he did not send just conceptual experiments.

The self-referentiality of mail art is central to the practice. Rehfeldt's postcard, asking the viewer to think their thoughts further, mentions no specific thoughts. Such strategies attempt to isolate the work from its political and historical context, if only temporarily. The work gains artistic autonomy and becomes a loop in and of itself. The object of the work is itself, or the artistic act. For Rehfeldt, claiming this autonomy meant carving out artistic space where he could perform semiotic experiments in language and communication and express the urge to reach out to others. Officially-aligned language served merely as a container that allowed him to do this.

Mail art has a complex relationship to artistic autonomy. Most notably, its separation from large art institutions in Eastern Europe meant it was distributed in the nonofficial sphere of the Network of artists, student clubs, and small galleries. The traditional context of the framed art object on a museum wall was incompatible with the values of nonhierarchical network exchange, which also privileged the act of communication over the artifact. Typically made from ordinary household materials, mail art flowed freely in and out of everyday life,[14] picking up where Dada[15] had left off to disrupt the institutional and

[13] "Networking" was also theorized by Kozłowski and Kostołowski in Poland in 1970, via their manifesto "NET," which will be discussed in Chapter II.

[14] Anu Allas argues that "the (avant-gardist) blurring of the boundaries between art and everyday life, every 'saying' (or an act of writing) can be equally regarded as a 'doing' as in any activity" (152). The neo-avantgarde partially inherits this historical avant-garde performative writing/doing gesture, despite its tendencies to seek more artistic autonomy.

[15] Mail artists bestowed upon each other the title of "Master of Dada" and other similar certificates, ironically produced by fictive institutions. In fact, the beginning of treating mailing as art can be traced to Marcel Duchamp's performative mailing to his neighbors. Constanze Fritzsch notes that "Rehfeldt seems to have read Beuys through and with Marcel Duchamp: Developing One's Creativity in Ironic Play. For Rehfeldt, Duchamp

bourgeois avenues for art. In this sense, mail art does not insist on autonomy from day-to-day activity. Yet, the exchange is a form of artist-to-artist communication, isolated from the general public. By removing intermediaries, mail art also cut off the non-artist audience, and thus claimed autonomy from the expectations of the nonparticipating public of viewers and critics. In theory, if the public was ready to perform, it was invited to be part of the Network, which was founded on the idea that everyone is an artist; yet to this day, a significant fraction of this public, including many scholars, has no idea mail art exists. Mail art's obscurity might be the most significant dimension of its autonomy.

Within the mail art network, however, Rehfeldt was anything but obscure. He was an organizer and agitator, widely distributing his lithographed *ARTWORKER CONTART NEWS* newsletter (Fig. 1.2), as well as conceptual postcards and collected address lists. As part of his performance, he addressed multiple audiences with the texts' multiple meanings. Postcards like Rehfeldt's "DENKEN SIE JETZT BITTE NICHT AN MICH" ("PLEASE DO NOT THINK OF ME NOW")[16] (Fig. 1.3), sent to an international network from the GDR, carry a variety of interpretations, depending on their recipients.

With the phrase, "Please do not think of me now," Rehfeldt ensured his presence in the reader's mind. In a negative imperative gesture, he was actually invoking the opposite by asking them not to think of him. Anyone asked not to think of something will inevitably think of it first before they manage to think of other mental images to replace it. Part of the call not to think of Rehfeldt, in particular, was sincere and motivated by a desire for self-

was also one of the founders of Mail Art, as he noted in the catalog Postcards and Artists' Cards of the Arkade Gallery in 1978: 'It was M. Duchamp who in 1916 thought of sending his ideas by postcard'" ("Variations").

[16] Translation by Constanze Fritzsch for the eponymous exhibit at Chert Lüdde, Berlin, in 2021. The copy of this postcard in Ruth Wolf Rehfeldt's archive at Chert Lüdde is from 1991, but it is likely that it was created before 1989 and that Rehfeldt make various copies later.

preservation. Rehfeldt was asking if the surveillance apparatus could possibly surveil somewhere else. He created a dialogic enactment of the intellectual chase between artist and surveiller. The logic becomes even more convoluted in "ICH DACHTE GERADE DARAN, WORAN SIE GAR NICHT DACHTEN, WENN ICH DARAN DENKE" ("I WAS JUST THINKING OF SOMETHING YOU WEREN'T THINKING OF AT ALL WHILE I WAS THINKING OF IT"). In this slogan, Rehfeldt's performance was the acting out of a game of mind-reading. The suggestion that the state was reading his mind was the less surprising aspect of the declaration; the part implying that Rehfeldt himself was reading the state agents' minds and that he was ahead of them in the thinking-of-things game is the bolder implication. By performing this absurdity, Rehfeldt communicated something to the effect of*: I see that you see me, but I can also see you, too, and I am anticipating what you might think*. While it may seem obvious that some of his slogans were directed at the Stasi, their subversiveness might consist precisely of the possibility that they might *not* be.

For the artist's friend-contacts, these statements took on different meanings. Rehfeldt *was* asking his friends in earnest to think of him. Thinking or not-thinking—is it possible to be sure of Rehfeldt's specific position? At a time when even one's *thinking* is a performance, is not-thinking a possible way out or is it another form of cultural performance for practical purposes? The practice of not-thinking could have other cultural influences and interpretations. The Dadaists, who convened in Zurich and Berlin and were motivated by their disillusionment with World War I, stressed nonsense, chance, and destructive play, challenging highly intellectual notions about the artwork. In 1975, Canadian artist Anna Banana bestowed Robert Rehfeldt with a certificate at "Dadda [sic] Land," naming him "Master of Bananology" for the "Banana Olympics April Fools." In keeping with a Dada

sensibility, its anti-art stance, and its refusal to clearly define itself, Rehfeldt also denied Dada itself in his 1979 postcard slogan in English: "DADA IS DEAD[.] CONTART LIVING IN YOUR MAILBOX" (Fig. 1.4). Very much like the not-thinking slogan, here Rehfeldt denies Dada while simultaneously affirming it by mentioning it. Aware of Dada references and influences in the Network, Rehfeldt drew on Dada's playfulness while staying focused on the present and agitating for and performing ongoing contact with networkers. He called for a constructive approach to organizing and art, whereby solidarity was more important than Dadaism's radical upturning of the social order. Rehfeldt's not-thinking was not destruction but a loosening of the tight grip over rigid old ideas.

Furthermore, the idea of not-thinking is an actual practice in Zen Buddhism, a spiritual movement centered on non-thinking meditation, which became popularized around the world in the 1960s. It is possible that Rehfeldt was proposing a similar radical stance concerning thought, a letting go of thought. This was paradoxical, of course, since the message was delivered through language, which inevitably contains concepts. To make art without thinking, to establish communication without specific ideas—Rehfeldt's philosophical conundrums delivered in the all-caps typography of official rhetoric astound with their amalgamation of references. His work is anything but simplistic and refuses to be pinned down or easily serve misguided purposes. His responsible role as an influential networker demanded that he pay attention to how he might be interpreted.

While performing his slogans for different audiences and with the actions of the Network, Rehfeldt also had a penchant for the theatrical in the photographic self-portraits he sent to some of his contacts. He engaged with the surreal by dressing up and performing *as* over fifty characters, including an astronaut and East German and American soldiers. Partly,

this surreal play could have been the expression of his mental illness. On the other hand, Rehfeldt was aware of what it meant to exist under different political circumstances, so he performed the arbitrary nature of choosing to support the country one was part of (Gilbert, "Human" 157). One moment he was a pilot, and then the next he was playing an electric guitar while wearing a gas mask. In terms of his personal beliefs, Rehfeldt was a socialist. For him, this didn't stand in contradiction with the possibility of artistic freedom and the energetic exchange of ideas about thinking together or not-thinking with anyone ready for *contart*.

2. Endre Tót: Zer0 Messages in Hungary

In Hungary, the rest of the decade after 1972 was marked by the decline of the liberalization of the 1960s, which had introduced the New Economic Policy[17] and the possibility of moving freely. While restrictions in the cultural sphere were not as permissive as those in Poland, they were still more liberal than those in Czechoslovakia (Piotrowski, *Shadow* 100). In 1973, the authorities closed, under false pretenses, the infamous Chapel Studio at Balatonboglár, operated by György Galántai, an organizer and initiator of neo-avant-garde activities, but not before he could organize the historic meeting of Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian artists in the summer of 1972. This networking gathering, complete with a peaceful game of tug-of-war, was reminiscent of exercises that the Hungarian troops performed before they invaded Czechoslovakia in 1968 and helped secure bonds between groups of artists who had previously been isolated. While the 1970s, which was considered a "golden period," brought an explosion of conceptual art and Pop art in Hungary, Piotrowski

[17] The New Economic Policy involved a partial stimulation of private wealth.

claims that "politically engaged [work] was an exception rather than the norm" (*Shadow* 215, 326).

To think about Hungary outside "the dichotomies of victim/suppressor," Júlia Perczel argues that János Kádár's governance introduced "a more relaxed framework of rules and implementation of power…[where] the practice of art under the socialist state regime can be construed as a grey zone" (Perczel 60). In this "grey zone,"[18] where the lines between "banned or supported" work fluctuated, artists continually reached for visual or linguistic expression that could serve under different codes, putting into force not only ambiguity but also a possible shift between opposites (Perczel 64). Work by mail art artist and conceptualist Endre Tót will serve to exemplify these gray areas in this section.

In the late 1950s, as the country's leader, János Kádár, was attempting to make Hungary "the happiest barracks in the [Soviet] camp," in reality artists were subject to arrests, closures of spaces, and exile (Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics* 104). The "Three Ts" of Hungarian art, *támogatott* ("supported"), *türt* ("tolerated"), and tiltott ("prohibited"), categorized works into types of art (Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics* 104). Nonofficial art and mail art fell into the last two categories. Some artists had secret files with code names and informers who reported on them, yet the artists did not tend to hide their work purposefully. Tamás Szentjóby,[19] for example, had the code name *Schwitters*, which recalls the German Dada artist Kurt Schwitters. This suggests that the Hungarian state saw the neo-avantgarde as connected to the historical avant-garde and thus, in its paranoia, suspected a destructive or

[18] Perczel says she borrows this term from Primo Levi's work on "the micro-society of concentration camps" (60).

[19] Szentjóby is also known to have sent 25 kilograms of mail art to Yugoslavian poet Katalin Ladik. Upon Ladik's arrival in Budapest in 1968, this exchange ended in a silent performance called *UFO (Tryst)*, the instructions for which she had only been given by mail. For part of the performance, the two artists dine outdoors without speaking.

revolutionary potential in the neo-avantgarde. Nonofficial Hungarian artists in the 1960s and '70s had invented a new kind of dissent that did not require them to make art in secret. Klara Kemp-Welch outlines their strategies in her chapter "Dissent" in *Antipolitics in Central European Art*. Artists avoided addressing politics directly by avoiding misguided metaphorical interpretations of their work, which mainly consisted of making straightforward gestures, however shocking some may have been. The Slovakian artist Júllius Koller refused to describe his work as "art" (Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics* 110). Others organized *Happenings*[20] that were incomprehensible to official bureaucratic structures and could neither fall under the *supported* category nor the *forbidden* one, for the most part. Therefore, it was simply tolerated, except when it seemed suspicious, and authorities intervened in the activities they further politicized[21] under false pretexts.

The Hungarian mail artist Endre Tót, who gave up painting in 1971 to devote his time to conceptual art, mail art, and street actions, exhibits multiple aspects of performance in his work. In 1958, Tót was expelled from the Magyar Képzőművészeti Egyetem (The Hungarian University of Fine Arts), where Gyula Pap taught socialist realism. Inspired by Georges Mathieu's performative paintings, Tót produced action paintings and dove into abstract expressionist explorations after artists like Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly (Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics* 143). However, the high cost of painting materials prevented Tót from focusing on large-scale canvas works. Instead, he worked with basic materials like pen, paper, and a typewriter, becoming a notable conceptualist. The project that transitioned his

[20] The "Happening," a concept coined by Alan Kaprow, was also theorized by Szentjóby and Gábor Altorjay and became a "sensitive term" in Hungary in the 1960s (Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics* 110, 114).
[21] Klara Kemp-Welch notes, "the censors' interpretations were idiotically specific; on the other hand, they rightly sensed the oppositional drift of such non-art-art. Ultimately, it was politicized by default, by those who suspected a political subtext" (*Antipolitics* 118).

work to conceptualism, *My Unpainted Canvases* (1971), alluded to *the end of painting* announced by Stepanova and Rodchenko in 1921 but also mourned the potential series of his unrealized works. In this project, Tót drew empty rectangles on paper, listing their specific dimensions in a performative simulation of an actual painting catalog. Tót could not continue being a painter but could perform being one. He lived in Hungary, where he parodied the prevailing official culture of optimism. In 1978, he emigrated to the FRG, continuing his conceptual street demonstrations in Western European cities.

Like many other artists in the Network, Tót is not only a mail artist. His performative "zer0" typing works and postcards from the 1970s eventually developed into live manifestations in the early 2000s. The participants of these performances were Tót's delayed audience of ideas he had been developing since the early 1970s. Bedford's analysis of viral performance art (art that tends to be reenacted over and over) could also be applied to Tót's "zer0" projects, where the "originary act recedes and recedes" but an "auratic charge" is transmitted (86). The zeroes Tót typed for his airmail letter to artist Gyula Konkoly and his wife Catherine Konkoly in 1971, which was featured in Jean-Marc Poinsot's book *Mail art. Communication à distance* (1971), continued to be multiplied not just in Tót's work: among correspondents who employed the *0* was the French nouveau realist Pierre Restany, after Tót sent him a letter of handwritten zeroes. Restany sent an ode back, beginning with "My Tót, Mein Tót" and philosophizing on the concept of *0* in 1975. The viral *0* manifestation was reenacted in Berlin as recently as 2012. The seeming emptiness of the *0* messages made it possible for their application to transcend time and adapt to changing historical contexts over the course of the past fifty years.

Tót also stressed that performing the physical act of typing the zeroes was a part of his artistic work. While in Blackburn, during his UK "Fluxshoe" tour with other artists in 1973, he proclaimed, "I will be typing at a writing table—in the gallery. / Only zeroooos! / For about two hours a day," according to a personal interview Kemp-Welch held with him in 2006 (*Networking* 161). In addition to typing as performance, his gallery activities included staring at the wall for one hour and stamping documents. While specific typing actions Tót undertook did not always figure into his mail art, the staging as a *task* helped clarify his attitude about the physical and cultural production of zeroes. Typing a zero in a gallery is not necessarily the same as the performance of mailing a zero, but the ongoing typing underscores the importance of the physical labor and the lack of semiotic equivalence between one zero and another, or one zero and a whole sheet of them.

As part of the zero's context, the choice of using a typewriter for the performance of typing was not entirely neutral,[22] either. It was a semantic container, providing some of the meaning of the message. Attempting to reach others by letter or postcard is a universal gesture of seeking connection when it is not done for official business. In his *zer0* letters, Tót used a standard letter format for the zeroes, with the customary address and signature. The punctuation and spaces between the zeroes became the featured semantic containers. A long string of zeroes also resembles a long-sounding or silent scream of the letter *o*, the zero's visual cousin. The incessant zeroes embody a typographic performance of a scream or other unavailable auditory exclamation.

[22] According to Jeremy Johnston, a curator for a 2021 exhibition of Tót's work at Printed Matter in New York, typewriters often had to be registered in the Eastern Bloc while nonofficial offset printing in Hungary was possible only in secret, for the price of a wine bottle or similar goods ("Endre").

Tót also sent questionnaires to correspondents, *TÓTal questions by TÓT,* in 1974, asking them questions, parts of which were zeroed out (the text was typed over with zeroes and made nearly unreadable). Tót's questionnaires required a response, as signaled by the use of question words. The receiving and answering of these questionnaires by artists internationally confirmed that this performance as a *networked ritual* was, indeed, an act of artistic communication. Tót's embracing of the seemingly empty signifier became a viral language of pure contact for networkers, where performing contact was more important than the so-called *message*. Tót claims these "[Z]ero-coded letters were probably regarded as secret messages by the censors, but they were also documents of isolation and loneliness" ("Endre" 262). Tót was performing the *task* of reaching out, in its purest form, without requests, stories, or a specific political agenda. The zeroes traveled well across languages and communication contexts in the mail art network and persevered as a more universal, non-alphabetic language.

Bedford argues that "Performance is a myth-making medium and as such essentially viral in nature" (Bedford 86). What is the myth of the *zer0* that went viral? In its simplicity and seeming innocence, the zer0 shows that the production of nothing is not possible. It becomes a cultural theater where the *nothing* of the *zer0* is staged as *something* by the fervent activity and performance of the typing and mailing artist. Through this staging of cultural and artistic production, the *nothing* does indeed become *something* through its immediate cultural, geopolitical, and historical context. The performative task of mailing the *zer0* is the stage that seals its status as *information* and cultural exchange.

In 1973, Endre Tót ceased painting and started pouring his efforts entirely into conceptual "gladness" photographs and the practice of typing and sending out zeroes. "In this

liberating self-restriction, he mainly committed himself to the expression of nothingness, abbreviated, condensed to *Zero* or *0*… as a word in the English language or as a numeral – finally has an image" (Bürgel 7). In his one-person performance, *I Am Glad If I Can Type Zeroes* (1973), Tót satirized the ability and freedom to do even the most straightforward, meaningless action—that is, to (actively) write nothing. At the end of the action, he painstakingly dated and stamped each page, making clear that he was taking the writing of *nothing* seriously. One set of pages, the originals, were displayed on the gallery walls. Another typed set, the copies, were sent to a score of international recipients. Tót used the official letterhead for whatever gallery he performed this from, such as the Student Center Gallery in Zagreb in 1975, where each page was ink-stamped with his face and signed. This series of physical actions amounted to a performance of simulated productivity where Tót took on the "performative role of the clerk," oscillating between "underground language" and "official language" (Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics* 174).

Tót's practice of zero-ing, however solitary and expressive of loneliness it may be, is not ascetic and does not emphasize personal exploration. It is a practice he actively and repeatedly shares with an audience and a network of artists. The gladness he derives from typing zeroes or raising one leg, as is portrayed in his conceptualist photographic self-portraits,[23] raises the question as to what the alternative to this glad state might be—not being able to move at all, not being allowed to write one letter or one punctuation sign. Tót's performance of his *joys* and *freedoms* also delineates a zone of autonomy and of simple physical actions where the artist can explore without constraint. The powerful ambiguity of

[23] Many of these self-portraits might not be strictly mail art, but are closely connected to the typing of zeroes (a practice the artist greatly explores in his mail art) because they are united by the theme of *gladness* or a performance of happiness or productivity.

these works allows them to inhabit a space of bitter irony and a realm of minimalist freedoms. Yet, could the "joy" itself be sincere?

Bürgel argues that Tót's "apparently groundless enjoyment appears at first harmless and humorous, then irritating and finally suspect. It runs too contrary to the optimism that was ordained under Socialism" (27). The artist's *TÓTal Joys* series, in which he poses in photographs doing ordinary actions with an exaggerated smile, is a documented performance of happiness. Since the happiness is not sincere, these actions are a performance of an already performed optimism enacted by the Hungarian public at official events where positivity was expected. By performing an already-performed gladness, Tót is, in effect, reenacting gladness, which becomes something else—a new expression in a different, more autonomous sphere, where it might be allowed to elicit a more comprehensive range of interpretations.

In his *zero* works, Tót's refusal to communicate anything concrete demonstrates the disappearance of communication itself. As if it were possible to say less than zero, the artist furthers the disappearance in another project. In his series *The States of Zero* (1971), Tót uses carbon paper to exhibit a typed zero, which slowly disappears over eight different sheets. The disappearance of the zero through the durational experience of the sheets is performative in that the zero itself undertakes an act of slowly vanishing until it is gone. In the six-postcard series *TÓTal zer0s for everybody* (1973-1977), beneath a circular image of the artist's famous joyous face, there is type that reads, "I AM GLAD yoo [sic] can see a vanishing zero at last." The lower half of the bold-face zero is erased. The idea of *nothing* is clearly expressed in the symbolism of the recurring zero, however paradoxical a recurring nothing might be. The erased zero, however, shows that Tót was also thinking of the process of

vanishing. In a sense, the written zero is a record of nothing and thus—something. The disappearing record comes closer to absence, leaving, of course, behind it a trace or mark of its vanishing. The mark and the disappearing ink serve as a further reminder of the zero's materiality.

The performance in Tót's postcards is the task of minimizing content as much as possible or even outright destroying it. Another postcard of the series, *TÓTal zer0s for everybody* (1973-77) says, "I cover this zero 'cause I don't want it to drive you crazy." The zero is covered with a semi-transparent paper and can still be seen. In this case, the hiding of the zero does not hide it and is thus purely theatrical—a performance of hiding or censoring. Another postcard (1973-77) is ripped in half straight through the zero and says, "I AM GLAD I could give away the other half of this zero." This postcard performs the task of destroying the zero, adding another layer of vanishing to the already absent message content. These new layers of covering and vanishing underscore the zero's physical and temporal ephemerality—the performance of the zero has a beginning when it is uncovered and an end when it is destroyed. The trace of the zero's vanishing is the documentation of the performance.

3. Paweł Petasz and Poland in the Long 1970s[24]

Between 1975 and 1977, Paweł Petasz was the director of the El Gallery in Elblag, Poland, a "progressive gallery, managed by the local government" (Kotun 315). Petasz was unfamiliar with mail art until 1975, almost five years after Kozłowski and Kostołowski distributed the "NET" manifesto. Petasz says he learned about mail art "accidentally" and

[24] I'm including the year 1980 in the long 1970s in this discussion of Petasz's work. It includes his participation in a US exhibit with a notable object, previously sent to the artist Pat Fish, whom Petasz had been communicating with in the 1970s.

found it "exciting to suddenly have a chance to participate in a world in which the Iron Curtain didn't exist" (Kotun 316). Petasz and other mail artists vicariously participated in the performance of artistic migration, which was not a physical migration but rather one channeled through the materials of mail art and its migrating objects. Petasz has recounted that "Mail Art itself probably had little effect in breaking down Communist oppression" but that it helped against "the feeling of rejection" Polish artists were experiencing (Kotun 317).

Poland is a particular case of political and artistic circumstances. In the title of his 1987 book *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism*, Miklós Haraszti coined the term that has since been used to refer to 1970s Poland. The state encouraged the production of Modernist art or non-intellectual "pseudo-avant-garde" work but nothing critical or postmodern, and artists had relative freedom to create as long as their work was not political. Piotrowski claims that it was precisely the "political indifference" that "lined with velvet" the prisons of artists (*Shadow* 288).

The relative artistic freedom in Poland after 1968[25] was a government strategy to avoid criticism. Piotrowski argues that the "Ideological State Apparatus" actually sought to encourage[26] artistic autonomy in order to "delegitimize political critique," an infamous tradition of the historical avant-garde[27] (*Art* 90). Kemp-Welch's interpretation is that this apparatus was actually "buying off critique by funding independence in artistic matters" (*Antipolitics* 52-53). Whether or not some neo-avantgardists yielded to this manipulation,

[25] The events of 1968 in Poland were marked by student marches and protests by intellectuals responding to the censoring of a Romantic play by Adam Mickiewicz and an anti-Zionist campaign, among others. Repressions of the protests followed. From the Paris May to the crushing of the Prague Spring by the Warsaw Pact troops, the unrest of 1968 was felt throughout Europe. Piotrowski claims the period of "normalization" that ensued turned the "Repressive State Apparatus" into the "Ideological State Apparatus" (*Art* 93).
[26] Here Piotrowski is disagreeing with Andrzej Turowski's claim (a supposed regurgitation of Borowski's 1975 arguments) that the state's purpose was to forgo artistic freedom (*Art* 90).
[27] Piotrowski recalls that the historical avant-garde interpreted autonomy as a feature of bourgeois culture and did not pursue it (*Art* 90).

Poland's *velvet* autonomy resulted in active art spaces like Tadeusz Kantor's Gallery Foksal[28] in Warsaw and Gallery Krzysztofory in Kraków and a wealth of nonofficial activity, including mail art. Anda Rottenberg also claims that the state was going through enough trouble attempting to control writers that the artists were seen as a lesser threat (qtd. in Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics* 53). Interestingly, mail art's intermediality occupies a hybrid position in this alleged dichotomy of control. Artists exchanged mail art without attracting much attention, all the more so because mail art didn't officially qualify as art. Whatever the reasons, Poland was, according to Wiesław Borowski, perceived by neighboring countries as a relative artist's haven in the Eastern Bloc (Kemp-Welch, *Antipolitics* 53). This perception was complicated by the introduction of martial law in late 1981 until 1983. Along with the ability to practice mail art with the international community, Petasz experienced the challenges of an artist who could not receive sponsorship for his work. His stamp to György Galántai reads, "If art is crown [sic] of intellect [sic], is it crown [sic] of thorns or the [sic] golden one" (Petasz, Envelope). Nevertheless, Petasz's correspondence was highly sought-after in the mail art network and contains many important examples of how mail art functioned as performance.

Once a mail artist deposited their work into a mailbox, the letter or package began its journey of organizational performance.[29] The outer appearance and path of the envelope as a migrating object could determine whether the work would reach its destination. After struggling with intercepted correspondence, Petasz began to machine-sew the edges of his

[28] Borowski argues that Gallery Foksal, so as not to arouse suspicion, feigned disinterest in politics while Piotrowski sees that gesture as a loss of rigor; Kemp-Welch reconciles these positions, claiming that there is a special power in "disinterest" to establish some autonomy during this specific historical period (*Antipolitics* 53).
[29] In *Perform or Else*, Jon McKenzie defines the practice of organizational performance, which reduces performance to whether a given task is successful or complete. The "or else" is the threat of failing at the task or facing some other unwanted consequence.

envelopes, which were made from heavier cardstock. Tót, on the other hand, took a train to Yugoslavia to post his letters in a mailbox there, hoping that would ensure a smoother postal journey. In these examples, the mail art work *performs* not merely as a cultural artifact but in the most practical organizational terms: the participant that even arrives at all *wins the race*. The Eastern European mail artists of the 1970s cheered for the snail race of their one-of-a-kind packages, which also performed independently, to be processed and ejected by the postal system, hopefully in the town and mailbox of their destination.

This type of performance is generally not theatrical, though it can employ elements of the theater of pretense in order to *pass*. Did the sewn envelopes *perform* well enough through a bureaucratic system of checkpoints to make it to their recipients? A significant number did, and that is why, in 1981, Petasz served as a mail art package performance coach for the letters of American artist Ginny Lloyd, who visited him and complained about mail delays. Petasz, accustomed to the process, helped Lloyd sort out precisely those pieces that he knew would be intercepted. This was an act of self-censorship; at the same time, Petasz ensured the envelopes' graceful performance through the labyrinths of bureaucracy. Petasz knew from experience which envelopes would fare better than others. He had likely internalized the "Ideological State Apparatus" way of looking after having lost so much mail.

The Polish censors[30] are partly the subject matter of one of the most curious artworks in the Pat Fish Mail Art Archive[31]—*Censor's Trinity* (Fig. 1.5). Petasz's 1980 response to Santa Barbara tattoo artist, mail artist, and collector Pat Fish's call for the *Fashion Plate* mail art exhibit in Santa Barbara is a notable work. Fashion is not a very common topic in Eastern

[30] Petasz had been visited many times by agents who, on occasion, blurred the official lines and shared a glass of vodka with him in a seemingly friendly manner in the hopes of extracting information.
[31] This Archive is discussed in the Introduction.

European mail art but one that Petasz has explored on several performative occasions, including his full-size mail art suit[32] made of fabric scraps. The productive tension between fashion and socialist culture runs through the twentieth century, making Petasz's engagement with the topic all the more curious. Seen as a bourgeois triviality of the West, at least officially, fashion in socialist societies underscored practicality and modesty rather than eccentricity or individualism (Bartlett 181). At first glance, Petasz's model is performing the ideal of modesty. She is outfitted in a simple white dress with black stripes and short puff sleeves.

Fashion was a practical concern for the historical avant-garde in Eastern Europe, whose interest in geometric patterns also included stripes. Russian artists like Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, and Alexander Rodchenko designed productivist clothing for theater performances and ordinary use in the 1920s, questioning the boundaries between high art and everyday design—boundaries that Petasz's work also probes. On the one hand, the use of fashion in *Censor's Trinity* downgrades the seriousness of the work's title to a category of everyday clothing design, carving out a space that is not necessarily burdened with intellectualism; on the other hand, it comments on gender and the violence of nonconsensual disrobing.

The challenge of gender distinctions from the productivist period made way for the myth of the expensive elegance of Stalin's Stakhanovites and for recommendations in the 1950s and '60s that women not wear trousers outside the home (Bartlett 68, 192). In 1953, in Poland, the popular *Swiat* magazine had a column titled "Tylko dlá kobiet" ("Only for

[32] The suit will be discussed in the context of performing the network in Chapter II.

women"), underscoring the return of femininity.[33] In the 1960s, the Polish salon Ewa already offered dresses that were expensive for most women (Bartlett 150). Thus, it is not surprising that Petasz's design is unmistakably feminine but also not luxurious, especially coupled with the connotation of *prison fashion* expressed in the horizontal stripes and the title *The Prisoner of Love*.

In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, central fashion institutions helped direct public taste while Western styles reentered the mainstream. Magazines encouraged a do-it-yourself approach by providing drawings and fabric recommendations. By 1975, East Germany and Poland were also producing jeans, an article of popular clothing Petasz decided not to use in his model. In 1980, Petasz's design was too reactionary for portraying an average young woman and is more reminiscent of a doll's dress a child might play with. Yet, Eastern European fashion was primarily a women's realm, whether on dolls or live models. It enacted and controlled the performance of femininity.

Petasz used the fashion context partially as a metaphorical façade to discuss the *dress layers* of censorship culture in Poland. The work is not just an investigation into communication but a rare and artfully created object, as I will explore below. Furthermore, there are sexist[34] undertones to be seen in the destruction of and burns on the doll's clothes, making it a politically complex work that protests limitations on artistic freedom through the exploitation of the female image.

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[33] Bartlett argues that "[b]ecause it did not challenge the traditional conventions of gender distinctions, the Soviet concept of femininity thus remained trapped in traditional practices" (192).

[34] According to Zsuzsa László, "The feminist revisiting of Eastern European art histories is complicated by the fact that whereas socialist societies ostensibly embraced women's emancipation and equality, latent sexism was present in both state and parallel culture" (17). This "parallel culture" is the neo-avantgarde to which mail art belongs.

To help undress the doll, a partially complicit viewer has to participate in the undressing performance. First, it is necessary to lift the vertical pieces of tape affixing the figure to the cardboard along the sides of the figure to separate the three layers of the dress. Each two-dimensional layer of the dress reveals more and more of the doll's pale pink paper skin. In the most stripped-down layer, the doll is not fully nude, but her private areas are exposed through an intentional design. By performing the action, the viewer has participated in the metaphorical invasion of privacy and sexualization of the paper doll, a cutout placed on larger black cardstock. A political statement on many levels, the doll conforms to the beauty stereotypes of Slavic folklore, with her hair in a bun and large pink circles on her cheeks.

Model #3, the topmost dress style, is titled *Censor's Trinity* (Fig. 1.5), which could also be read as the title of the entire work. The dress is transparent, with three small black circles, about the same size as the circles on her cheeks, covering the areas where the doll's breasts and genitalia should be. Her sexuality seems to have been performatively censored in an obvious way, which paradoxically emphasizes it. The "trinity" could refer to the three dots, the three layers of dress, or it could be a jab at the position of the state's almost *religious* power and pretense to higher moral authority. In this ambiguous artwork, the multiple outfits could be disguises, symbolizing the censors' duplicity and their performance of friendliness and familiarity to obtain information. According to Lütticken, for contemporary British and German artist Tino Sehgal, the striptease strives to increase immateriality as the "shedding of material ballast has become its very content" (190). There is less and less of the artwork the more it is uncovered. The performative uncovering can also be read as an antidote to the covering or covering up, the motion of censorship.

The doll's second layer of dress can be accessed by performing the task of lifting the tape on the sides. A curious viewer of the interactive work who has gotten this far in the performance has become a participant in the transgressive gesture. Model #2, *The Prisoner of Love* (Fig. 1.6), wears a striped prisoner's dress featuring an ominous prisoner's number. The prisoner's underdress is revealed through a heart-shaped burn in the dress. The doll's nipple is visible in another burn in the undergarment, which is under the dress. The double-layered burning gesture serves to reveal and seems to perform the opposite of what the black circles do, which is to obscure. Though they are opposite in nature, burning or covering may censor an image. The paper doll gazes back at the viewer during the undressing as if to say, *I can see what you are doing*, and this act seems to be performed by the doll itself, the viewer, and, in a sense, the artist, who have all now become accomplices. This collective performance of the undressing implicates all the participants in a complex gesture that melds the subversion of state rhetoric with sartorial design, along with sexual objectification and transgression.

Under Model #2 is Model #1, *Hot Cherry* (Fig. 1.7), the doll's sexualized *bothersome* iteration, wearing a long undergarment. All three spots covered by the black circles earlier are now burned out to reveal skin. On the one hand, Petasz's obsessive attention to the intimate areas of the doll's body may be an act of crude objectification. On the other hand, it could also be making a point that the act of redaction may make what is obscured even more apparent.

In deciding to view the doll, the viewer is asked to undo the hiddenness or covering, participate in symbolic violence, and further uncover the present violence. This participation enlists the viewer to participate in the performance. However, we do not see enough of the doll's body to be sure that, underneath, the doll is not androgynous. The doll might represent

femininity culturally, but it cannot define itself as a "she," so the mail art performance includes a gender performance, defined in part by the gender-specific violence directed at the doll's clothing. Dolls, which have gender only in the cultural imagination, are slates onto which expectations about beauty, gender expression, and body autonomy are projected. They can be descriptive of cultural norms but also prescriptive, which is why this doll raises ethical concerns about what kind of beauty or intimate relations protocol it dictates.

The doll is also a performance of interaction and complicity. The theatricality and the interactive aspects of the work categorize the doll as a work with a temporal dimension, completed through audience participation and through a process at a spatial and temporal remove from the artist. The complicity burdens the viewer with the ethical responsibility for their performance of the undressing. In its engagement with body politics and fashion, the work distances itself further from state politics.

4. Ghosts of Presence: a Mail Art Reenactment

Reenactment has been heavily theorized as an aspect of live performance in the past decade. Usually, the source for a reenactment is a performance itself—a doing or action that is not necessarily thespian in nature. Some reenactments[35] restage battles, for example. Is it possible to reenact an object, however? I will argue that it is the case when the source object is part of a performance *framework*. If a work's reenactment is possible, the work, as understood by the reenactor, must be a performance. The case study here is a series of intermedia and genre-bending works. Petasz reenacted others' mail art works as *ghosts*, drawing attention to their ephemerality and attempting to remedy it performatively.

[35] Civil War reenactments served as a case study for Rebecca Schneider's work in *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011).

In the artbook object series *Ghost of Your Masterpiece* (1978-79)[36], Petasz returned photo reproductions of mail art works to the original mail artist after having added a humorous flair. He would receive an original work in the mail from another artist and then copy it. Petasz magnified and inverted the images, often adding a message or commentary. He would return them to the artist who might have thought they would never see the work again. The artist would receive Petasz's work, or what he referred to as a "ghost," or a reenactment that did not repeat the original (that would have been impossible) but transformed it. The 79 booklets Petasz created were numbered, yet each recipient likely did not see any of the other 78 works. Luckily, several works are preserved in the Artpool archive.

The practice of manipulated reply-works is common in mail art, but in this case, Petasz is engaging on a more critical level with the short-lived mail art performance. He is asking the original artist to consider the impermanence of the disappearing mail artwork and the happy paradox of its performative conceptual return. Mail art objects are ephemera—made cheaply, unframed, and often lost or discarded from crowded archives. Yet, it is hard to say precisely where the mail art performance ends. It might be when the recipient interacts with the work; that is the most obvious way to understand it. The mail art performance might continue, however, through the archive and its various performative aspects. What is known is that the original work rarely returns to the artist who created it. To them, the work or its documentation is lost, one of millions of exchanges, not likely to be seen in a museum,

[36] The image can be found in Viktor Kotun's article cited in this chapter: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.journal.doc.art.pl/pdf22/art_and_documentation_22_gallery_kotun.pdf

either. The conceptual, performed return of the altered original work back to the original artist should be a surprise for them, a miraculous reappearance.

Unfortunately, not much is known about Petasz's *ghost* series, and there are just two copies from it housed in the British Library and Madrid Atelier Bonanova. The scarcity of the ghosts themselves prompts a reconsideration of the artwork, which disappears by degrees: first, as the object sent away, then as its performative *ghost* returning to the original sender, and, finally, as a lost or discarded artifact that has permeated the porous fabric of an archive. Cristina Baldacci argues that what is missing or lost "becomes a prophecy and a condition of [the artifact's] rebirth" (66). Once a mail art work has finished its postal journey, some of its cultural currency has been spent. It will not likely travel again or be *live* in the Network. Petasz is reactivating this lost aspect. The reenactment of the disappearing artwork increases its auratic potential and proves the point that mail art is a performance to begin with.

Petasz remedies the piece's ephemerality through its unexpected spectral appearance. The return of Bálint Szombathy's work back to him is not simply its reproduction or an empty multiple. The ghost is preserved in a booklet, a documentation of an unrepeatable event. It may have inspired nostalgia for the original event, reminding the creator of the time when he labored on it and what he hoped to communicate.

Yet, the dialogic prompt, "Do you recognize it? Yes!" performs a short, interactive exchange between the booklet and the original author. In this case, the booklet may be considered as performative documentation. The opening and closing of the booklet complete the performance of the ghost's surprising appearance. Not only is Szombathy hearing back from Petasz, but he is also hearing back from his own work, whose life has been extended

into its *afterlife* as a *ghost*. Szombathy may or may not have chosen to "recognize" his creation, which, moreover, is a photographic negative included in the traveling *exhibit* of Petasz's mailing. Yet, Petasz's linoleum stamp urges the recipient to answer, "Yes!" presuming a reunion sparked by the recognition. Apart from its absence, the ghost bears the mark of the scarcity or near-total absence of proper photocopy technology for Eastern European mail artists, thus heightening the quality of *ghost-ness* in the reenactment.

The *ghost* version is a reenactment of a work, which may or may not have been an original itself—many mail art works were sent out in multiples to the Network. With the *ghost*, Petasz is re-performing the originals as *originals* by re-enunciating them. Petasz's *originals* are, of course, not really originals anymore because they have been transformed through photo reproduction, commentary, and changing context. Many performance scholars, including Baldacci, agree that a reenactment cannot possess genuine authenticity because it is always different from the original. However, the new work becomes singular because of its *ghost-ness*, mainly because the reproduction often pictures only parts of the original. Such is the case with booklet 75/79 from the series, which manipulates Szombathy's *Postcard no. 2 1979*. Petasz's *ghost* copy-art reply serves as a reminder of the absence of Szombathy's postcard, presumed to be the "masterpiece," which is now photo-reproduced onto the inner page of a bi-fold booklet.

For the text, Petasz uses a lavender-colored linoleum stamp with his typical artistic font on the page facing the "masterpiece." The folio cover is stamped with an ellipse and reads "Petasz," while the spine is lined with a bright red band. Kotun's interpretation is that Petasz is "calling attention to the problem that if an artist posts a work that exists only in one

copy, he or she is likely not to ever see it again" (322). This is often the reality for many single-copy ephemera, and this was especially the case prior to the advent of digitalization.

It must be noted, however, that the copy-original dichotomy in mail art is not taken as seriously as in painting or proscenium-stage performance. For example, in 1977, Rehfeldt sent a serial self-portrait stamped with the words "Art-workers Unite" to artist Paulo Bruscky in Recife, Brazil (Gilbert, "Human" 156). "In a final gesture, Rehfeldt stamped 'Original' on the image most faded by the copying process, a reference to the rejection of unique works in mail art" (Gilbert, "Human" 156). Since the mail art network generally questions ideas about strict authorship and intellectual property (in the "NET" proposal, for example), Petasz might also be engaging this field of discourse in his photo reproductions. He could also be saying, "You've created your original, but—here, I can recreate it, too."

Because mail art is also a practice *in conversation*, its engagements and interpretations continue developing long after the original work has performed its journey from ideation to archive. The intermediate, conceptual, and performative works by artists in the Network tested the limits of communication within the boundaries of the postal envelope and were packed with meaning but sparse in terms of content. Mail art activity showed less concern for preserving artifacts as objects and paid greater attention to a collective and ritual performance of context-specific daily tasks, reenactments, and interactive assemblages. With the awareness that other artists were doing the same thing, each artist sent envois widely through the Network, passing along not only their individual message but the performance of communication itself—an encouragement to others to respond or to pass the impulse forward. This fervent and self-generating activity increased continually during the 1970s and '80s until it began to peter out in the '90s. It is especially worth exploring what kept

interactive rituals moving forward for several decades. This phenomenon of the Network will be explored in Chapter II.

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II. What is the Role of the Network?

For the project entitled *THE INTELLECTUAL BENEFITS OF ART* (1980) (Fig. 2.1), Paweł Petasz asked participants to send him textile pieces measuring 16x23.5 cm, which he then sewed into a suit for himself. A photograph taken in Amsterdam of Petasz wearing the suit was used for the cover of a 1996 catalog for the Eastern European mail art exhibition at the Staatliches Museum Schwerin in Germany. This image of Petasz in the suit assembled from the scraps has become an iconic representation of collaboration in the Network and documents what constitutes a performance of belonging in a network. Cristina Freire argues that for Eastern Europe and Latin America, "the opening of the Mail Art Network, by its inherent capacity of trickling through blockades, was inversely proportional to the political and ideological shutdown lived in these countries" ("Alternative" 255). This powerful "trickling through" was possible due to coordinated artist activity between numerous points in the Network and through collective publishing and authorship initiatives that developed in the decentralized rhizomatic field of the Network.[37]

In this chapter, focusing on the period from 1971 until 1987, I will address how mail art is performance as a form of communication in a network. I will explore two modes of relationships between the Network and the individual artist and provide examples of artworks whose concept was tied to their existence in a network. The first mode is the act of dispersing representations of the individual into the Network, and the second is the collection of bits of the Network to be united via the individual. This multi-directional relationship between the

[37] Czirak states, "It was precisely the development of underground networks in the state socialist countries that demonstrated that no public sphere can be closed in a totalitarian way, and that no communication system can be utterly regulated" ("Interview").

one and the collective is essential for understanding mail art as an action and as a networked ritual. Mail artists in Eastern Europe often created works utterly inseparable from the Network by either fusing materials gathered from numerous participants or by dispersing parts of an artwork to physically and politically distant corners of the Network. Thus, they virtually connected points that were not connected before. While not all works that circulated in the Network were designed *for* it, the ones that in fact were help to understand the *Zeitgeist* behind the larger portion of mail art activities and the importance of interacting in a community.

1. What is a Network?

Generally, a network is understood to be a web of nodes connected by communication pathways. Networks may be analog or digital. The mail art network is an analog collection of points positioned at participants' respective addresses and connected by (mostly state) postal routes. There are several differences between the meaning of the Network in Eastern Europe and the former West (Western Europe and North America). First, in the Eastern Bloc, the Network served as a nonofficial society for geopolitically isolated artists whose work was often not regarded as *art* by state art institutions. In the West, the practice of mail art upheld a network of artists sharing noncapitalist values of art production and circulation that attempted to evade the hegemony of the art market.

H.R. Fricker defined what being part of this network activity and Zeitgeist meant. He argued that "the impressive-sounding title of 'networker'" required "[r]ole flexibility" most of all, which meant being "not only an 'artist' but a sender and receiver, an organizer of shows, meetings, congresses, and a participant in his colleagues' projects" (Fricker 175). Despite its criticism and mockery of institutions, the Network also had its institutional

aspects. It performed institutionality but functioned in more flexible ways. For example, the Network held mock contests, organized Congresses, and set up nonofficial exhibitions despite the problematic aspect of having exhibitions featuring a practice that does not generally uphold or take the status of art objects very seriously. Fricker describes "the internationally decentralized Mail Art Congress in 1986" as having over eighty venues, with groups ranging from five to fifty participants (179). At first, networkers had hoped to gather in Switzerland but decided against excluding those who couldn't travel there (for example, individuals from Eastern Europe). The new "basic motto" of the decentralized gathering was: "A congress will take place everywhere where two or more networkers meet in 1986" (Fricker 179). This flexible definition allowed artists in various circumstances internationally to be included in the congress, which was not a place but an idea for collaboration, and available for all to participate. Thus, the congress-organizing institution of mail art was more symbolic and open-ended than a hierarchical bureaucracy.

One of the first significant efforts that helped develop the mail art network in Eastern Europe was Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostołowski's 1971 manifesto, "NET," which describes ideas of free exchange that are reminiscent of the principles of the Internet.[38] At the end of the previous year and an entire decade before the wave of the Solidarity movement of the 1980s, Poland had experienced rising food prices and the tumultuous Gdańsk strikes, which had united Lenin shipyard workers to press for the establishment of independent trade unions. Dozens had been killed when the demonstrations were suppressed by Władysław

[38] Mail art was developing at the same time as the Internet and other digital communications. While mail art has been compared to an analog version of the Internet, the two are not exactly similar in terms of structure or power distribution. The mail art network was more exclusive than the Internet because it required possession of an address list. On the other hand, the materials it required for participation were a lot simpler: a piece of paper, a cheap stamp, and proximity to a postal mailbox.

Gomułka, who was shortly replaced by Edward Gierek, a supposedly more pro-labor candidate. At a time when issues of collectivity and independence were at stake in Poland, the "NET" proposition appeared. The manifesto featured the laconic title in large blue capital letters, a list of nine unnumbered ideas, and the authors' signatures at the bottom. Even though a similar but much less concrete idea was expressed by Robert Filliou's *Eternal Network* concept, the Polish artists mailed their statement to hundreds of recipients, which jump-started mail art in a redefined context for Eastern Europe. The first point states, "[A] NET is open and uncommercial." The idea is that anyone from any "point" may participate in an exchange of media and materials. It is a vision of the arts without costs, profits, or "any coordination." Kozłowski and Kostołowski even gave up ideas of copyright or exclusive authorship regarding their proposition: "the idea of NET is not new and in this moment it stops to be [sic] an authorized idea…NET can be developed and copied." The values expressed in this manifesto reflect the spirit of collectivity and decentralization that is so characteristic of the mail art movement. Even the sending out of this proposition was itself a performance as network ritual, to be followed by many other such performances.

Another model for the art network was presented in German artist Klaus Groh's pivotal book of new European art, *Aktuelle Kunst* (1972). Hungarian artist Tibor Gáyor's electric circuit map of Europe was titled *Das bin ich!* and points to a spot between Austria and Hungary where the artist situated himself (159). Arrows on the circuit map point in various directions, signifying the energetic flow between different countries. Gáyor's network is full of activity despite flowing through stationary territories marked by the countries' symbols. The artist's position on the map seems to constitute a movement between two countries, destabilizing the seemingly rigid circuit borders.

2. Robert Filliou's *Eternal Network*

Mail art was not the first movement to popularize the concept of art in a network. Mail art's direct predecessor, Fluxus, had branches in both the East and the West and was already steeped in the notion of forging connections outside formal institutions. One of the most essential theorizations of networked art was the concept of the Eternal Network, invented by the French artist Robert Filliou prior to the 1970s. While its notions of the Network and its function for Eastern Europe and the West might differ, Filliou is one of the earliest network theorizers and is widely acknowledged by mail artists for his ideas, which he began lecturing about in the late 1950s at Columbia University. Unlike many other artists of the 1960s who were also inspired by Zen Buddhist ideas of nonduality, Filliou not only made art according to nonbinary principles but also lived them and died with them, passing away at a meditation retreat at Les Eyzies in 1987. The merging of art and life, as practiced by the Dada movement, was amplified through Filliou's philosophy and became essential to mail artists in Eastern Europe and internationally.

The term "Eternal Network" predated and was not invented with *mail art* in mind. Fluxus and other groups employed it before the 1970s. The word "network" only appears in the English translation of the term. The original phrase "fête éternelle," which more accurately translates to "eternal party," dates from 1963 when Robert Filliou coined it to include the inanimate as well as living organisms in a flow of interwoven relationships. According to Michael Crane, Filliou interpreted it as "the lasting interconnection of spiritual events, whether animal, vegetable, mineral or thought energy" (98). Ken Friedman holds that Filliou did not believe one could belong to the avant-garde or rear guard because the

immense knowledge of humanity could never be contained within one person; the fact that it was supported by many different minds rendered the *avant* and *rear* positions meaningless ("Foreword" xvi). This view places human knowledge in an interconnected network beyond the specific domain of art practice and includes all of human experience. Thus, the realms of Fluxus activity or mail art are just some of the possible contexts to which "fête éternelle" could be applied. Mail art also distances itself from rigid distinctions between avant-garde and traditional art. Filliou's philosophy was suited to mail art and was adopted by its practitioners precisely because mail art was, similarly, less interested in the differentiation of genres and styles.

Filliou's vision was not a specific project but a shift in consciousness. Friedman argued that networked art was part of a "different paradigm" and that "the experimental and radical nature of artists working in the context of the Eternal Network rendered [them] invisible to the art-world" ("Foreword" xv). This relative freedom from the art world meant networkers could carry out their activities near or around it and still not have to submit to its rules, individualism, or institutional hierarchies. Friedman further states that "Filliou's notion of the Eternal Network was not a call to action, but something between a metaphor and a description of… an emerging social reality… the purpose of art was to make life more important than art" ("Wealth" 414). Filliou's network was not a conceptual art mechanism, nor did it outline an art movement or specific practices. In a Dada-like spirit, it was meant to question the autonomy of art and shine the light back on life itself, which had retreated in favor of the vast establishment of art institutions. By performing ordinary activities like folding and mailing a letter or scavenging their kitchens or newspaper stacks for art

materials, mail artists in Eastern Europe and elsewhere practiced everyday existence as an aesthetic experience, a perspective attuned to Filliou's vision.

Friedman further stresses the importance of collaboration for Filliou's "radical equality": "the Eternal Network placed its stress on dialogue, even on the multilog, the process of group research and the community of discourse" ("Foreword" xvi). Some excellent examples of multilog are the mail art suit by Petasz and assembling magazines like *Commonpress,* which had a different editor for each issue. If Filliou's new emerging reality sounded rather esoteric, it was movements like Fluxus and mail art that concretized its principles into specific communal rituals like performances, chain letters, and catalogs of purposefully useless oddities. The 1960s and '70s upheld the importance of process in Western art, which meant that performing was the actual aesthetic site. Chuck Welch argues that "the process aesthetics of networking implies the action of dualistic forces: forward and reverse, turning within and without, creation and destruction, re-organization and recreation, of attachment and non-attachment, of taking and giving" ("Introduction" xix). While not all art is produced this way, making art in a network, an amalgamation of diverse intentions and aesthetic directions, can mean endlessly forming and reorganizing relationships. The Network aesthetics of Filliou's Eternal Network are in perpetual flux as long as a few artists are active and communicating somewhere.

It is uncertain how aware the artists in this chapter were of Filliou's theory. Still, the term "Eternal Network" should have been quite familiar to anyone who participated in the Network consistently for a number of years. According to Chuck Welch, the term was "a traditional expression often used in the vast, pluralistic international mail art world" ("Introduction" xviii). In addition, when mentioning the collaboration between Ray Johnson

and the Japanese Gutai Group, John Held Jr. stated that "they were guided by the concept of an Eternal Network propagated by Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, in which continuous communication between artists occurred despite limitations imposed on them by external forces" ("Mail"). Ray Johnson communicated with György Galántai, so this concept must have also been propagated in Eastern Europe. Especially after the 1974 edition of Canadian group Image Bank's *FILE* magazine, Filliou's "expanded concept of an Eternal Network" was given a large audience (Held, "Networking" 21). Whether or not this magazine reached artists like Petasz, the mail art network's conversation could not have easily stayed on one side of the Iron Curtain.

Juxtaposed against the "well-made" and the "badly made," Filliou's concept of the "not made"[39] or the "incomplete" or "bricolaged" work exploded the duality of "good" and "bad" art (Fredrickson 30). Filliou considered all works incomplete, in order to go beyond judgment, commercialism, and, inspired by Buddhism, "beyond the either/or of everyday thinking… and… beyond duality" (Fredrickson 47). It is this transcendence of categories that mail art's performance inherited. Since mail art also had little regard for concepts like "good" or "bad," it could be said that mail art works and activities are also "not made," in Filliou's terms. The disadvantage, or perhaps advantage, is that the critics and the art market, unsure what to do with mail art, have mostly avoided the genre. Mail art has remained mainly in Filliou's[40] "utopian Poetic Economy," a noncommercial space of exchange without judgment

[39] Furthermore, Filliou's "Principle of Equivalence" implied that these three categories were all the same in the end. He would stamp it over his conceptual *Portraits Not-Made*, "an ironic nod to bureaucratic authorization" (Fredrickson 35). Frederickson describes the importance of this aesthetic: "The wild card is the not made. In order for the work to be well or badly made, it must be completed. Not made evades all these categories" (35). He continues, "[I]t refuses, even, through lacking finiteness, to participate… still coming into being, in the act of being made (or not made). If no work achieves completion, then well and badly made remain merely concepts that are never located in objects" (Fredrickson 35).

[40] Filliou is an artist and philosopher who has been largely overlooked by scholars as well (Fredrickson 30).

where art is "dialogue" (Fredrickson 50). Nevertheless, mail artists have continually credited him, naming entire works and an anthology of essays after his concept of the "Eternal Network." Filliou rejected the possibility of completion and described the work as lingering in an open-ended state. The idea of the work, which continues and is ever in process, "a thing still coming into being," is consistent with the interpretation of mail art as a *doing*, as a performance (Fredrickson 35).

3. The Rhizome

The nonhierarchical and open-ended nature of the mail art network has been compared to the structure of a rhizome, a botanical and philosophical concept. The notion of the *rhizome*, inspired by the functioning of certain plant roots, is a continuous decentralized structure that may experience growth from any point. Berswordt-Wallrabe argues that the mail art network started locally in one place and then another until it became a global phenomenon. Yet, these initial sites of germination did not necessarily hold. She notes the fashion in which the mail art network grew:

> Communication began in a small circle of people—locally, and via analog messages. These circles widened according to the principle of the rhizome… The unrestricted communication meant that networks could grow endlessly in different directions and connect to each other at different points—which was also rhizomatic. (Berswordt-Wallrabe 129)

The idea of "connecting at different points" is vital to mail art because the practice directly links the margins of the art world to each other without the need for the center to mediate the exchange. Few institutions were involved in distribution or network-building except the post office and some student clubs. The mailboxes of certain well-connected artists, like Robert

Rehfeldt in East Germany or Ryosuke Cohen in Japan, served as entry points into the Network. All one needed was to obtain their address to connect with dozens of other participants, groups, and projects.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari apply the rhizome to the idea of the book and psychoanalysis, but the concept is similar if applied to mail art: "the principal root has aborted, or its tip has been destroyed; an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots grafts onto it and undergoes a flourishing development" (5). In this analogy, the growing secondary network of finer roots is the mail art network, originating from sources that are no longer its main foundation. The mail art field has a plethora of beginnings: Dada, Robert Filliou, Fluxus, Ray Johnson, and Kozłowski and Kostołowski. Some of them, like Dada, were already historical when the mail art networking fever began. "The rhizome is anti-genealogy," Deleuze and Guattari claim (11). While mail art has a history of influences, it is not a hierarchically staggered family tree but an ongoing, developing process of communal ritualized performance. Mail art participants have a relatively same level of importance—only relatively, however. The Network claims to be egalitarian, yet from a contemporary intersectional viewpoint, it reflects the exact inequalities and holds similar stereotypes that Eastern European societies had during the 1970s and '80s. For example, the low participation of women artists is evident in the examination of archives. Furthermore, some more famous mail artists did develop international reputations while others did not. With this relative equalizing, mail art takes on the rhizome's deterritorialization. The origins of a practice no longer govern its spread in a network, which can expand from any corner. The availability of long-distance postal exchange shortens geopolitical distances. A fitting example of rhizomatic decentralization is the long-running assembling project of the

magazine *Commonpress*, which will be discussed in Chapter IV. A plethora of different artists from different continents took turns editing the issues of *Commonpress*, which created a diverse aesthetic and decentralized circulation. While Paweł Petasz was the project's organizer and helped coordinate it, his involvement lessened over the years, and his aesthetic overseeing new issues was minimal.

Besides demonstrating an awareness of the Network, the works of mail artists also made statements about the structure of the Network itself. In 1986, the Romanian artist Iosif Király received a postcard shaped like a rhizome root from his Japanese correspondent Shozo Shimamoto, famous for co-founding the Gutai group with Jiro Yoshihara in 1954. Király and Shimamoto's correspondence over such a great distance was so slow at times that Király created his record of sent and received mail to track how long mailing took and whether some of the materials disappeared. His two-column log is bureaucratic, even self-consciously so, performatively displaying the checks and balances in his artistic exchange with Shimamoto.

Shimamoto's cardboard-cutout rhizome illustrates the principles of anti-genealogy and self-reflexivity, commenting on networked art practice. The postcard's network of roots has a beginning point but is not subsumed by any hierarchical structure.[41] The roots seem to have grown both vertically and horizontally and, in the process, fused at various crossing points. The title is *RHIZOME* (1986), spelled in the Latin alphabet and Japanese. The

[41] The relationship between mail art and bureaucracy is a complex interplay of borrowing, appropriating, and changing contexts. Ironically, on Shimamoto's postcard, it can be seen how the post office conventions have had to comply with the shape of the object. First, Shimamoto has written his own and Király's addresses by following the meandering root segments. Second, the postmark stamp with the date has been strategically placed by the postal workers at an intersection of the roots where there is enough space to fit it.

partially obscured text states that "networking truly means art itself"[42] (Shimamoto). As Röder argues, "[T]he artist-genius had been replaced by the net-worker whose individual achievement alongside others helped in producing the joint work" (249). Shimamoto's postcard to Romania performed the equivalent of networking and engaging with art by sending a miniature metaphorical illustration of the Network's principles. Even the possibility of artists in Romania and Japan connecting in the second half of the 1980s speaks to the resilience of mail art and its independence from official institutions. Király's detailed record-keeping confirms the precarious line of communication between the two artists and performs its own nonofficial institutional and archival presence.

In the late 1980s, Romania was politically different from the rest of the Bloc. Ceausescu did not apply *perestroika* and *glasnost* policies, and artists like Király staged performances mostly in private residences and away from city centers. Due to a significant lack of funds and materials for nonofficial art in 1980s Romania, some artists focused on the body itself as a cheaper alternative to art materials. The radical genre of body art was all the more pertinent in the time of violence during Ceausescu's regime. Király's response to this environment in 1983 was to perform "*Notes in the Fields*… a politically incendiary action which entailed building a tower of Babel out of party newspapers," and in 1987, along with others, he staged a work for the camera, which explored "withdrawal into private universes" (Fowkes and Fowkes 112). This movement from taking bold actions to demonstrating the choice not to engage directly with the political reality in Romania points to a likely disillusionment with art's role as a significant tool of social protest.

[42] A meandering sentence follows the direction of the roots, but some parts of it are obscured by the cut-outs in between. It reads, "I believe the networking truly means art itself. it's [sic] no more than worth… me to call a composition when I made 'MY OWN WORK'" (Shimamoto, *RHIZOME*, 1986).

Compared to public performance, mail art is a more private form of artistic expression because, despite the fact that it exists in a network, it most often addresses one person. Understandably, Király's limitations of artistic engagement in his social environment caused him to maintain a sustained connection through the mail with artists who were very far away, such as Shimamoto. However, mail art in Romania in the 1980s had its public moments. The artists Dan Mihălțianu, Andrei Oișteanu, and Mircea Florian organized a traveling mail art exhibit, *Arta Poștală/ Mail Art*, which they managed to lay out in 1986 in Cluj, with the help of members of the group Atelier 35. The Cluj exhibit, which took place in the display windows of the university's library, was eventually forced to close and go to another city; however, the residents of Cluj were able to have an encounter with the works and, according to Alexandru Păsat, respond with a variety of emotions, such as "curiosity, interest, surprise, disappointment, but also a kind of indignation and even scorn" (30). Păsat argues that the point was "to show the world that an alternative means of communication existed and manifested itself—provocatively, nonetheless—in the street, in full view of everyone" (30). While "the street" was not the usual place for mail art, mail art does lend itself well to that space because of its immediacy and lack of art-world pomposity. The "full view" aspect was the unlikely element here, partly because of Romanian politics and partly because exhibiting mail art has often been questioned by its participants.

One year after the Cluj exhibit and after he received the rhizome postcard from Shimamoto, Király continued to explore the role of the camera and created the photographic self-portraits *Sketches for a Mail Art Object* (1987) and *Mail Art Objects* (1987), further illustrating the performative quality of networked art. Both pairs of photographs are blurred with motion and feature the artist at work. Lines of white paint and etchings on the surface

further stress the sense of hectic activity. Text fragments (possibly Japanese and likely pointing to Shimamoto) and a date rubber stamp are collaged onto *Mail Art Objects.* The works undermine the idea of a mail art object since no object is portrayed at all unless the artist himself is the object, pictured holding his head with both hands or sketching. The artist's own body as the content of a package (as mentioned in Chapter I) had already been explored in the 1982 collective performance *Contact. TRANS-IDEEA,* where Király and Konstantin Flondor attempted to mail themselves abroad. According to Röder, "The Network in Eastern Europe became part of an intellectual and artistic survival strategy for many of the participants" (*Topologie* 248). Chaotic and dark, Király's photographs portray the artist as being engulfed or looking up in a manic state, never quite still. Mail art can be a serious, even existential, high-stakes activity for isolated artists for whom the networked ritual equals an artistic lifeline.

4. The *Dispersed* Self-Portrait

Not everyone saw mail art as an artistically serious practice. Paweł Petasz recounts, "Mail art was never respected by the official artists and art critics of Poland. The number of mail artists were [sic] always small, fewer than twenty, and primarily included H. Bzdok, T. Schulz, A. Dudek-Durer, R. Rupocinski, A. Dudek, A. Kirko, W. Ropiecki, and P. Rogalski" ("Mail" 92). Included among the artists whose work can be widely found in international archives from the same decade is also Andrzej Partum, whose Biuro Poezji/Bureau de la Poesie was a Polish center for nonofficial art in the 1970s, situated in the attic of Hotel Polonia in Warsaw. "Partum's drab walls were covered with mailed poems and artistic propositions from all over the world… As neither a qualified artist nor member of the Union, he lived precariously" while mailing manifestos with a confident bureaucratic tone (Kemp-

Welch 285-86). Andrzej Partum's small quarters-turned-gallery and Ewa Partum's Galeria Adres in Łódź were among the few spaces that provided spaces for experimental art. Petasz, who only joined the mail art movement in 1975, has explained that mail art's lack of official popularity in Poland was a linguistic issue: "The Polish language doesn't tolerate common words for uncommon activities. Mail is too simple, Art isn't. In a more complicated, serious tone, a producer would call it something better: "urzadzenie magnetofonowe" (a magnetofon device). 'Mail art?' This doesn't sound serious at all!" ("Mail" 93). Though Petasz found mail art serious enough to become one of Europe's most productive mail artists, he also approached it with a degree of humor and lack of dogmatism, which caused him to be widely appreciated in the Network.

An artist from the small city of Elbląg, Petasz initiated various projects and mail art works that were conceptually designed with the idea of the Network in mind and would not have been able to exist without it. *SELFPORTRAIT* (1979), *THE INTELLECTUAL BENEFITS OF ART* (1980), *TRANSPARENT SELFPORTRAIT* (1981), and the assembling magazine *Commonpress* (1977-1981) are activities that perform networked communication and belonging. Furthermore, they rely on trust in other participants' roles in the execution of artworks and publications whose duration is essential to their purpose. These three projects are examples of performances that could continue indefinitely, inviting participation from others and sustaining active network rituals.

In 1979, a year infamous for its "winter of the century" in Poland, Petasz sent a translucent self-portrait to Pat Fish in Santa Barbara, California (Fig. 2.2). The work was numbered "055" and featured a linoleum stamp with the text "PAWEL[43] PETASZ I – 1/100

[43] The Polish letter "ł" would usually be used for a name like "Paweł Petasz"; however, the international character of mail art correspondence caused Petasz and other participants and scholars who discuss his work to

OF SELFPORTRAIT. WHOLE SELFPORTRAIT IS TO BE SEEN WHEN ONE LOOKS THROUGH ALL 100 PAGES HELD TOGETHER AGAINST STRONG LIGHT." The artist used a black ballpoint pen to outline fragmentary features of his likeness, including partial hair, beard, and glasses frames. It is unclear who the other ninety-nine recipients[44] of this series are.

For practical or artistic reasons, artists sometimes had to mail messages in multiple parts.[45] "Multiple fragments of messages and objects were placed by mail artists into envelopes mailed from different locations" (Welch, "United"). In this case, however, Petasz mailed the self-portrait fragments for artistic and networking reasons. He was creating a *dispersed* conceptual artwork that had the potential to bring networkers together by invoking a sense of belonging. After receiving a piece of the self-portrait puzzle, the apparent impulse would have been to think about what the other pieces might look like if they were different and whose hands they could be in. Only if networkers gathered their self-portrait layers together would the full image emerge. Otherwise, the complete likeness of the artist would remain a mystery. The likelihood of one hundred mail artists coordinating such a venture was very low, but this potential was not the main point of the self-portrait. While these might not have been the artist's intentions, the fantasy of bringing all the pieces together would create an end to the project. Mail art is sometimes a practice of entropic dispersion, a rhizomatic growth in many different and unexpected directions. The project does not have to (and could

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use the more internationally-familiar versions of "l." Whenever the name appears in a quote in this chapter, the original spelling in the quote has been preserved.

[44] One self-portrait has been listed as an item for sale on Amazon, though it features no images and is out of stock. While this commercial listing could be the joke of a mail artist aware of the practice's noncommercial mission, it also affirms the continuing life of the work in the space of networks—in this case, digital. Moreover, the label *out of stock* suggests that the work is sold out, meaning that one was supposedly sold and that others could resurface in the future and potentially be available for sale.

[45] In 1970 London, this practice was taken to an extreme by the Mexican artist Felipe Ehrenberg, who successfully mailed an erotic image made up of two hundred postcards.

not possibly) return to its original condition; thus, it is entropic. Yet, all that is needed for a new connection to form is for two or more pieces to be layered under intense light. The staging of the work against the light that the receiver or viewer carries out is also part of the performance. If two artists who had received Petasz's portrait layers managed to meet, the entropic quality of the work would be partly diminished. Bringing the scattered pieces back would, in some way, equate to a temporal reversal of their dispersion.

In a booklet, Petasz also created another transparent self-portrait in 1981, TRANSPARENT SELFPORTRAIT. This project is listed as existing in fifteen copies that used stamping and offset printing techniques. Brogowski describes the significance of performing actions when viewing the self-portrait:

> [A] brochure of about twenty pages, includes a protocol, printed on the cover, which asks the reader to tear off three pages (the content of which consists of religious symbols), then to look at the book against the light to discover the portrait of the artist. Realization of the piece is based on the partial destruction of the book, which does not come without any problems or questioning the meaning of the gesture…. [In *Ten Theses*, Petasz] claims in particular that in an ideal situation art can do without common spectators, since experiencing art is more interesting and richer when one is a spectator and at the same time an artist. (Brogowski 304)

The reader of the self-portrait booklet becomes part of the performance by also taking part in the destruction of the object's intactness. It is as if the inviolable crafted object stands in the way of the performance of mail art. Looking against the light is also a different kind of *looking*, distinct from *reading* under the light. Completing the artwork as a participant, the so-called spectator becomes an artist and co-authors the Network-context performance.

Another notable aspect of these transparent self-portraits that are dispersed across the Network is that they fall under the genre of self-portraits. Petasz could have chosen any other subject for the series, but in the end, he chose himself. Using the self as a subject begs the question of the link between mail art and the body, a connection that is not always obvious but reveals essential aspects of the practice. The self-portrait, as a representation of the sender's likeness, performs the here-ness and there-ness of their body.

Commenting on the work of South American mail artists, Zanna Gilbert discusses "indexes of the body" or "the ephemeral, but material creations of artists [that] approximate the personal despite the inherent absence of the artists' body implied by mail art" (175). In Gilbert's research, these proxies are not necessarily self-portraits but fingerprints or photographs of the Brazilian artist Paulo Bruscky—in essence, other traces or representations of the body, but the logic is the same. The portrait or photograph, however unreliable and non-living, becomes a way of transporting a physical aspect of the artist. Gilbert argues that "by bearing an indexical relationship with the artist, the artwork functions as a proxy for the artist, extending their presence in time and space" and "invert[ing] mail art's disembodied character" (175, 15). This indexical relationship underscores both the performance of the artist's presence through the mail art artifact and their de-facto absence once they are removed from the proximity of the work as it travels around the globe.

The translucent layers of paper, each painted with fragments of the artist's face in Petasz's self-portrait, intensify the effect of the artist's degrees of presence. If the self-portrait transparencies are layered one by one with the help of network participants, the face begins to appear. Through his slowly appearing portrait, the artist's presence is established gradually. If the layers are separated, the likeness disappears. This uncertainty about whether

the body is indeed there or not performs the tension of an embodiment/disembodiment dichotomy. The envelope cannot carry the body of Petasz, but it carries its marks and traces across great distances and long time intervals. Looking at the self-portrait is akin to looking at the light of a possibly dead star—the light shows what Petasz looked like a while ago, someplace far away, but it feels close because of its immediacy. Receiving news or a body's likeness via mail already involves a temporal displacement. By the time the self-portrait is received by another participant, it is impossible to say what has become of Petasz or whether he still has the same haircut or facial expression.

Furthermore, the body in the Network performs its multiplicity. The image could be in a hundred different places at once, performing an act of multiplication, a miniature mass-media experience for those who are able to take part as simultaneously as the medium of mail could allow. The main difference between the network of mass media and the Network of mail art, however, is the reciprocity, without which a different power dynamic is established. Gilbert clarifies this point by applying Jean Baudrillard's ideas to the work of Argentine artist Edgardo Antonio Vigo, but the same case could be argued regarding artists in Eastern Europe:

> Baudrillard is clear that without the possibility of response, any media must be considered despotic… In contrast, mail art, with its system of participatory exchange —however limited—was valid for Vigo because reciprocity is in-built to the network's structure. For Vigo, broadcast mass media is "despotic" and, through lack of dialogue, it converts human beings into "islands," whereas a "narrowcast" mail art is communicative, participatory and egalitarian. (218)

The "narrowcast" scope of mail art allows for audience response, activating an ongoing reciprocity. The multiplied body is not forced upon the recipient. Instead, it performs a visitation, stressing the artist's transferred presence through the materiality of the work itself, which has been hand-stamped, numbered, and individually addressed. Seeing a piece of Petasz's self-portrait against strong light might be a shared experience among many artists in different countries and thus a networked performance, though this does not take away from the personal touch of the act of communication.

In fact, Petasz's project as well as most other mail art projects in Eastern Europe, even those that incorporate multiples, do not distribute identical works. Complete identicality in the mail art network is an impossibility due to the unique physical journey of each envelope and the impossibility of completely repeating a performance. This aspect parallels *samizdat*—self-published nonofficial dissident works in the Eastern Bloc whose copies often differed due to being hand-made, retyped, or assembled from whatever heterogeneous materials there were available. Their makeshift quality included blurry or wrinkled pages, sometimes carbon-copied or even hand-written. Each copy was passed around secretly and went through the hands of many readers, incurring marks and scuffs that distinguished this kind of publication from officially printed books and pamphlets. Yet, there is a difference between the distribution of copy art or original hand-written multiples and the *dispersed* self-portrait. The former types of works are nearly identical, if not in their print or handwritten quality, but in their content. The portrait is more easily compared to a collection of puzzle pieces that produce a whole if assembled correctly. The whole may never be assembled, but its theoretical possibility is the ongoing performance of networked connection and entanglement.

5. The Network Suit

Petasz continually explored this entanglement and performed it by physically and conceptually intermixing materials from participants in the Network. For the conceptual costumier Paweł Petasz, this interest in fashion included dressing a paper doll. In 1980, as mentioned above, he dressed himself in a three-piece suit and dress shirt made of unique fabric scraps sent to him by eighty-four artists worldwide, including Robert Rehfeldt, Takako Saito, Paulo Bruscky, and Pat Fish. The Network suit is a unique and complex project, which is not a very good *visual* representation of the average mail art work in Eastern Europe. Yet, *THE INTELLECTUAL BENEFITS OF ART* performed the connection of Petasz's body to the Network by fitting one to the other. On the one hand, the project's title reflects the conceptual aspect of the composition, and on the other, the title ironizes the idea of benefitting from art, whether intellectually or practically, as the result of the project is a colorful outfit with few applications outside its network context.

The project's title could be seen as a question posed to the participants, with their fabric pieces serving to respond to the phrase. In his invitation to mail artists, Petasz wrote: "You are invited to submit one or more art pieces realized on cloth… suitable for sewing and wearing. The pieces should relate to the theme: 'Intellectual Benefits of Art.'" The deadline was August 10, 1980, the same year the non-communist Solidarity trade union was established in Poland. Due to strikes, shortages in goods were common, and rationing took place. The idea of communally sourcing the scraps for a suit could be seen as a metaphor for the socio-economic conditions. In addition, sewing clothing from scratch was a necessity more frequently encountered by Eastern Bloc artists than it was, for example, by Western artists like Petasz's correspondent, Californian Pat Fish.

This mail art call was also humorously framed as a competition, a concept generally at odds with the nonhierarchical mission of mail art. The invitation further claimed, “Pawel Petasz I, as supreme judge, will examine the contributions against these essential requirements… One hundred dollars are to be distributed amongst participants” (*Intellectual*, 1980). As the project's originator, Petasz performed the critical role of the so-called “judge,” blurring the line between artist and critic and subverting the dynamics of the competitive art market or state competition.

Once the project was complete, the announcement of the prizes also performed an exaggerated pomposity: “THE SUPREME JURY DECIDED TO AWARD THE FOLLOWING PRIZES” (Petasz, “Intellectual”). This “supreme jury” was simply a jury of one—Petasz himself, who performed the methods of institutional bureaucracy, which his mail artwork borrowed both for humor and to solidify itself as representing an alternative, albeit fluid, institution. Ironically, the winners were all Polish artists. Petasz wrote, “1. First Prize: $25,-- : Jaroslaw Baklazec, because he is a friend of the Jury and a good fellow-citizen” (“Intellectual”). The other three winners were Wiesław Osewski, Piotr Rypson, and Andrzej Wielgosz. The reasoning for the conferral of their prizes was the same as for the winner of the top prize; only the word order of the phrasing changed. Awarding accolades to an artist just for being a “good fellow-citizen” jokingly borrows the language of state rhetoric. The nominal prize amounts and the unabashed favoritism signaled that this was a playful simulation of a contest and was not taken very seriously. However, the performative nature of the contest’s overt nepotism resulted from a purposeful act to satirize the idea of contests in general. In the decentralized and supposedly nonhierarchical landscape of the mail art network, the idea of a contest was often perceived as paradoxical unless it was

performed for pure amusement or as commentary on the local or global art world. In this case, the repeated mention of "good fellow-citizen" as justification for winning a prize indicated that Petasz's contest satirized art institutions in Eastern Europe rather than the West, with Petasz perhaps indicting corruption or parodying sham elections.

Due to difficulties receiving mail, some pieces didn't make it in time before the August 10 deadline. Petasz wrote on a postcard back to Pat Fish (Fig. 2.3): "Many thanks for the contribution. They liked it so much at the post office that they needed 2 months to deliver it" (Petasz*,* Postcard). Petasz here is aware that the postcard might also be read by the postal worker, who is not excluded from the audience in this case. Pat Fish noted in the archive some details about why her own contribution must have stood out: "I contributed a square of shantung silk, the special kind that shimmers purple/green as it moves, and to it I attached a real ermine tail" (Editor's note). Fish believed her package was delayed for "presumably debating whether ermine, traditionally the fur reserved for royalty, was a contraband substance" (Petasz, *Intellectual*). Fish responded to Petasz's performative pomposity with luxury silk and fur, and the gesture fell under the scrutiny of Polish customs. Petasz wrote back, announcing that "The Cape of Late submissions… Will be included as well to Stempelplatz documentation as to further display" (Postcard). An ermine tail was the perfect material for a *royal* mail art cape whose creation also signaled Petasz's best efforts to include everyone's piece in the networked outfit. After all, including the late submission in the documentation acknowledged the ritual of postal exchange, complete with all its challenges and delays.

The infamous black-and-white photograph of Petasz wearing the completed suit was used in 1996 for the bright red cover of what is likely the most essential publication about

mail art in Eastern Europe: *Mail Art: Osteuropa: Mail Art im Internationalen Netzwerk* (1998), an exhibition catalog produced by the Staatliches Museum Schwerin. John Held describes the poetic juxtaposition of the image with the catalog cover: "Striding barefoot in a sea of red ink, the black and white figure of Petasz marches across the book cover in a wardrobe composed of artworks on cloth sent to him by mail artists" ("Sugar"). The cover is striking, but without context, a viewer might not be aware of its symbolic importance. An envelope with artistamps or a conceptual text might have done better justice to the mail art practice in general. However, the walking figure of Petasz, which is *doing* something, combined with the collection of network scraps serve as a reminder that a mail art work can involve action, which includes the body, and that the genre is meaningless without the container of network consciousness. Though not all mail art works are designed to illustrate this idea, this particular work is a vivid example and is mainly designed with this concept in mind.

In a more recent color photograph from 2007 at the Museum Serralves in Porto, the suit's technicolor design can finally be observed. The mixed patterns partly recall an earlier avant-garde, such as Varvara Stepanova's ideas for sports suits, for example. The geometric designs and square patches are reminiscent of Rodchenko's Constructivist work suit, which also exhibited its assembled structure on the surface. However, Petasz's work is not of one piece. It is a three-piece suit featuring a waistcoat and a dress shirt—not precisely the proletarian vision of the Constructivists. Bright pinks and yellows alternate with plain white cotton fabric, but the textures are even more notable. Embroidery, appliqué, lace details, drawings, and plenty of text populate the dozens of square pieces making up the suit. Petasz employed a purposeful placement of the textile pieces in this three-dimensional collage. For

example, in the spot where the shirt buttons are located, there is horizontal text that reads "CLOSED" and vertical text that reads "OPEN." When the shirt is unbuttoned, the horizontal text is split in two. This conceptual play is sourced from the creative possibilities of collaborative and networked activity.

The suit's production embodies the opposite action of Petasz's layered self-portrait. While the self-portrait is *dispersed*, the suit project actively brings network nodes together creatively. This gathering and dispersing is the elastic bond between the one and the many in the participatory community Petasz belongs to. In his work, the *one* is implied by the *many*, and the many nodes eventually come in contact with reverberations from the one.

Just as participants in the Network help put the figure of the sartorial *Petasz* together in the finalization of the suit, they also take it apart in the dispersal of his self-portrait, sent to numerous recipients. This act of assembling and taking apart involves the artist's body both times, questioning the site of the artist's actual presence. If the self-portrait is disassembled and sent to all ends of the globe, this action suggests a disappearance of the artist's likeness and, by extension, the artist's person. On the other hand, the constructed[46] nature of the Network suit does not allow the viewer to forget its origins—the eighty-four different network nodes—entirely. This multi-source unity also implies difference and incongruence. If the pieces were returned to the original senders, the suit would fall apart, which would have similar implications for the artist's body.

We can draw a few general conclusions from Petasz's work with the suit. Petasz's body and materiality are connected in his mail art practice. Furthermore, his body connects

[46] The suit's constructed nature is a reminder of the Russian historical avant-garde clothing designed by Popova, Tatlin, Stepanova, and Rodchenko. In addition, the assemblage technique points to the playful and irreverent creations of the Dada movement and Kurt Schwitters.

all the materials in manual craftwork. A connection could also be drawn between the practical sewing of envelopes that Petasz is famous for and the sewing of the Network suit. Sewing secures bonds but takes a long time, especially with hand-sewing. Petasz's sewing affirms that his mail art can be an art of duration and process, a performance, not only an object or a conceptual experiment. Petasz's donning of the colorful suit is theatrical. It also sartorially and visually performs the existence of a sample of the mail art network he is familiar with. Even though it does not represent the entire network, only the participants who sent fabric to Petasz, the donning of the suit symbolizes being enveloped or surrounded by this specific corner of the Network (a smaller network of mail art collaborators and acquaintances in the community). Petasz's mail-art-as-clothing design also brings awareness to the site where his mail art meets the body, which is essential but often forgotten in the culture of long-distance communication.

However much it stresses texture and materials, the actual suit is less practical than symbolic and likely more ephemeral and prone to disintegration than the everyday suits of the time. Its purpose was neither to last nor to be worn longer than it took to demonstrate it can be. Petasz's performance was a demonstration that his mail art *could be* wearable. Reminiscent of a suit made of rags, *THE INTELLECTUAL BENEFITS OF ART* could be connected to the relative poverty[47] of mail artists in Eastern Europe and their adoption of everyday materials as artistic media. In another sense, Petasz's suit reflected the specific cornucopia of the Network as he experienced it at that moment when resources (in this case,

[47] While we should not imagine all of these artists destitute or pining for the cornucopia of the West, artists excluded from unions struggled significantly. Most notably, György Galántai was losing his teeth from malnutrition in Hungary after 1973 when he was targeted by the authorities. With the shuttering of his Chapel-studio at Balatonboglár, others were afraid to keep in touch with him, and his isolation and lack of resources worsened.

fabric pieces) gathered from a group of participants could amount to a valuable batch of art materials. The suit could also be seen as a performance of the unsuspected utility of ephemera and art scraps Petasz had received. He only seems to have been photographed in the suit while abroad in Amsterdam. The mail art suit could be interpreted as the mantle of that version of Petasz that eventually crossed the border himself. Alternatively, it could have been an attempt at conceptual fashion for mail artists. If it was, it was not Petasz's only attempt at using fashion design for conceptual or political purposes, as was discussed in the example of the paper doll in Chapter I.

One of the notable qualities of the suit is that it has no single author who would be responsible for its complete execution. Authorship distributed among a large group of people is common to many mail art projects. This method was initially encouraged by Ray Johnson's mailings in the 1950s and '60s when the New York Correspondence School developed its conceptual and network-oriented uses of mailings. "[Ray] Johnson… began circulating drawings, collages, and prints through the postal system instructing correspondents to 'Please send to …' or 'Please add to and return …,'[47] thus encouraging chance, unpredictability and, distributed, networked authorship into his work" (Hunter and Bodor 184). Part of this collaborative method is giving up complete aesthetic control over the artwork and allowing the Network collective to perform segments of the artistic labor. The lack of predictability of the artistic outcome further proves that mail art practice is less concerned with its products and more interested in the ongoing aspect of collaborative activity.

6. Paul Neagu's Cells

Compared to Poland, Romania's situation in the 1970s was marked by a higher level of political tension. In 1971, Ceausescu's speech delivered the "July Theses," new measures limiting cultural freedom and focusing on socialist art. However, in Western Romania, a lesser presence of censorship had already allowed for the city of Timisoara to serve as the headquarters for the Sigma group whose project *Information Tower* (1970s) drew from "neo-constructivist design and cybernetics" (Fowkes and Fowkes 86). This geometric architectural model exploring communication and networking was meant to be integrated into the city center. Its repeating elements' visual rhythm is a reminder of of Paul Neagu's cell networks. Two years earlier, Stefan Bertalan's work *Maxwell's Demon* (1968) exhibited a geometric grid made of stretched cotton thread. From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, in Cluj, Ana Lupaș collaborated with villagers on installations, using ordinary organic materials like clay and straw and investigating issues related to the environment. Using basic art materials to create work within a community of non-professionals also connects to the values of the mail art network itself. However, Ileana Pintilie called for Romanian "experimental and performative activity" under Ceausescu's rule to be seen as "underground art" due to its minimal audience (Bryzgel 19; Pintilie 86–87). When performances in the capital were out of the question in the 1970s, artists like Ion Grigorescu and Geta Brâtescu took to filming in their studios, questioning gender and focusing on the experience of their bodies. Although he emigrated to London via Paris in 1970, Romanian sculptor Paul Neagu also turned his attention to the body, just as Paweł Petasz explored the idea of the whole and its parts in the mail art suit.

Neagu, who also participated in mail art, investigated the relationship between micro and macro structures and grids during the 1970s and ’80s. For him, both of these structures manifested in the human body. The body’s safety itself was also at stake in Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Romania, where interrogations and disappearances were more common than in most other states in the Bloc. Neagu chose to leave five years after the infamous leader was instated. Strict pro-natalist policies caused the deaths of 9,000 women seeking illegal abortions. State control over the body put women and anyone deemed suspicious in a position of perpetual precarity. The Securitate, Romania’s secret police, performed frequent human rights abuses and caused divisions between neighbors and within families. For Neagu, seeing the individual body as a network opened possibilities for seeing or experiencing parts connected to a whole on multiple levels. Piotrowski argues:

> By familiarizing himself with constituent elements (the micro-structure), [Neagu] was able to know the whole (the macro-structure). He proceeded in his exploration from a spatial cell or a body to the entire body and the space that that body occupied: a bed, a coffin, a house, or larger structures, a city, a country. An individual element of the structure, such as a single cell, became, in this context, an intimation of the entire universe. (Piotrowski 262)

Nevertheless, Neagu’s *cell* works presented in the gallery context did not have the same meaning as his (visually similar) works participating in mail art exchanges. In the context of mail art, the cell works could be seen as performing the grander scheme in which they were participants. As portrayed by Neagu, the cell grid of the human body recalled the Network's interconnected nodes.

In August 1973, he sent a mail art piece entitled *Homeostasis* to Bogdanka Poznanović in Novi Sad[48] (Neagu). The gouache-and-pen color drawing, which had to be folded to fit the envelope, pictures a hand consisting of Neagu's typical cells, numbered from one to twenty-six. Between the forefinger and the thumb, however, Neagu had added a twenty-seventh rectangular cell with a slot labeled "My letter box [sic]." This extra cell changes the meaning of the entire drawing. The "letter box [sic]" has been equated with the rest of the cells in the structure, as if they could be interchangeable. On the one hand, this comparison suggests that the human body comprises letter boxes connected in a grid of interconnection and communication. On the other hand, it could mean that the letterboxes are part of the Network that includes other letterboxes, connecting animate and inanimate matter. Like all the other numbered cells, Neagu's letterbox is empty and open: it has no back or front. A free flow of interconnection and communication would easily pass through it, as through a gate. At the same time, the hand looks *cut up* into boxes, which could symbolize bureaucracy or mechanization, fusing the human body with the grid rhythm imposed on it.

In addition, the hand itself is a reminder of Neagu's earlier idea of the role of touch. Neagu's *Palpable Art Manifesto* (1969) determines that art should avoid being limited to the visual. The artist claims, "[T]he eye is fatigued… obsolete… losing its primary role in aesthetic responses" (Neagu 205). Instead, he advocates for art that involves all the senses. When he sent the cell hand drawing to Poznanović, Neagu was performing *touch* in the Network's context of long-distance communication. This practice of touch through mail art will, along with rubber stamps, be discussed in detail in Chapter III.

[48] Exchanges with Yugoslavia were a lot easier to take part in than exchanges between the UK and the Eastern Bloc. It would have been more difficult for Neagu to correspond with artists in his home country Romania, for example.

The reciprocal multilog of the rhizomatic mail art network in the 1970s and ’80s performed a media exchange like no other. Through the gathering of group resources, networkers engaged with both distance and materiality, extending the performance of mail art from the actions of its first author through the individual and group contributions of other participants to the reception and staging by the receiver. Some conceptual and participatory mail art works were explicitly designed with the Network in mind, highlighting the importance of the Network for many artists. While other works traveled within the Network, they were not necessarily conceptually entangled with it. Furthermore, the rhizomatic network, however equalizing, was not fully egalitarian and did not have the same purposes or accessibility for artists in the East and West. While Western artists shared values of collaboration, their version of a nonofficial exchange was to reach beyond the values of an object-driven capitalist art market. Furthermore, material inequalities in the Network complicated the ideal of the “rhizome.” The purpose for Eastern Europe was, essentially, to find connections with others through nonofficial art exchanges and collaborate beyond geopolitical boundaries. The presence of the body, asserted by performing a visitation or documenting traces of its existence, had a special significance for isolated artists, especially in Eastern Europe. An assemblage of various parts, the represented body, has questionable integrity, though this makes for a flexible structure more suitable for passing through communication channels and networks—a body that also multiplies to reach distant corners of a precarious artist community. This somatic connection and the idea of long-distance touch will be further explored in Chapter III.

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III. Stamping, Bureaucracy, and the Body

In 1973, the Czech artist Karel Adamus *stamped* riverside rocks for his work *Hold Šlépějím* ("I'm Stomping my Feet"). He accomplished this by dipping a shoe sole design (most likely rubber) of letters and numbers in paint, which raised the question of what should be considered a *rubber stamp*. Traces or prints, rubber stamps, and artistamps played an important role in Eastern Europe's nonofficial art and mail art, both as elements in artworks and as artworks of their own. Uniting two surfaces while using physical force or a print of the body, these practices represented notions of establishing contact, travel, and the immediacy of somatic experience in long-distance communication. Artists like J.H. (Jiří Hynek) Kocman and Ewa Partum converted the body into a printing instrument while others like Petasz employed motion and humor about the body in their mail art works. Performing a connection between free speech and the historic avant-garde's trans-sense language *zaum*, Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay transferred a stamp print between their bodies in a live performance. In addition, two sources of inspiration for Eastern European mail art are the body and bureaucracy, which are often activated together but also sometimes contraposed, as the fluidity of the body's gestures in the artwork interrupts the rigidity of bureaucratic practices. The artworks in this chapter, from the period of 1970 to 1992, represent examples of a few different types of stamps and body prints, yet they are all united by the performance of physical movement and the expression of a desire for close connection.

Stamps are a performance of and for the body in several ways. First, the non-commercial print requires a human hand to press something onto the paper. Artists and scholars have compared this gesture to *touch* (an impossibility in long-distance

communication) as well as to prints of the body that are used in mail art and in other intimate or bureaucratic contexts, such as fingerprints, handprints, lipstick prints, and traces of bodily fluids. Second, the question of multiples also concerns the body. On the one hand, the body is used as a tool that prints the image over and over, since stamping involves physical exertion and the repeated gestures of the body in order to create numerous copies; on the other, this replication can also be of the body's own traces where the flesh is pressed against paper without the use of rubber. In that way, the work extends the limits of the body beyond its traditional boundaries. Tracing the bodily prints and fluids back to their source would be the province of forensics, with its own bureaucratic practices.

1. Disambiguation: A Variety of Stamps

In art, stamping appropriates and ironizes bureaucratic forms. This often involves appending an additional image to an already existing work, such as a mail art envelope, though the images can also stand as artworks on their own. They may certify an envelope or document or add texture to the surface to join the performative officiality of the borrowed bureaucratic gesture to artistic engagement with materiality. Symbolically, they both involve the process of joining two surfaces: the rubber with the paper (if even for a second) and the adhesive side of the artistamp to the envelope exterior. This joining always involves applying force or pressing down to create the print or adhesive bond. This reveals not only the performative but also the explicitly corporeal aspects of these practices. First, though, it may be important to differentiate between different kinds of stamps because stamps have a long history as cultural artifacts.

There are two different types of stamps: rubber and artistamps. Though rubber stamps and artistamps are both called *stamps* in English, this correspondence does not exist in many

other languages; therefore, while comparing the practices in this language, it is important not to conflate them semantically. Rubber stamps create prints and imprints, which are also referred to as *stamps* (or, rubber-stamped images). Artistamps are added to a surface via adhesives and resemble the stick-on postal stamps that pay for the delivery of a letter and are collected by philatelists. Unlike postal stamps with denominational value, artistamps are created by artists who usually attach them to the surface of envelopes alongside official postal stamps. This chapter mostly focuses on rubber stamps, along with a few examples of artistamps, to stress the corporeality of the bureaucratically inspired performance of these practices and to examine the meaning of multiplication and thus the conundrum of copies and originals in mail art.

It was not until the early twentieth century that rubber stamps became part of artworks. In 1912, with the help of three illustrators, Russian avant-gardists Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov composed the book *Мирскоңца* (*Miskontsa*/ "Worldbackwards"), for which certain lines were placed via rubber stamping, "a dismissive gesture toward type… with isolated letters added by the sophisticated technique of potato printing" (Ostashevsky). Around 1919, Dada artist Kurt Schwitters produced his first stamp drawings, or *Stempelzeichnungen*. In the post-war period, artists like Ben Vautier, Dieter Roth, and Arman were among the first to experiment more explicitly with the genre. Hungarian artist Géza Perneczky claims that "Roth was intrigued not by the form of his stamps but rather the passionate dynamism of their use," an important aspect of the practice analyzed in this chapter (70). In 1966, actual stamp tools by Vautier and Ken Friedman were included in the *Fluxpost Kit*, which was fabricated in New York. That same year, Dick Higgins created a seven-line Fluxus manifesto in the form of the rubber stamp—a brief theoretical work that

came with its own means of distribution. Czechoslovakian artist J.H. Kocman printed the first anthology of rubber stamp art in 1972, in only thirty copies. Kocman, who is known largely for his rubber stamp work, produced his own *Monography of My Stamp Activity* two years later. During the 1970s and '80s, many other Eastern European artists continued this practice in the context of mail art.

Not all *rubber stamps* involve rubber. Hungarian artist László Beke, in what Friedman and Gugelberger call his "unrealized stamp project," created a stamp without using rubber at all (410). Beke managed to perform the absence of a stamp with a work that still looked like a stamp. His conceptual stamp, written out in pen and included in the French artist Hervé Fischer's 1974 stamp anthology *Art et Communication Marginale,* reads, "je n'ai pas de tampons parce-que en [sic] Hongrie il n'est pas permis de faire faire tampons par personnes privés [sic]," ("I don't have any stamps because in Hungary private persons are not allowed to make stamps") (159). Beke's stamp brings attention to the sociopolitical context for mail art in Eastern Europe, where bureaucratic power was mainly wielded by state institutions.[49] Endre Tót's stamping action the year prior had taken place abroad in the UK, proving the point that if Hungarians wanted to stamp in the 1970s, it was best done abroad. For example, the Stempelplaats gallery in Amsterdam, active from 1978 to 1981, was dedicated solely to rubber stamps and exhibited works of Eastern European artists like Kocman and Petasz.

[49] Not only did state institutions retain the promissory power of bureaucracy, but they also possessed its tools. At certain times in the Eastern Bloc, it was difficult to obtain rubber stamps or have access to typewriters and printing technology. Sven Spieker states, "In the countries of the former eastern bloc, the media of technical reproduction and archivization, which the historical avant-garde had viewed as so many emancipatory organs of a newly mechanized collective social body, were declared state monopolies" (11).

If Beke's limitations had led him to experiment with form and Fischer had accepted his entry for the anthology, what can be said about how far the concept of a *rubber stamp* could be stretched? It depends on who gets to decide. Hungarian artist Géza Perneczky might be inclined to say that any object could be fashioned into a stamp. In 1973, a strolling action also brought Perneczky to find objects like a comb, a button, a beer cap, and a nail, which he made prints with for Fischer's 1974 stamp anthology. Yet not all of Perneczky's stamps were considered as such by the art community. Neither photographers nor stamp artists accepted his attempts to stamp with light for publication or presentation (Perneczky 75). Was this partly because he lived in West Germany and had the ability to stamp whenever he wished to? Perneczky stamped constellations onto photosensitive paper using a flashlight and perforated material. He claims that the light performed the function of "ink" (75). Of course, placing work in exhibitions was not at all the point of mail art. The aforementioned flashlight anecdote mostly proves that neo-avantgarde artists who participated in mail art also created other kinds of works (official or nonofficial), which they hoped to exhibit somewhere. Perneczky, who lived in Cologne, West Germany, had ample opportunities to do so. In his case, though, the artist's stamp was an experimental practice—it performed *stamping* without leaving a trace. Using light as *ink*, Perneczky stretched the definition of rubber stamps so far that, for many, the action wasn't even considered *stamping*, as it did not leave a trace once the light was off. Perneczky's overt experimentation became an obstacle for working with his community. While mail art was the site of much experimentation, generally it wasn't concerned with being at the very forefront of the artistic avant-garde.

2. The Body in Stamping

In a 1979 text accompanying his rubber stamp work, the Mexican mail artist Ulises Carrion wrote, "Of all new media, rubber-stamps are the most anonymous. There is no way to see 'the hand of the artist' in a rubber-stamp" (*Rubber*). Carrion is right that few other media of that time contained such a degree of anonymity. Yet, depending on how the presence of the artist's *hand* is understood, that touch and connection to the artist's body might be just as present as in other media like painting or photography. A rubber stamp requires carving, which is done by hand. Even if the carving was done by one artist and the stamping by another, both would leave their somatic *mark* on the work. The stamper applies a certain amount of force and ink along with stability or even a lack thereof, which could lead to smudges. Repeated stamping can also be a very physical and strenuous practice, sometimes the point of the entire performance. These aspects of stamp work were explored by Eastern European mail artists who were invested in the corporeality and materiality of the practice.

Mail artists in the Soviet Union employed these tactics as well. Drawing on the historic avant-garde's stamp legacy, they stamped on the body and braved crude body humor. These explorations existed under very specific historical conditions. The Eastern European mail art practice expressed itself in the precarious exchange of ephemera, performing its networked belonging in a climate of relative uncertainty. For artists from the Soviet Union, who were last to join the movement in the second half of the 1980s, the even greater uncertainty of international mail was a financial burden and an expected hindrance. Despite these challenges, a few Soviet artists made their way into the international mail art network by taking part in specific network practices and referencing network tropes. They were

performing a network identity. Mail artist Rea Nikonova or Ры Никонова (born Anna Tarshis), along with her partner, Serge Segay or Сергей Сигей (born Sergei Sigov), for instance, used face-painting and rubber stamping to explore connections between Russian Futurist modes of communication and the mail art network during the late 1980s and early '90s, especially in its Soviet context. Certain of their right to produce art even away from big cultural centers, they worked from the small coastal town of Eysk, situated on the Sea of Azov, before emigrating to Germany in 1998.

Nikonova and Segay joined the Network in 1985, which was not without a price: "they were sanctioned for the sending of mail to Western countries, they experienced difficulties in their job and family situation, and extremely bad living conditions" (Greve 447). In contrast to the rest of the Eastern Bloc, where mail art had existed since the late 1960s, in the Soviet Union the restrictive post office practices and strained relations with the Western World made it virtually impossible for artists to send work abroad. Segay had known about mail art at least since 1980, but it wasn't until 1985 that the artist duo participated in the Budapest Young Experimental Artist's exhibit. The work consisted of photographs of a bare-backed sunbather with an Old Slavonic letter on her skin (Greve 447).

The tradition of rubber stamps dates back to the historic avant-gardes[50]—both Russian Futurism and Dada challenged notions of authorship, art production, and the use of special painterly materials in art. One of the rubber stamps Nikonova openly used on the outside of her envelopes read, "ZAUMail," referring to the trans-sense language of the Russian Futurists. Another rubber stamp Nikonova and Segay sent to Japanese artist Ryosuke

[50] Malevich was also featured on an artistamp design for the poster for the very first Soviet Mail Art Exhibition in 1989, titled *Scare-Crow*. In addition, Nikonova's 1990 pen-and-ink drawing of four square artistamps across the page was a diagonal progression of blankness and thick lines, ending with *Black Square*.

Cohen's "Brain Cell" project included a multilingual pun. The text read "Peace-dada / Rea Nikonova," drawing inspiration from the abundance of mail art nicknames and slogans that reference Dada, the movement's widely agreed-upon artistic ancestor. However, as Charlotte Greve notes, the stamp's text, when read by a Russian speaker, is reminiscent of a vulgar term for female genitalia (454). This is one of various examples of instances when the artists' sense of humor did not necessarily translate linguistically or culturally for many others in the Network, but still maintained a conceptual connection to the body.

On March 22, 1992, Nikonova and Segay engaged with the body in another performance juxtaposing official political language and a Futurist poetry term. It was part of a Russian Congress of the 1992 Netshaker Harmonic Divergence, organized with the help of American mail artist CrackerJack Kid (John Held). It took place for two hours at the Eysk Museum and included a concert, a book exhibition by international artists, and a poetry reading. In their *Spirit Netlink Performance* (1992), the duo enacted face and hand painting, using a stamp with the text "Glasnost? Zaumnost!" Segay transferred the wet ink stamp from his palm to Nikonova's forehead. Nikonova refers to this stamping action as a "spirit impression" ("Mail" 98). This direct communication from the hand to the *spirit*, symbolized by the forehead, alludes to the trans-sense language of the Futurists, yet it involves no sound. "Netlink" likely refers to the budding influence of the Internet and the context of the mail art network, participants of which were present at the performance. The juxtaposition of *glasnost* and *zaum* in *zaumnost* was more puzzling in 1992, even though *zaumnost* already existed as a Futurist term. *Голос* (*golos*; "voice") and *заумь* (*zaum'*; "trans-sense language") presented a paradoxical pair in the context of 1980s Soviet politics of so-called *openness*. If *golos* can be a voice but only in a rationally incomprehensible trans-sense form of expression, the

openness becomes hermetic and somatic. The artists might say, "Let us speak our minds but only *in tongues*."

What would the historic Futurists have thought of the mail art network? They might have saluted its collaborative spirit, performance, and its engagement with technologies. Yet, in the age of digital communication, paper letters become a look towards the past, to materiality, to the body. In the 1990s, artists like Nikonova negotiated between these driving forces, finding new languages and engagements with the performative Futurist legacy. Soviet mail art has been understudied by scholars and constitutes a missing chapter in research about nonofficial Soviet art. Furthermore, there are few women in the mail art network. They represent another understudied neo-avantgarde. Yet there were women mail artists in the Soviet Union and later Russia, like Natalia Lamanova, who went by the mail art pseudonym "Lamana Wooma" and created postal stamps in the late 1990s. It is in these pockets of activity that unique cultural amalgamations and collaborations exist, bridging the avant-gardes with new provocations and expressions of new artistic subjectivities.

Mail art had the potential to be the new international and universal "language," different from yet resembling *zaum* at a time when political and social barriers in Eastern Europe were being recharted and communication possibilities re-envisioned following the Revolutions of 1989. Mail art as *zaum* underscores the playfulness of the practice and its explicit interest in materiality. *Zaum* defamiliarized language and poetry, bringing attention to the palpable quality of speech, its vibration, physicality, and its strangeness. Similarly, mail art disregarded traditional representation and moved toward unhurried experimentation with everyday stationery and household supplies, revealing them as materials for conceptual projects in a network.

In Hungary, mail and conceptual artist Endre Tót, whose work is discussed in Chapter I, achieved relative celebrity status in mail art circles for performing with the most basic materials. Among his infamous *zer0* performances at the Blackburn Museum in the UK in 1973 was the stamp, "I am glad if I can stamp zeroes" (Tót 173). A year before this, in Poland, Tót performed an action of stamping and typing zeroes called, "I am glad if I can stamp in Warsaw too" (183). Kemp-Welch calls the artist an "unkempt clerk, eagerly fulfilling his norm" (172). Tót made a show of his deadpan stamping and typing until it resembled a performance of endurance aimed at sending a message through the obliteration of the message itself. As his fame grew, Tót returned to his early works from the 1970s and reprinted or modified them.

In these reactivations of his own archive, Tót showed that mail art was still aware of its noncommercial aesthetic in the post-1989 era. An envelope he covered with a stamp, featuring his smiling face, "I AM GLAD IF I CAN STAMP" (1971-1993), has an added sticker with the prophetic text, "SAVE THIS! YOUR HEIRS WILL GET MUCH MONEY FOR IT AT SOTHEBY'S." This envelope was addressed to "Networker Culture" at the University of Texas and is now out of stock at an online marketplace that sells ephemera ("I AM GLAD"). In a humorous gesture that also reflects the work's role in the very art market that nonofficial art usually defies, this work is performing its own future monetary value by stating it might be worth a lot one day. Whether or not that is true, the work gives away the physical labor required to stamp the envelope with the same rubber stamp eleven times. Yet, repeated stamping does not necessarily increase the value of the work or its efficacy; it could also obscure it and cheapen it. The stamp is *exhausted*, and the ink has run out on the last few prints, which also have begun to exit the page. The physical exertion it took to complete this

performative stamp work can be reconstructed through the intensity of the prints and imprints and their path. These comprise the *documentation* of the stamp activity. With its repetition, the stamping builds semantic layering and a crescendo of further exertion because as the ink is running out, the artist has to press the stamp to the page more strenuously. This gesture can also be seen as an attempt to fully use one's materials and to bring the performance to its logical conclusion.

Zanna Gilbert has also stressed the importance of the body for experimental art, where it "became a method for investigating the subject's relation to the 'real', the often mentioned 'art-life' question" (177). The connection to everyday life, inherited from the historical avant-garde, persisted through the work of mail artists, grounded in fabric scraps, fingerprints, locks of hair, smudges, and cheap paper. The conceptual and bodily aspects arose spontaneously out of the environment of mail art. Gilbert further states,

> The fact that mail art is a disembodied art practice did not prevent mail artists from experimenting with ways of making the body the protagonist of their work… against the backdrop of dehumanising technological communication and mass media meant that they aimed to find ways of establishing affective connections between one another. (178)

Even though Gilbert mainly focuses on artists from South America, her view of the centering of the body in mail art practice also applies to Eastern Europe in the 1970s, when body art became popular in nonofficial circles.

3. Touch as a Stamp

Another meaning of *contact* that emerges in mail art is the idea of physical touch. For all the pride it took in connecting people, mail art rarely brought correspondents to meet in

real life, though the fault for this lies not with mail art but with its economic and political conditions. Meetings did happen, and artists offered lodgings for each other in order to help with attending foreign exhibitions, but these opportunities were rare and mostly reserved for those on the same continent. Physical contact became a nearly impossible dream that manifested itself as a theme in many artworks. For this reason, rubber stamps have a special meaning for long-distance communication and mail art—a meaning that would not extend to non-artistic stamps used to certify contracts, for example.

> Curator Cristina Freire speaks to the role of touch since the 1970s:
>
> Reproduction made the circulation of photographs within the Network of Mail Art possible as a palpable object, thus linking it to the sense of touch. The sense of touch is an important differential, above all at a time when physical files migrate to the digital registry of virtual networks. Touch is the characteristic element of announcing performances and actions, which, at that moment, still arrived by postal service and documented transitory projects. (254)

The objects of mail art performance, unlike the objects of museum art, were objects that could be touched by anyone. Freire makes the point that reproduction, wherever possible, expanded the possibility of touch to a greater audience. Developments in the digitization of information, however limited they may have been in the 1970s, only enhanced the act of touching the paper, cloth, and body prints in postal mailings. Touch itself is an action that cannot be recorded in its entirety unless its prints or symbolic representations are involved. Yet, in mail art, there are artistic practices that may act *as* touch, perform touch, or communicate a somatic impulse. Body prints and imprints, rubber stamps, and, in some instances, artistamps have performed this role in mail art and conceptual experiments.

Stamping in long distance communication has significant implications about the role of the body. Not only does the practice unite the rubber stamp and the body as the stamping tool;[51] this unification communicates the body's longing for in-person connection. Brazilian artist Paulo Bruscky, who communicated with East German networker Robert Rehfeldt, sent many communications marked with his performed bodily presence. Writing about their correspondence, Gilbert argues, "The artist's indexical trace is marked on the mailed work by fingerprints, stains and photographic evidence, through which ideas of disappearance and reappearance emerge" (Gilbert 175). At times, Bruscky's headshot would peek out of the envelope flap, greeting the recipient. At other times, his mailings reflected a totalitarian reality, much more suffocating than everyday life in Eastern Europe. Bruscky's communication included creative prints that viscerally relayed the atmosphere of violence and oppression in contemporary Brazil. While the Eastern European examples discussed below tend to be more subtle and humorous, their urgency to perform a relation to the body is nevertheless evident.

4. Ewa Partum's Haptic Prints

In 1975, the Polish artist Ewa Partum created an *alphabet* of lipstick prints in her folio *Zmiana* ("Change") (1972-75).[52] The work is currently located in the archive of the Danish mail artist Niels Lomholt and is marked as a mailing from Warsaw. The work may be

[51] Gilbert notes that "Marshall McLuhan's notion of media as an 'extension of man' is applicable here; however, in this case the media tries to escape the 'autoamputation' McLuhan cites, in which the media both extends and amputates the body" (179).

[52] The "Change" folio also includes four reproductions of paper with its corners burned, another gesture from letter-writing. There are four signs: "un peu, beaucoup, passionement, pas de tout," ("a little, a lot, passionately, not at all"), most likely referring to degrees of affection. In the *not at all* section, none of the letter has been burned, so this leaves the audience to wander about all love letters that haven't been burned at all. Part of the artwork was the burning of the paper, performed by Partum. Ironically, only the traces of the burns remain, leaving one to wonder if this *language* of love is still valid.

seen both as mail art and mailed art, but its greatest importance is to illustrate the connection of stamping to the body in mail art. Partum's most famous performances featured the female body, the agency of which in mail art has otherwise been underrepresented. In *Zmiana*, Partum leaves a lipstick print with her own lips on the paper. A cliché gesture from the love letter genre, the print is subverted through its enactment, reenactment, and alphabetic codification.

This body print work can be seen as a version of a rubber stamp, but also as a concrete poem since it suggests a *language* of kisses. The *kiss alphabet* parodies the idea that lip prints could be a type of secret code used to relay a precise message in a mail art letter. The sheet is a black-and-white reproduction, so the kiss prints could have been sent to a large number of recipients, making them less personal. However, the reenactment of the letter *O* with red lipstick over the black-and-white print stands out and assures the recipient that this page was, indeed, physically touched by the artist's lips and is thus not an identical reproduction.

The entire work performs the act of *kissing* twenty-five times. It recognizes that the intimate gesture still could fall prey to reproducibility, which causes some inescapable attrition of meaning. This exploration of reproducible work and unique hand-made elements is typical for mail art that is interested in interrogating the copy-original dichotomy. Even more so than actual rubber stamps, human lips are unable to produce exact copies of a print because the very act of moving them to create the print already changes their shape. The human body does not function exactly like a rubber stamp, though all rubber stamps are extensions of the body and thus also produce unique prints because a human hand can never press the same stamp on paper twice in the same way. Partum, here, could be performing

écriture féminine avant la lettre, writing with the female body itself. In fact, Partum's work, which was sent in 1975, but likely created earlier, might even predate Hélène Cixous's famous essay "Le Rire de la Méduse" ("The Laugh of the Medusa"), published in French the same year. Both Cixous and Partum's projects attest to a mid-1970s intercultural zeitgeist.

Karolina Majewska-Güde also connects Partum to Cixous, yet she argues that Partum's use of alphabetic language complicates the project of developing a specifically feminine form of writing à la Cixous:

> Partum did not aspire to create an alternative feminine writing, as her texts still depended on the logocentric textual order… [She] employed her lipstick writing to enrich the conceptual work's poetics with another form of notation related to the everyday experience. (151–52)

While the performance of the everyday gesture is indeed a staple of mail art, Majewska-Güde might be overstating the importance of the Latin alphabet letters under each kiss print. The letter *key* is not meant to help translate the prints through complete equivalency. The alphabet letters are simply an inadequate approximation of the fluidity of the human body used as a stamp. While Partum's kiss prints are not classic rubber stamps, they enact the role of rubber stamps by leaving a print through a pressing action of the body and then repeating that action. Majewska-Güde herself calls Partum's *poems by ewa* an instance of "haptic notation" (153). Partum uses the lip print method specifically as a woman, aware that in the 1970s, it was a form that was less accessible to her male colleagues whose *kisses* likely did not leave prints because, for them, wearing lipstick would have been less common.

Yet American artist Stephen J. Kaltenbach's rubber stamp representing a kiss print came first in the form of a project he wore lipstick for in 1969. Kaltenbach was self-

conscious about the size and color of his lips; this brought him to create a lipstick print, which was converted to a rubber stamp for an art show in Berne and, following instructions from the artist, then sold cheaply in many copies (Kaltenbach, "An Interview"). The aim was to encourage affordable public stamping performances, while for the artist, this work acted as an affirmation of his body. This example also shows the strong connection between stamps and performance. Ironically, mere red prints of the kiss stamp can now be purchased online for two hundred and sixty dollars. Kaltenbach's social and art world concerns at the time were, of course, part of a different cultural context. He had the means to have stamps created for him in a Western European country, and he did not dare to use his own lips directly because he was uncomfortable with them. While Kaltenbach's work is one degree removed from a direct interaction with the artist's lips, Partum's print does not shy away from this interaction, which is both necessary, due to cultural conditions, and a direct choice that allows the body to write. Women like Partum viewed their bodies as being subject to different sociopolitical and semantic pressures. Partum's struggle was not about being comfortable with her own body more than others' comfort (or discomfort) with it. Even her husband at the time, the artist Andrzej Partum, had been strictly against her appearing nude publicly.

In a society where gender equality was professed officially but practiced only partially, even in dissident circles, women in the Eastern Bloc could not easily overcome the professional glass ceiling or the domestic roles that sapped their energy and ingenuity. Yet Western-style *feminism* is a culturally inaccurate term for Eastern Europe, where it was often seen and scorned by women, including artists, as a foreign influence.[53] Massive organizing

[53] There are a few exceptions, however—in Yugoslavia, for example. Croatian artist Sanya Iveković was well-versed in feminist theory.

for feminist ideals was the practice of Western feminists whose gaze upon Eastern Europe fashioned the Bloc as an example of equality (Bryzgel 166). Yet Eastern European artists did not have an official movement to address issues of gender. Artists and scholars use terms like "latent feminism," "feminist with a small 'f'", "soft feminist," and "proto-feminist" to describe "intuitive" approaches of not participating in a widely coordinated movement (Bryzgel 168). The draw of trending progressive ideas in Western movements, such as for civil rights, did not have direct cultural equivalents in the Eastern Bloc where different body politics were at play.

For mail art, the stakes were connected to being able to take part in the performance of touch over postal communication. If communication through touch can be inscribed on paper, what does this mean about its reinterpretation back into human touch? The viewer could attempt to perform the touch in the notation, or *read* it visually and, thus, feel its effects through the imagination. This strategy of transporting touch on paper was also explored by Czechoslovakian artist J.H. Kocman in his stamping activities.

5. Rubber-stamped Images and the Issue of Multiples

A 1972 anthology by J.H. Kocman, *Stamp Activity*, collected rubber stamps from twenty-five artists, such as Jan Steklík, Jiří Valoch, and Jan Wojnar. By the 1970s, this early avant-garde practice had gained in popularity among nonofficial artists. Fischer warned against a trend in the "reporting of banalities"[54] (quoted in Valoch, "Incomplete" 61). Meanwhile, in 1988, Valoch reflected that the practice "became another convention of mediocre artistic expression" (61). He further claimed that mail art "rediscovered and actualized the postal transfer for itself by creating works reminiscent of stamps" (64). Valoch

[54] This Fischer quote is found in Valoch's essay, which offers no Works Cited, so its accuracy is difficult to establish. The quote does not seem to appear in Hervé Fischer's *Communication Marginale*.

is likely referring to rubber stamps, whose "heaping" numbers, he thought, made the art "dilettantish" (64).

Could the sheer amount of rubber-stamp works undermine their aesthetic value? It depends on who the gatekeepers of this *value* might be. In the case of mail art, the gatekeeper is not the market but the Network community. While some artists took mail art and stamp art very seriously, others believed that an egalitarian system of collective participation was a more adequate measure of *success*. It is between these two goalposts that the reality of most mail art performance occurs. As Klara Kemp-Welch has argued, "cultivating a low-key, low-quality aesthetic" allowed mail art in Eastern Europe to escape much of the censorship applied more regularly to works more easily classified as *art* (1140). It is, in fact, this "low quality," along with the stress on actions and not objects, that allowed the practice to continue existing. These remarks should not be misconstrued as accusations, since mail art's aesthetic has never claimed a high-brow status, but they do beg the question if the significance of stamping actions and prints (and other copy methods) erodes with their popularity, accessibility, and tendency to come in multiples.

Regardless if mail art stamp is an aesthetic achievement or not, the question remains as to whether repeatedly stamping an image hundreds of times might erase its uniqueness or desensitize its audience to its message. Perneczky, for example, argues that "[t]he effectiveness of the stamps… is in direct proportion to their quantity. Produced en masse, the stamps might create links between the continents. But a single stamp is bound to remain unnoticed" (73). Looking at stamping as an activity helps clear up the distinction between the obscurity of a single rubber-stamped image on a letter and a deluge of such stamps on many letters throughout the world. It is the energy involved in stamping that creates the dynamism

and intercultural momentum of stamping in mail art. Exceptional individual works do exist, but that is not the point. The essence of stamping practice, especially in a network of bodies, is the collective somatic engagement, which connects mail artists not simply through their words but through the motion in their muscles and joints.

In some ways, reproduction at the level of the artwork (not repetition, which occurs at the level of the body) does serve as an agent of obliteration, that is, if one is looking in the wrong place for the rubber-stamp artwork—as a brief message whose small variations between copies are mere imperfections. First, stamped works are not *really* copies, if we consider the mail art work as a performance. From the carving of the rubber, linoleum, or potato, or the finding of ready-made stamp-like objects to the dipping in the ink, and the physical act of making the print—all these stages involve degrees of physicality. Furthermore, the physical gesture and thus the performance of each stamp is unique. There is a difference in the strength applied and the diminishing amount of ink from each pressing of the stamp into the paper. The stamper's physical energy can be passed forward onto the print depending on the amount of pressure applied. The repetition of the movement can be seen as diligent, strenuous work, or as a meditative dance. One need not necessarily stamp with a kiss or a fingerprint to make an impression of one's somatic existence onto paper. Mechanized reproduction done by a human is an illusion. Every work *is* a sibling original and never an identical twin.

6. Fingerprints: Kocman's Touch as a *Stamp*

The physicality of stamping was explored in works involving fingerprints by the conceptualist J.H. Kocman, who was born in Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic. Kocman's work can be contextualized in a Czechoslovakian tradition of Body Art, visual

poetry, and experimentation with postcards. Jiří Valoch traces the roots of Czech mail art to Vladimír Boudník's manifestoes of Explosionism and needle-calligraphy postcards (in the late 1940s to early '60s). Valoch also points to the work of visual poets Ladislav Novák and Jiří Kolář as another source ("Incomplete" 59). Kolář manipulated the structure of an envelope in 1961, making it possible to read part of the letter through an open flap. Milan Knížák and Soňa Švecová, members of the action art group Aktual, also experimented with postal communication. In the late 1960s, Knížák established a fervent communication exchange with American Fluxus artist Ken Friedman, using the concept of "Keeping Together," a practice of establishing and maintaining deep friendships despite long distances. Švecová, on the other hand, created mailable *object poems*, using combinations of small, packable items. Nonofficial art 1970s in Czechoslovakia centered on Action art, which touched upon themes of connecting to nature, performing everyday living, and experimenting with the body. Body Art[55] was mostly practiced by nonofficial artists like Jan Mlčoch, Petr Štembera, and Karel Miler, the latter two of whom were strongly inspired by the austerity of Zen Buddhism.

Stamping or letter pressing is a common metaphor for touch in mail art. For example, as part of his stamping activity, Kocman's mailed postcards placed Brno on the map of neo-avantgarde art (Perneczky 71). Though mostly not a mail artist, Kocman perfectly illustrated this point with his 1970 stamp activities, which have been included in collections of rubber stamp prints. There, on a blank page, sits his stamp—a simple circle with the word "touch" inside it. There is melancholy in the solitude of a seemingly official symbol on an empty page and in the way it documents a touch that has occurred but that is no more. Other

[55] This essential movement in Eastern European nonofficial art has been described by the art historian Piotr Piotrowski in *The Shadow of Yalta* and by the curator Pavlina Morganová in *Czech Action Art*.

examples of Kocman's stamps, which have appeared as a two-page spread in Fischer's stamp anthology, are stamped on a single page along with twelve others and state, "I am waiting/ for your touch" (1973) and "this page was touched/ by the fingers/ of j. h. kocman" (1974) (154). Kocman's works transform the function of the stamp or print from certifying or approving to addressing someone or mimicking physical contact.

Kocman placed these works under the two categories "touch activity" and "stamp activity," in both cases equating rubber stamping with a haptic gesture. Though it might be a practical impossibility to attempt to transfer human touch through paper correspondence, this goal can be found in many mail art works and in personal epistolary correspondence, which has included exchanges of kiss prints or hair locks for centuries. In Kocman's work, performing physical touch for the recipient suggests that the artist is conceptually reaching for a more immediate affective connection. Indeed, Jiří Valoch has observed that Kocman's activities are "largely in the area of communication and communicative materials, and the artist's main interest lies with the individual relationship between the artist and the addressee" ("J.H. Kocman" 103). To stress this personal connection, Kocman sometimes included the name of the recipient in the stamp. He repeatedly did this in his communication with the French Fluxus artist Ben Vautier.

Kocman's works using rubber stamps are complemented by his self-portrait photography, which portrays a performance of *printing* with *touch* on the body and on everyday objects. This series of five 1971 photographic self-portraits, which appeared in Klaus Groh's famous anthology of Eastern European contemporary art *Aktuelle Kunst* (1972), shows a sequence of scenes.[56] The first photograph portrays a pair of hands

[56] The page with Kocman's photographs can be viewed here: https://artpool.hu/2015/Groh/Groh089.html.

(presumably the artist's) with fingers covered in ink, though the palms are not. Further down, we see two photographs of Kocman touching his own face, and the inky fingerprints[57] that this action leaves behind. In the last two photos, the artist's hands are seen pouring tea, and a second series of darker fingerprints can be seen on a teapot and a teacup in front of the artist. *Touch* remains on everything, even though it cannot be seen easily without the ink. It is the ink that makes ordinary touch into *a stamp*.

Notably, Kocman's photographs in the anthology *Aktuelle Kunst* come with instructions:

> touch-Studium soll nur in der Nacht [sic] / also
> ohne der [sic] Augenkontrolle [sic] / realisieren [sic]
>
> Die Fingerabdrucke bleiben als eine Documentation [sic], eine Partitur,
> ein Szenar
>
> touch-Study should only be done at night / so
> do it / without visual inspection
>
> The fingerprints remain as a documentation, a score,
> a scenario[58]

[57] In 1966, Czechoslovakian poet Vladimír Burda also created a visual fingerprint poem, "Ich," with the German text "ich" ("I") under it (73). The poem questions whether one's identity can be equated with their fingerprint and allows for a reading of the fingerprint image as "text."
[58] (Kocman, *touch activity*; my trans.)

A study of orienting oneself by touch is indeed best done at night. The advantage of darkness is that it diminishes habitual reliance on vision.[59] Night can also be the time when isolation is at its most palpable. Isolation was in fact what that inspired many works of mail art in Eastern Europe. While Kocman's photographs might not necessarily have been sent as mail art, the touch performance they portray crystalizes the experience of longing for an actual, haptic encounter. For the viewers of the series, this encounter is only realized conceptually when they encounter the documentation of the performance and attempt to follow its instructions.

Fischer has classified some of Kocman's work as "visual poetry," giving as an example a rectangular rubber stamp work by the artist with text that states, "[A]ll written on this page is a poem by J.-H. [sic] Kocmann [sic]" (29). Though the *poem* contains text that could be called a poem ("all written on this page is a poem by J.-H. [sic] Kocmann [sic]"), the stamp also includes nonalphabetic elements, such as the rectangle that frames the text. This particular stamp work poses a conundrum because what it performs is an act of certification that states that whatever is next to the stamp on the page is thereby declared a poem. Yet, the stamp itself is also present on the page, suggesting that it too must be considered a *poem*.

This understanding of what a *poem* is changes the meaning of *writing* (such as, for example, a poem) to include stamping as well. In mail art, stamping *does* become a form of writing, and one that is frequently employed. Printing the shape involves the performance of dipping the rubber stamp in ink and pressing it against the paper. Such a physical act may also be considered part of Kocman's performed poem. Not coincidentally, Perneczky

[59] The request to do the action without looking recalls Romanian artist Paul Neagu's 1969 manifesto "Palpable Art," mentioned in Chapter I, in which a privileging of touch over vision is pursued as the new paradigm in art.

humorously sums up that "Kocman's personality combined the qualities of an office clerk Svejk and those of a lyric poet who buries himself in paper applications" (34). Indeed, Kocman's work perfectly exemplifies the unusual combination of lyricism, conceptual play, mimicry of bureaucracy, and an investment in materiality, especially the use of ink and paper. He authored the rectangular stamp, "yes,/ i am very interested/ in paper" not entirely ironically (Kocman 154). Kocman made paper and designed books from it. He *was* indeed interested in paper as a material, with its texture and weight contributing to its function as a communication medium. Yet, his stamp statements offer few other clues about how they should be interpreted. With his "hallmark restrained, defensive atmosphere," he proved to be an artist of few, well-chosen words, which simultaneously stated the obvious, performed a meaningful gesture (like communicating touch), or conceptualized the boundaries of what poetry is (Perneczky 34). His stamps were poems, artworks, and conceptual communication experiments.

The visual situations Kocman created involved minimal manipulation so as to retain thematic and performative focus. This was, overall, an ideal use of resources and visual space for Eastern European mail art. Kocman's work, *Yes – No* (1970) comprises just the words "YES" and "NO" spaced about two inches apart on a page (Kocman 69). The artist developed this concept in a series of works. A notable example is a pair of identical photos of a nude sculpture of a woman turning her back to the viewer. One photo has "YES" stamped across the back of the figure, and the other "NO" (Kocman, *Yes – No* 191–192). The stamp

functions both as the *speech* of the figure in the photo—she is either affirming or negating the viewer's proposition—and as a message communicated from the artist to the figure.[60]

Mail art images can often be seen as intermedial *proto-memes*,[61] avant la lettre. Since Kocman's text is a rubber-stamp print, it is clear that this text ("YES"/"NO") is not part of the original work and must therefore be considered a gesture by the artist who either approves or disapproves of the figure in the picture. The photographed nude body of the sculpture is used as a virtual canvas for the *touch* of the stamp and is thus eroticized. In other works by Kocman, touch can also be quite literal when it comes to the female body. In "Love-touch-study (parts 1, 2, 3)" (1971), for example, the artist photographed a woman's breast, then a hand touching it, then the breast itself again (Kocman 35–37). A pillow and window in the background suggest this was done at home, in the context of an intimate encounter.[62] While Kocman, as a human being, and without using ink, probably continued his *touch activity* by touching his surroundings or his face, as in the photographs, he did, however, eventually stop documenting it in stamp projects.

In a typical self-reflexive mail art gesture, Kocman marked the end of this stamp activity with nothing other than a stamp. To him, this was the end of a playful, less serious era in his creative work. Kocman made "JHK'S LAST ART STAMP" (1975) by request from Gallery Stempelplaats and G.J. de Rook. Two years later, he responded to Aart van Barbeveld's request with a memorable blue stamp, "Sorry, I make stamps never more!" in

[60] This work echoes Italian proto-conceptualist Piero Manzoni's 1961 *Scultura Vivente* ("Living Sculpture"), where the artist signed the body of a model and declared it the artwork. Kocman's version is a reversal of Manzoni's since it personifies a sculpture rather than turning a living human into a sculpture.
[61] Intermedia works in mail art have been seen as predecessors of digital memes.
[62] Nudity was rare in Eastern European art in the early 1970s. Some exceptions are found in the work of Ewa Partum and Yugoslavian artist Tomislav Gotovac.

1978, for an international exhibition of rubber stamp designs in Amsterdam (Perneczky 82-83). The 1978 edition could be seen as *not* being an "art stamp," and thus a performance of the certification of the end of Kocman's stamp activity. The "Postscriptum" under the stamp declares, "My stamp activities remain in my memory with nostalgia as a time of *breezy* creativity. I ceased my rubber stamp activities in 1975, with the *last art stamp*. I have not made stamps since then" (Kocman, *Mail* 213). The *making* of stamps, or failure to do so, is also part of Kocman's performance. Perneczky recounts that "Kocman's concept also made him publish certain issues of My Activity in zero number (!) of copies" (34). This conceptual gesture could suggest either that Kocman discontinued his activity at a certain point or that he simply did not want to document it in a book, which further stresses his interest in everyday embodied experience.

Proclaiming the official end of a practice is also a dramatic gesture and a public performance in itself. In the case of the last stamp, the single physical act of stamping was the creation of the work and the end of Kocman's practice. The stamp's bureaucratic power self-reflexively certified its own position as *last*. Kocman did not give a clear explanation as to why he concluded his practice in this way, nor is it clear that he was recommending that others also quit the practice. This behavior was consistent with the general attitude of the mail art network at the time: a participant did not proscribe practices or proselytize to bring others in.

7. Bureaucracy and Rubber Stamps

The rubber stamp, as an official phenomenon, is known for its role as a mark of cancellation or approval. This binary function is sometimes directly challenged, as in Kocman's *Yes – No*, and other times transcended entirely. Yet, the most immediate way for

mail art to subvert a bureaucratic form like rubber stamps is to engage with materiality. Mail artists form and transform not only semiotic codes but also combine the practices of bureaucracy with unusual materials, such as human body parts and potatoes. As the examples in this chapter so far have shown, the array of materials that rubber stamp artists employed shows their departure from bureaucracy in their unceremonious inventiveness.

The improvised materials, frequently used by rubber stamp artists like Petasz, underscore that stamping is a continuation of everyday activity. Besides bureaucratic ink pads and art paint, Petasz "used materials at hand, such as potatoes, erasers and floor lino to make his art. He's still making rubber stamps [sic] prints to this day" ("STEPHEN"). This is what the artist Stephen Fowler recounted in 2017, two years before Petasz's passing. From chopping a potato while cooking to carving it, the artist allowed plant material to nourish his art practice, not just his own body. Unlike linoleum, for instance, the organic stamp template cannot be saved for later because it rots, which stresses the importance of performing the activity over its products. Even the tools of stamping can be ephemeral.

In his book *Networked Art*, Craig Saper explores the ways in which artists have incorporated bureaucratic elements[63] into their works, thus commenting on the validating power of official rubber stamps. Many mail artists participated in the practice of assemblings (network-circulated magazines or collections of work), which overlaps with mail art. Petasz, for example, started *Commonpress* and invited different people to guest-edit each issue. Saper notes how Petasz's experience with the bureaucracy of permissions informed his work on the assembling:

[63] For an exploration of how artists have responded to bureaucracy, see Sven Spieker's *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*.

> Petasz has noted that in Poland the censors would stamp each and every proof page of a publication on the back side of the proof. With these kinds of excessive controls, one can imagine why *Commonpress* began investigating these stamps of authentication in a number of issues produced in Poland. (Saper 13)

The language of bureaucracy can be repetitive and absurd, and bureaucratic codes[64] can become layered with artistic or personal meaning in the mail art works that engage with them.

Petasz gives an example from Poland in the 1980s that could be used to illustrate this process. "After the martial law issued by former President Jaruzelski… the militarized post offices were instructed to pay attention to the 'language of stamps'" (91). He means that they suspected stamps were used as secret codes to relay messages of political content through the post office. Petasz did not expect that officials were that aware of private codes, but he remembers reading in the paper about "strategies… between semaphore alphabet and lovers' code: a stamp in the right corner equals 'I love you'" (93). Petasz seems to be speaking of postal stamps here, not rubber stamps. If he means the right corner of an envelope, is that not where postal stamps usually are placed? The instructions given to the post office might have been driven by paranoia, and the "lover's code" rumors might have been exaggerated, but similar messages probably traveled in the network. A sign borrowed from official postal conventions and transformed by correspondents in a personal relationship might have also

[64] Assembling and mail art works not only appropriate and transform the language of bureaucracy but allow it to function both on the individual level of the work and within the artistic distribution system, or "network." What does Saper mean by "network" here? He argues that "in other assemblings, especially mail-art compilations, the network might refer to the entire historical lineage of mail art and to an elastic group of international potential participants" (Saper 21).

spread as a practice in the wider network of mail art. In this way, various layers of public and private meaning may inhabit the same sign.

8. Performing Travel and Flight through Waves of Bureaucracy

Many mail artists in the international network have recontextualized postal media by using them in a different environment. Craig Saper points to how "mail artists…take abstractions from our bureaucratic society and bring them back down to earth with parody in order to make the now-deflated abstractions useful for intimate connection among real people" (61). One such abstraction is the postmark, which is stamped on each mailed envelope to signify that a shipment was accepted by the post office. The postmark usually includes the date and time when the mailed object was received by the post office, which is, incidentally, a useful feature for mail art archivists and scholars who wish to date the thousands of works collected by artists. The parallel lines or, in some countries, the *wave* that can be seen on a postmark is strangely known as the *killer*. The *killer* is stamped, rolled, or printed across and thus invalidates the adhesive stamp used for payment. The *killer* wave is not the same as the dated and often round postmark, though they can both cancel an adhesive stamp. These practices could and can be found in postal systems internationally, including Eastern Europe, where they were used by mail artists for the creation of network-specific works.

The postal wave symbol has nothing to do with actual waves and it bears this poetic name merely because of its parallel curved lines. Every country has a standard for the form of this wave, a fact that Petasz explored in 1980 in a book that performed the possibility of travel. Petasz had correspondents from many countries and was easily able to sample a

variety of waves for a project with a *traveling passport*[65] theme. Petasz's project *Homages to Some People, Vol. II: Waves* (Fig. 3.1–3.4) is an intermedia work of text labels and stamp photoreproductions that were bound into a passport-size booklet. Petasz's postmarks and *postal wave* stamps resemble stamps in passports, thus creating an artistic passport. Each page of Petasz's passport features the same dark, abstract background, on top of which Petasz copied the part of the postal envelope that bears the postal wave. There is also a separate tag with the name of the country from which each respective wave was taken (Fig. 3.2).

Much like other mail works that question the boundaries of artwork and bureaucracy, Petasz's *Waves* reconfigures the idea of postal paraphernalia. Instead of collecting adhesive stamps, Petasz has collected their cancellations. The artist's viral aesthetization of the *killer* wave rippled throughout the postal system. On international letters, the waves functioned as symbols of crossing borders. Collectible and categorizable, they accumulated so as to constitute a symbolic and performative migration of the artist. Ironically, since the artist's series of waves only consisted of letters sent to him, such travel only occurred in one direction—that is, to the artist's residence in Elbląg, Poland. If Petasz were to have traveled with this improvised passport, he would have only kept ending up back home.

This project serves as an example of mail art's ability to neutralize a bureaucratic charge of a symbol (in this case, the wave), making it available for aesthetic manipulation and code-switching. To be sure, the trajectory of a letter sent through the mail is not identical to the performative journey of an artist-generated mail art envelope. The former travels through the postal infrastructure while the latter belongs in the art context and in the context of the interconnectedness of the mail network. Similarly, Petasz's *passport* had one meaning

[65] *Passport* is my term here. It is not known if Petasz thought of the booklet in those terms.

while in his possession, but another once it was mailed. The passport was sent by the artist around the world to his various correspondents, traveling by itself, without an accompanying person, hence a passport emancipated from representation. And yet, this symbolic passport was already filled with stamps before it even embarked on its journey. The series of waves bridged distances by bringing together all the countries represented in Petasz's correspondence, alluding to waves in the bodies of water in the comical titles added by the artist: "Yugoslavian wave," "Canadian wave," "West German Wave," and others (*Homages*). What might the difference be between the actual waves situated in these different countries? Would ripples on a Yugoslavian shore differ from those on a Canadian one, for example?

While the waves have instrumental and institutional significance for the transportation of mailed envelopes, for Petasz, they became like stamps in his personal collection, mapping his global friendships. The intimate meaning of mail art emerged as the bureaucratic postal codes were transformed to create new codes, readable only for a certain group or community of participants. Saper calls this phenomenon "intimate bureaucracies" (151). The possible allusion to the passport form is probably not coincidental. Petasz most likely did not own a passport in 1980 since he recounted how, in 1985, he was offered one in exchange for becoming an informant for the Polish authorities[66] ("Mailed" 90). The international passport was a symbol of free travel, rarely available to Eastern European artists, for whom mail art practice had instead become a meaningful connection to other artists around the world.

Mail art further allows for the interpenetration of different state bureaucracies. In his collage booklet, for example, Petasz created an opportunity for different countries'

[66] Petasz wrote, "Visits by spy hunters ceased in the 1980s, although in 1985 I was called to visit the secret police headquarters, where I was offered a passport if I would accept a position as an agent" ("Mailed" 90).

bureaucracies to *talk* to each other. Overall, he arranged the postal waves by distance, starting from Elbląg. It is the proximity of the different waves that seems unnatural. In reality, a letter receives only one wave at a time; the waves are foreign to each other and never meet, except in mailboxes of people whose correspondence is abundant and international. The visual differences between the wave designs of each country stand out significantly. The Polish wave is first, stamped twice (Fig. 3.3). The Czech wave has four lines while the Hungarian one has five. The West German wave, similar to the Belgian one, has six, but it is very short. The East German one, on the other hand, is long and not really a wave at all, since it consists almost entirely of straight lines (Fig. 3.4). The Italian wave has a gentle curve, and the Canadian presents very thick lines. There are two American waves. One features a "HOT FLASH" rubber stamp across it, signifying that it came from the progressive San Francisco gallery "Hot Flash of America." The other one, interrupted to wrap around the postmark, has straight lines and originated in Pasadena. These two American waves, the last ones in the booklet, reveal that even waves that come from the same state can differ. If there is a logic to the look of different countries' waves, it may be that the quality of the lines and curves reflects the bureaucratic *mood* of each country's ways. The juxtapositions of these bureaucratic expressions add up to a snapshot of the artist's community of contacts as represented by their country's postal aesthetics.

9. Experimentation and the Rear Guard

Even though mail art can be experimental and conceptual, it does not necessarily claim to be part of any leading innovation that necessarily expands the definition of its genre or art in general. One example is Petasz's infamous "Arrière-Garde"[67] rubber stamp logo of

[67] Kotun states that Petasz did not see himself as part of the avant-garde (328). Petasz's well-known rear guard stamp graces many of his characteristically humorous works. "Rear-guard" is also a term used by George

one dog mounting another in the *Atlantis Post* series, discussed later in this chapter. This form of his artistic signature, present in some of his books as a publisher's stamp, pictures one animal mounting the other, alluding to the deft body humor typical of Petasz's work in general (Fig. 3.12). Here, Petasz performs a reversal of the idea of the avant-garde as the artistic front of innovation, presenting instead a *rear guard*. The rear guard is both a literal pun and a paradox because the animals seem to be successfully mating, i.e., the *rear* has not been *guarded* well. Physicality in mail art can be a sign of looking for connection, especially in the context of long-distance communication that involves no touch. The mating act in Petasz's work is a metaphor for this very desire for contact or collaboration.

Being part of the rear guard also has its advantages for the creative process in mail art, which may be less burdened by an intense adherence to the principles of a very unified art movement (which mail art is not). In another iteration of Petasz's *ARRIÈRE-GARDE* rubber-stamped image,[68] this time featured in *Censor's Trinity*, there are marching soldiers, a reference to the French origin of the military concept of the avant-garde (Fig. 3.5). On the image, a uniformed group of soldiers, presumably the *avant-garde*, is headed toward the enemy to attack while a smaller, stationary group looks the other way, with their flag and weapons up. The front guard soldiers seem to be blindly following their group's directions, while the rear guard exhibits more individuality, standing in a variety of poses. In art, too, being part of the rear guard may have advantages: through the relaxed body poses and the

Maciunas in a 1965 Fluxus manifesto to advocate for noncompetitiveness, in contrast to the avant-garde. Even though mail artists participated in artistic and networking innovation during the 1970s, nonofficial art in Eastern Europe (a category under which mail art falls) was not necessarily a synonym for cutting-edge experimentation or marketable art commodities.

[68] The stamp might be just one of Petasz's humorous staples, but since it is affixed on the inside of the envelope with the *Censor's Trinity* doll, it might be taken to suggest that it is worth watching one's back.

mating of animals, Petasz expresses that a safer place, more conducive to creative experimentation, may not necessarily coincide with the front-line of cultural production. Indeed, mailing from the rear, or the periphery, served Eastern European mail artists well, given the sociopolitical circumstances.

10. Flight

For mail artists, being part of the periphery frequently involved dreams of travel. Mail art can also perform this longing or travel through its own intermediality. Another intermedia work by Petasz, *How to Fly Like a Bird* (1978), is a miniature animation flipbook taped to the back of a postcard, which intertwines the media of film, rubber stamp, and card (Fig. 3.6–3.11). By flipping the pages, one sees the animation of a human figure flapping its arms and coming to life. This work features twenty-three rubber-stamped images on separate pages, just for the flying figure itself. The energy and labor required to stamp these pages individually, the smudges, and the allusion to physical exertion all anchor this work in a distinctly somatic experience. The work is also very close to a photo flip book. The differences are that this work is also a postcard and that the left-hand side of the pages has non-flip-book content. Thus, the booklet is also meant to be examined slowly. The title on the second page of *How to Fly Like a Bird* is "Spiritual Flight," which alludes to the bird images on the left-hand side of each page, which are stamped with fragments of the Hindu mantra "om mani padme hum" ("praise to the jewel in the lotus"), implying the idea of freedom for the human being understood as a whole.

A bird's flight, standing for free travel, is a difficult feat for the human figure in this stamped booklet, which only *appears* to be flying through the quick succession of the frames. As part of the arrière-garde, mail art is less wary of employing trite metaphors such as this

one. The point of the work is not the metaphor but the creative intermediality and performativity of the simple postcard-book-film and its juxtapositions of images. The *wing flapping*, an engagement with the body, plays out not only at the hands of the artist but with any viewer of the book who thumbs through it.

Just as the simulation of wing flapping is supposed to bring flight, other mail art works have strived to assume a power over the workings of daily life. When allusions to bureaucratic certifications meet body humor and irony in mail art, bureaucracy's officiality is disarmed and its power is transformed into creative power. This is exemplified in Petasz's small-format red book titled *Genuine Hand-Stamped Amulets Against Unfortunate Accidents* (1979) (Fig. 3.12), for which Petasz created rubber stamp prints with an imagined power bordering on the magical. Each page is stamped with a rectangularly-framed image, representing the comical scene of a different everyday accident. The so-called *amulets* are described as "genuine," meaning they were made by the artist, and they really do work (which, of course, is part of the joke). These works perform by simulating a protective function. The booklet is not just meant to communicate or experiment; it has (a jokingly) practical use in real life. On one hand, the stamps are fetishized into charms, and on the other, the caricatured depiction on each stamp subverts the very title of the work. These so-called *amulets* are none other than representations of the actual accidents: a person falling from a chair, another bombarded by bird excrement, a woman's heel crushing someone's toes, a dejected man with erectile dysfunction, a terrified person about to be hit by a falling brick (Fig. 3.13–3.18). It is ironic that the very representations of these daily misfortunes are supposed to protect against such calamities.

Mail art frequently employed humor, and did so sometimes adjacently to a more somber commentary on the social and cultural conditions of the Eastern Bloc. For example, the last image in the amulet series, featuring a figure drowning with its arm raised above the water, ends the humorous streak (Fig. 3.18). This image resembles safety diagrams, though the gravity of the accident seems to preclude its power as an *amulet*. Ending the series with this image has a disillusioning effect. In a desperate gesture, the artist is trying to save himself from drowning by invoking the very distress of it. Perneczky suggests that a certain mood present in Polish stamp art cannot easily be found in the work of Western artists: "What's missing from [George] Brett is the neurotic tension of the Poles, and also the fatal ability to identify with the absurdities and the tragic turn-abouts" (76). This dramatic and unmediated shift between the comical and the tragic speaks of a deep investment not only in formal experimentation but in affective expression.

Offering meta-commentary about its own practices and their relationship with bureaucracy was not uncommon for mail art works, either. Artists were aware of the symbolic charge of the forms they used and sometimes made that explicit. In a stamp-over-stamp entanglement, Petasz's two layers of stamped images imply the different levels of power each stamp might have over the work. Each blue stamp illustration in the booklet is additionally certified by at least one red stamp, picturing a stick figure resembling a devil with a dollar sign on each side. The red stamp on blue possibly alludes to Japanese woodblock prints, but its symbolism and its repeated and misaligned use suggest a more chaotic aesthetic. In addition, the irony of a stamp certifying another stamp raises the question of how the authority of an official stamp overrules the authority of the artwork's stamped images.

Because mail art is performance in a network, neither the stamps, nor the stamped images encompass the entire work. Petasz's thoughtful stamps are well-known and cherished in the mail art network, and yet, in the end, the fact that he chose to destroy them to remind his audiences of this. He completely transformed some of his stamps, thus confirming their transiency. Perneczky interprets Petasz's gesture in this way:

> His oeuvre was only enriched when he chose to crush his painstakingly carved stamps in order to replace the expressive prints with splinter impressions. These fragments gave a tragic tone to Petasz's message, which blended personal doom with a sense of national mourning. (74)

Petasz's destruction of certain stamps, an indelible aspect of his rubber stamp work as a whole, was not a sign that he regretted having engaged in the practice, but rather an expression of frustration and disillusionment. Petasz shattered his stamps and proceeded to create the series *Obsolete Rubberstamps*, with all of the stamps sized differently. Perneczky recounts that "The number of copies ranged from 13 through 30+3 to 39, and this formal confusion can easily be identified with the puzzling contents" (74). This unusual numbering is part of mail art's unconventional use of bureaucracy that transforms the logic of market conventions.

Despite the myriad possibilities of experimentation and performance that the practice of stamping offers, artists and scholars have also expressed doubts about its significance. Perneczky, for one, has asked the question as to whether "rubber stamp art might be a sophisticated form of umbilical contemplation," by which he means *navel-gazing* (73). Perneczky is asking whether there is something self-indulgent or obsessive about this practice and continues to offer a response: "The answer is no, and I mean it… this genre is

bound to walk a tightrope somewhere between the functioning office stamps and the redundant and decorative stamp prints" (73). This metaphor suggests a delicate balance for stamp artists that involves abandoning both mere functionality and aestheticism in equal measure. While rubber stamping might look easy, if taken seriously, it is in fact a sophisticated practice that requires dedication and concentration.

11. Artistamps and Irony

Through the practice of artist stamps (artistamps), many mail artists have attempted to perform, if only jokingly, the official authority of the post office. And though on rare occasions mistaken for adhesive postal stamps, artistamps are an innocent version of fake currency, an independent coin of artistic exchange. Mail artists often placed them along the official stamps, and from a distance, it was hard to tell which was which.

Collaboration and contact were common themes in the mail art world, serving as attempts to fight isolation. Most of the time, collaboration occurred between an artist and another artist, with a few exceptions. Petasz's witty humor may also be observed in how he collaborated with those who did not expect to be part of his projects. For example, he sent a postcard in 1979 from Poland to Pat Fish in California that featured an invitation for the mail carrier to co-author the work. On the address side of the card, the stamps are shifted slightly to the left. In the upper-right corner, in a printed or drawn outline of an empty stamp, it reads, "Postman, read other side please" (Fig. 3.19). This text is positioned in the place for official postal communication—the stamp corner. If the mail carrier decided to follow the prompt, they would read the back of the card, which continues, "If you cannot deliver it before April 1st, this year, please hold it and do for April 1st 1980. Thereby you will be coauthor of this piece of art and you may sign it here" (Petasz, Postcard). An arrow leads to the dotted line

where the signature is supposed to be added. The date of "1.IV.19" is clearly stamped with large print numerals, leaving the particular year uncertain (Fig. 3.20). Apart from being an April Fools' joke, this card acknowledges the role of the mail carrier in the exchange and also alludes to the uncertainty in the 1970s that mail from Poland would make it to its final destination. On another postcard to the US, which was supposed to arrive on April 1st, 1979, doubting its timely arrival, Petasz wrote, "But I don't believe in it." The card is stamped "received" on April 2nd (Postcard 2) (Fig. 3.21).

Mail art has not shied from rallying the collaboration of postal workers or even commenting on the state of the post office that allows for the possibility of artist networks in the first place. In the humorous sheet of stamps called *Atlantis Post* (1978), Petasz's intervention involved alluding to the *sunken* value of the postal service while also using body humor. The stamp images portray various copulating duos: humans, animals, objects, numbers, signs, and texts. One image pictures Leda caressing the swan, while others feature: one fish on top of another, an exclamation point leaning on a question mark, a musical note going at another one, one text cutting through another text. The name *Atlantis Post* underscores the impossibility of the artistamp post's existence and echoes the humorous impracticality of most of the copulatory poses. The stamps only have an effect all together, as a sheet, through context. Otherwise, a missile and a peace sign together are just that, without the innuendo.

Artistamps, in general, are also a cultural performance of monetary value (as opposed to actually having any) and represent bureaucratic permission for postal passage. Yet, stamping can also be seen as a form of copulating. The word comes from the Latin *copula*, which means *connecting*, which is also what the mail does. Mail art, too, could be seen as a

form of *copulating* in this sense, a function that Petasz is performing here. Kotun observes that "[t]he traditional themes of sexuality and nudity are treated by Petasz in his characteristically sarcastic and mundane way" (Kotun 343). The fervent activity performed by the grotesquely reproducing figures, including a cloud/zeppelin duo and a man smelling a woman's foot, amounts to a sarcastic performance of inutility and a jab at postal bureaucracy.

Some of mail art's political critique expressed in the form of artistamps in the 1980s, shortly after the Polish martial law years, is quite obvious. Petasz's red artistamps, called *Fallen Slogan's Land* (1984), portray incomplete words like "Futur" and "Fre," seemingly crashing out of the sky onto a red-colored landscape. As the words fall, they leave trails behind them in the air that suggest motion and then disperse debris as they break across the red land. The slogans seem to stay intact while floating in the air, in a theoretical space of a possible *bright future*. Once the slogans touch the land, however, their fragility meets the harsh red landscape. From the performance of slogan speech, the words become slogan stutter, interrupted utterances, partially unrecognizable. The stamp sheet enacts a performance of the cultural disintegration of socialist slogans in Poland, a bureaucratic language that loses its power in the practical realm.

While stamping often engaged with the idea of *power*, it also brought attention to paper, ink, the image, and the materiality and media of the mail art work. Indeed, rubber stamping and artistamping became a central way for mail artists to perform, interact with, and satirize their own means of distribution, the postal system. Their unique approach of amalgamating bureaucracy with somatic expression challenged conventions of officiality as much as the language of intimacy. Combined with conceptually rigorous performances involving the artist's body, rubber stamps spread traces of physicality throughout the

network. In the Eastern Bloc, artistamps and rubber stamps transferred artistic energy, linking it with gestures that involved pressing hands and lips to form connections across borders without the need for actual travel, which was beyond the reach of most artists from the region. Stamping was one way for nonofficial and mail artists in Eastern Europe to coopt the state bureaucracy for the purposes of their own connection with the self and their community, a real lifeline during social and political ostracization.

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IV. Visual Poetry, Collective Authorship, and Assemblings

Visual poetry and artists' so-called *assembling magazines* often occupy overlapping spaces in the mail art network. But is there a clear distinction between the intermedia expressions of mail art and visual or concrete poetry? Unlike many practitioners of visual or concrete poetry, mail artists are more interested in aesthetic integration and collaboration than in the purity of form. Their work flows from genre to genre, and scholars who insist on the neat classification of each artwork miss the point that mail art communications are performances that reach toward connectivity from one end of the Network to another.

The publications and works in this chapter have been chosen to illustrate a spectrum of such assembling, semi-assembling, or assembling-like activities as practiced by different mail artists. They expanded the idea of authorship to a participatory communal project. *Commonpress* (1977–1990), the assembling journal founded by Polish mail artist Paweł Petasz, is a famous and broadly international example of the Network rituals of collective authorship and rotating editorship that are typical of mail art. The collective performance of mail art magazines like *SVEP*, *UNI/vers(;)*, and *Double* reveal that visual poetry assemblings blossomed in the 1990s and included some of the easternmost regions of Eastern Europe, like Russia and Bulgaria, into the Network. The time period chosen for this study, from 1974 to 1991, encompasses the full run of *Commonpress*, *SVEP* and *Double*. This era is also united by the difficult periods of stagnation in the Soviet Union and Pinochet's rule in Chile, which largely overlapped, and ends with the opening of glasnost, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the end of the Soviet Union when mail art's newly available mobility allowed for creation of new projects.

1. Assembling as a Genre

The gerund *assembling*[69] functions as a noun but is derived from a verb, signifying the action of gathering, in which both the artist and editor participate. The genre refers to a performed activity rather than an object, such as a periodical publication. Perneczky identifies the genre of assembling as:

> [A] *limited* edition publication form, for which the editor would request a certain number of copies of statements and contributions by the authors and then they would compile them into *periodical-like publications* whose number of copies cannot exceed the amount of copies submitted. Assemblings are thus always periodical-like anthologies of *original* works… Assemblings… often do not make it clear whether the individual issues include original contributions… or "original photocopies." (*Assembling* 11)

The limit on the number of copies for assemblings meant that usually any reproduction was performed by the artists themselves. Yet, this was not always the case, as sometimes editors also performed the copying. It was ideal, of course, to use originals, but if a larger edition was planned, the process would become too laborious. This "original multiplication" meant that "any reproduction might qualify as an 'original work' if it was created by the artist (this resulted in 'original copies' in the case of photocopying)" (Perneczky, *Assembling* 13). None of the artists were ever paid for their work, as it was carried out as part of a communal

[69] Unlike assemblings, their earlier cousin, *assemblage*, is "not a periodical," as Perneczky states when he explains that some examples of *assemblage* are "Marcel Duchamp's folders and boxes, the 'Fluxboxes' and 'Fluxkits'" (*Assembling* 11). Assemblages were single works gathering various scraps to create a three-dimensional artwork, more of an object than an activity. The art of *assemblage* was practiced by the earlier avant-gardes up to five decades before the spread of mail art. The network reversed this aspect by stressing the act of gathering instead.

performance in a space outside the official art market and official distribution. Since making copies in this way was acceptable, this act became part of the process of assembling.

When discussing assemblings, it is also useful to acknowledge their history. In his anthology *Assembling Magazines 1969–2000*, Hungarian artist Géza Perneczky examines a number of decades of publications in the genre. The earliest examples, such as the French publication *OU*, date back to the late 1950s. Perneczky traces the beginnings of assemblings by noting that some "editors in the '60s whose publishing activity in the field of visual literature moved from distributing magazines of classic format towards boxed or bagged anthologies, collected directly from artists and thus containing more or less 'original' works of art" (*Assembling* 19). The meaning of what an "original" was became more flexible, sometimes including certain types of reproduction. According to Perneczky, the earlier publications were more "selective" than the "democratic" ones that followed in the 1970s (*Assembling* 23). The traditional spine-bound paper container that held together a magazine changed over time to include more loosely bound sheets. The editors' roles also changed since they were no longer interested in gatekeeping.

In 1970, the American author and artist Richard Kostelanetz's magazine *Assembling: a Collection of Otherwise Unpublishable Manuscripts* inadvertently defined "assemblings" when he published the first one with the help of Henry Korn. To prepare the issue, one thousand copies of each work sent by each artist were compiled into a one thousand-copy run of the 160-page bound booklet. The idea was to publish works that mainstream publishing would not even consider printing. This egalitarian view on publishing was perfectly compatible with mail art's principles of "no rejections." Thus, assemblings were born within

the context of nonofficial publishing in Brooklyn, and the idea took off and was replicated internationally in mail art circles.

Mail art borrowed a lot of its forms from the earlier avant-gardes (like the *assemblage*) as well. Still, it also modified them to allow greater participation and accessibility, which was actually vital given Eastern Europe's conditions of material scarcity. "We run across among the early assemblings, the use of typewritten carbon-copies, alcohol stencil techniques, or cheaper 'instant print' off-set printing" (Perneczky, *Assembling* 145). Western contributors to the magazine *UNI/vers(;)* sometimes sent Guillermo Deisler in East Germany fifty photocopies of their works, whether individually touched-up or not (Perneczky, *Assembling* 145). This variety of reproduction[70] techniques was not so accessible to participants in the Eastern Bloc or South America. After the end of the GDR, where it was not permitted to publish anything in more than fifty copies without official permission, Deisler was able to offset-print *UNI/vers(;)* in a thousand copies (Perneczky, *Assembling* 145). Political conditions largely determined the activities and forms of the genre of assembling, which amounted to a mere ten percent of total publications in the mail art network (Perneczky, *Assembling* 145).

It is important to note that the reason artists participated in assembling activities had nothing to do with the advancement of their careers. "The reward of a sense [of a] social [sic] place was valuable enough by itself that it made it worthwhile to take part in the various Network actions" (Perneczky, *Assembling* 148). This sense of social belonging was an end in itself. Making a connection and participating in the project *was* the essence of networked

[70] The term is used here to mean "copying," "printing," or any other method used to create multiples of a work.

publication. The assembling issues were sent to all contributors and, if there were extra copies, to others in the Network.

The obscure but abundant production of assemblings reversed and also dissolved the power dynamic between author and audience. The fact that nonofficial artists engaged in these practices from the social and cultural periphery of Eastern Europe shows that the power of communal aesthetic energy is not necessarily to be found in canonized masterpieces or state-approved monuments. Just as the collective energy and physical exertion of rubber stamping created a wave of collectivity, so did the production of assembling magazines. So many assemblings were produced in the 1970s and '80s that participants did not see them as items of great value that needed to be carefully archived: "The Network[71] did not create major works either; rather just small, almost anonymous, excessive reflexes which taken together we can perhaps grasp as one huge action, a great explosion from the underground" (Perneczky, *Assembling* 153). Despite sometimes being admirable objects, the issues of assembling magazines simply documented a moment of aesthetic activity in the Network. The magazines' aesthetic aura emerged later in museums and collections, where the genre's ephemeral artifacts were preserved and hence reified.

2. Gender and the Lineages of Concrete Poetry

Human connection, the prioritization of process over product, and the possibility of subjective expression were among the main values of the mail art network. The women of concrete poetry had similar concerns.[72] In the late 1970s, Italian artist and poet Mirella

[71] Perneczky capitalizes this word to mean specifically the mail art and assembling Network.
[72] To think about the typist and the vocalizer entails the role of subjective experience. Typography and sound relate to the activity and movement of so-called *concrete* poetry. *Typing* on a typewriter is a temporally specific and, in part, gendered practice whose performance has cultural, social, and somatic connotations, depending on who performs it and where. *Sound* is another type of movement that extends the concrete poem off the page into spatial vibration and potential vocal performance—again a somatic experience. In some cases, poems became a pointedly performative artifact, "a score for an oralization" (Balgiu and de la Torre 13).

Bentivoglio saw a fundamental connection binding women to the articulation of the letters of the alphabet since they were the ones first involved with passing it on to the next generation (Ives). This language transfer activity occurs in a fundamental situation of relationship and deep connection—that of the child to the parent. In the 1960s and 70s, around the time that mail art was born, "subjectivity reemerged as a concern" in concrete poetry[73], where women transformed the genre into "a space, in truth, of combination, metamorphosis, switching, process, and remediation" and "opened the space of the 'concrete'… to their own experiences" (Ives). This more flexible and communal form of concretism stuck with its artists. Balgiu and de la Torre relate to this idea of collectivity when they interpret Swedish artist and poet Öyvind Fahlström's ideas as implying that "concrete poetry could induce a form of 'collective rhythmic ecstasy'" (13). Similar to the wave of collective energy in rubber stamping practices, collectively freeing words from convention could have to power to release visual and rhythmic experience on a larger scale in the Network. In mail art, the accumulation of practices like visual and concrete poetry further amplified their collective rhythm through investment in materiality.

These genres already contain conceptual and intermedia grounding that made them especially conducive to being incorporated into the mail artists' approaches. Their inclusion

[73] Rosemarie Waldrop argues that the concrete poetry movement was a "revolt against the transparency of the word" (47). The word or letter itself, a simple referent, was not centered previously—not its shape, length, or sometimes even sound. To understand this point, Heidegger's remarks on technology and distance, though predating the 1960s, prove useful. Technology is mostly invisible if it works well. Graham Harman explains this point: "Heidegger observed that the eyeglasses on my face are further than the acquaintance I see approaching the street, since the glasses are usually ignored as long as they are clean and in good working order" (21). It is only when it breaks down that it can be noticed. Modern technologies, according to Heidegger, have washed together nearness and distance into one middle ground of the "distanceless" (Harman 21). Graham Harman claims, "distance is not a discreet physical span, but refers primarily to distance and nearness for human concern" (21). Speaking about language and its degree of removal from the reader is, of course, not a matter of physical distance. Language had become transparent through repeated use and tended to lead in a few familiar and tired directions.

in mail art as a practice that stresses both the visual and the textual occurred naturally. Since these practices also exist independently from mail art, it is important to define them and settle on what they encompass in the current context. Are visual poetry and concrete poetry two different practices? In the 2021 collection, *Concrete Poetry: A 21-Century Anthology*, Nancy Perloff claims that "visual poetry, a more general term for poems that focus primarily on the visual arrangement of language, … [is] a larger category that subsumes concretism" (10). Like Perloff,[74] I will use the term *visual poetry* to refer to a wider collection of language and symbol inscription practices and performances, including concrete poetry. This chapter will also use Balgiu and de la Torre's definition of *concrete poetry,*[75] which stresses a movement away from restrictions and structures towards more unbridled and malleable language experimentation as activity and performance. While it's important to define these terms and situate them historically, it must be noted that mail art did not subscribe to strict genre definitions and fully welcomed inter-genre expression.

If the battleground for two generational lineages of concrete poetry was determined by the dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, mail art must be situated mostly with the latter, despite the fact that its community was comprised mostly of men. In "But Is It Concrete?" Lucy Ives argues that concrete poetry's "(mostly male) originators" carried a

[74] Most of Perloff's examples of concrete poetry are from the mid-twentieth century, ever since its invention in 1953, but the title of her book stresses that she is updating the way the history of the genre is interpreted. Its sources stream from the Russian avant-garde and *zaum*, the Italian Futurists, Dada, and famously, the Brazilian group Noigandres, whose 1958 manifesto "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," composed by Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, and Décio Pignatari, stated that "concrete poetry begins by being aware of graphic space as a structural agent" (90). This definition is widely respected and frequently cited, but it also reflects only one specific context—that of Brazilian men in the '50s.

[75] Balgiu and de la Torre also draw attention to how the tradition of women's work in the genre has deconstructed methods of expression and discourse that the Noigandres group did not engage with. They cite the legacy of Bentivoglio's 1971–81 exhibitions, where genre definitions also emerged, delineating two types of work: "poesia visiva (including text and images, often collaged) and concrete poetry (concentrating on the visuality of typography and writing and the sonic properties of words)" (Balgiu and de la Torre 12).

"technodeterminis[m]" and pursued "broad statements about culture and society." Rigid notions of technology and simplified ideas of a sweeping universal experience restricted the early days of concrete poetry activity. Ives recounts Haroldo de Campos's "rather macho assertions" when he defined "concretism as… populist and as speaking 'the language of today's man.'" It is thus not surprising that he dismissed "the insubstantial rhetoric of lyric poetry" for a practice of objectivity that stressed the Cold War decades' advancements in technology and explorations of "non-verbal" methods of communicating (Ives). The way that male concretists viewed history and the meaning they interpreted their times as carrying defined the direction of their art and caused them to radically dismiss all forms of lyricism. This patriarchal lineage, however, is certainly not the main aesthetic and philosophical ancestor of the kind of visual language experimentation that took place in Eastern Europe's mail art.

Overall, mail art is less interested in genre purity and does not assert strict boundaries between the *visual* and the *concrete* in poetry. Among the genres in mail art is also *word-based art*, a looser term for using language in visual art, which can be used for intermedia or mixed-media collages with poetry that does not necessarily challenge the conventions of language. To be sure, the way scholars define literary and artistic genres often does not coincide with the artists' and poets' own definitions of what they do. For example, Brazilian mail artist Paulo Bruscky claimed that he was "a visual artist who writes" and that "the word, somehow, reaches beyond the visual" (10–11). Whether mail artists also saw themselves as writers, visual artists, visual poets, or conceptualists, they did not adhere to strict aesthetic or literary lineages, including gendered traditions in concrete poetry.

3. Collaborative Editorship in the Performance of *Commonpress*

While concrete poetry was exchanged between individual artists in the network, assembling magazines, a virtually rejection-free publication model, were very common places to find it. This case study of the mail art assembling *Commonpress*, which was founded in 1977 by Paweł Petasz, can help further clarify the role of the assembling magazine in the democratization of Network activity. After this case study, I will discuss specific 1990s assemblings that focused more exclusively on visual and concrete poetry.

The editors of *Commonpress*, which started in December 1977 with seventeen participants in the first issue, intended for the magazine to be an ongoing performance, to be continued in the future by others who shared the values of artist-powered network publishing on a shoestring budget. Participating also meant taking responsibility for the project by agreeing to edit one's own issue at some point (Petasz, "Projekt" 181). For the magazine's communal performance, the editors were sourced from the contributor pool on a volunteer basis. Miśniakiewicz notes that as the number of contributors grew over time, the original idea that each would eventually serve as the assembling editor "would either appear impossible or potentially everlasting… this proposition of infinity resonates with Robert Filliou's and George Brecht's concept of Eternal Network" (15). Yet the magazine was only an eternal project in theory and its chain-letter eventually ran its course in 1990 with issue 100. In 1984, Guy Bleus claimed that *Commonpress* was still open for anyone to produce if they contacted the coordinator (108).

Due to the magazine's resilient mechanism of rotating editors, *Commonpress* aimed to be a utopian, never-ending project. Swiss mail artist H.R. Fricker has called the magazine "an exemplary networking instrument" (Fricker 176). For each issue, the editor announced a

specific theme over the Network, and participants could each send one work to the issue's editor, who changed with every issue. The editor then assembled the works into one bound issue, copied it, and sent it back to the participants. Due to this ritual of copying, where the originals sent to the editor were not being directly used, *Commonpress* should actually be considered as what Perneczky refers to as semi-assemblings, or publications for which "contributions are printed by the editors on behalf of the authors" (*Assembling* 12). Perkins defines the magazine as a "meta assembling" and argues that "Petasz endeavored to set in motion a perpetual periodical machine that was entirely dependent on the network for its participation" (Perkins 401). Perkins sees in every issue of *Commonpress* "a momentary snapshot of the network" (402). This snapshot reflects the level of activity in the mail art network at any given moment, performing the double role of documentation and self-archivization.

While mail artists were not very interested in having a museum presence, the fact that *Commonpress* editors sent their assembling magazine to an official archive was a symbolic act of entering history as a Network collective, especially for individual artists. Requirements for the *Commonpress* format were minimal, but the community expected the editor to publish at least two hundred copies at their own expense, never charging the participants. *Commonpress* was permitted to sell some copies while a few dozen were saved for major museums and the magazine's archive. This reveals a flexible attitude regarding art institutions on the part of *Commonpress*. As Petasz's founding rules stated, "The whole matter of sales, copyrights and so on must be clear, we are serious guys already and have to deal with serious guys, we aint [sic] a bunch of students making a classroom rag" ("Introduction"). With a nod to the freeform aesthetic and open-participation model of mail

art, Petasz explicitly clarified that the magazine should be produced with "serious" intentions and the appropriate effort. Despite its vast international cast of editors, the principles of this counter-cultural publication strove to uphold a communal ritual assembling practice. Therefore, the same rules were followed regardless of where the gathering and reproduction of the submitted materials took place.

Various scholars have noted that despite the fact that it produced physical objects in the form of copied magazines, *Commonpress* was, in its essence, more like a cultural performance of tasks based on communication and with a high awareness of the network within which it functioned. Jupitter-Larsen calls this project "an ongoing international performance… a collective performance; created, produced, & shared by its many contributors" (115). Kotun also locates the artwork that is *Commonpress* in its activity: "A collective performance… not the printed matter held in our hands that is the artwork but the multi-layered performative actions of the network and all of its participants who are in a constant correspondence" (Kotun 341). Zanna Gilbert, meanwhile, notes that the theater curtains in the magazine's logo are significant insofar as they mark "the behavior associated with the publication to be more important than what was actually published, affirming the conceptual and anti-market principles of process over product: the [N]etwork *is* the work" (125). The Network itself was not a stationary structure but a dynamic mechanism that was constantly evolving. Its essence was process, and it could therefore be considered an internationally collaborative performative artwork. *Commonpress's* curtain logo, designed by Petasz in 1977, stresses the letters "ON" in "Common" in a different color and surrounds them with a dotted line, while a drawn hand with wings reminiscent of the god Hermes points at the "ON" letters, heralding the magazine's arrival ("Introduction"). What this

suggests is that the magazine is meant to be always "ON"—perhaps a magazine that doesn't sleep, much like the Network.

The *Commonpress* project was aware of its own temporality as a large-scale endeavor being passed from the hands of one group to another. With skipped issue numbers, it was as if the magazine were propelled into its own future while also leaving the possibility of returning to the past and creating issues for the missing numbers. Petasz's coordination of *Commonpress* was continued by Jupitter-Larsen with his comically out-of-order numbering of the magazine's issues. Jupitter-Larsen introduced the nonchronological numbering of issues, which, according to Kotun, Petasz called an "anti-numbering concept" (331). In keeping with this, Jupitter-Larsen perceived his role at *Commonpress* to be a continuous performance, even when he was not submitting work or editing an issue:

> [T]ill Paweł states otherwise, acting as the magazine's coordinator is something which eye'll [sic] keep on doing. For most Commonpress editions, my contribution has been nothing. One reason for this being that, by not sending something in to a participant for his theme, eye [sic] illustrate what that theme is by explaining what that same theme is not. This again, is like a kind of a performance. (Jupitter-Larsen 116)

Jupitter-Larsen's relationship with the magazine was such that both his actions and their absence could be interpreted as being part of the performance. He spells the personal pronoun "I" as "eye," expressing that he is *looking* at the magazine as an eye would, observing even when not contributing in a traditional way. This *looking* is part of his performance of coordinating the assembling.

Collective network performance like the one practiced by *Commonpress* required steep sacrifices from the individual in charge of each issue. Miśniakiewicz argues that "*Commonpress*'s decentralisation meant that artists from more democratic countries could publish without further consequences [the] politically charged works of those who would have risked much more" (15). She notes that Vittore Baroni's *Commonpress* issue "Political Satire: Post Scriptum" (1979), which included 250 artists, would not have been publishable in the Eastern Bloc[76] (16). Consecutive issues could be assembled in Omaha, Budapest, and Mexico, but the material conditions[77] and legal ramifications at these locations and across the Network were hardly equitable, and printing two hundred copies was not necessarily easy or cheap. The volunteer mail art economy could not pay its assemblers, and the way that semi-assembling editors paid for the copying was left up to them. Miśniakiewicz stresses that "time and will, but also money" was needed to assemble *Commonpress* (14). The editor of the fifth issue, the Mexican artist Ulises Carrión, therefore contested any views of the Network as a seamless utopia: "it has been said that mail art is easy, cheap, unpretentious, and democratic. All this is rubbish" (48).

To give an example, *Commonpress* 10, titled "Post Office," was organized by Brazilian mail artists Paulo Bruscky and Leonhard Frank Duch in 1979. The self-reflexive title of this issue ("Post Office") referred to the magazine attempting to perform the role of an

[76] Even five years later, in 1984, Hungarian secret police agent Zoltán Pécsi responded to the Hungarian exhibit of *Commonpress* 51 "Hungary: "For Galántai's competition several 'works of art' (in reality plain botch-works) had been provided that are politically problematic, destructively criticize and, moreover—primarily some of those made by Hungarian 'artists'—mock and attack our state and social order as well as the state security organs" (Miśniakiewicz 16).

[77] Brogowski discusses how publishing *Commonpress* drove its creator, Petasz, to modest means of art production: "This periodical publication, like many other prints he authored, made him adopt the aesthetics of material and formal poverty associated with the practice of issuing low-cost artistic publications—cheap artists' books, small press, petites publications, artists' prints, other books etc.—formally modest publications, often self-published with the use of means at hand, either artistic or semi-industrial, such as offset or photocopying" (304).

alternative post office, distributing materials along new routes or patterns around the world. However, Kotun and Chuck Welch recount that "it… was published [,] but the post office of the Brazilian dictatorship confiscated all the copies called 'Post Office,' ironically enough" (336). Perneczky notes that "50% of the works were stolen" (*Magazine* 265). The Brazilian postal authorities may have been suspicious that these mail artists were claiming state authority for themselves.

A somewhat undemocratic aspect of *Commonpress,* and of the Network overall, was the low participation rate of women artists, who numbered only a handful.[78] This phenomenon was not unusual for the 1970s and '80s and further affirmed that mail art, just like the neo-avantgarde in Eastern Europe, more or less duplicated the gender power relations of the population at large. The lack of women editors and artists also meant that *Commonpress* performed mainly for men as an audience, and that occasionally its output was exploitative or misogynist. For example, German artist Peter Below's *Commonpress* 3 (1978), titled "Eroticism and Art," featured a cover image of a topless model in a bathing suit who had her face and breasts scratched out. Such defacement was a clear breach of mail art's egalitarian mission. This was also the only issue that had a price printed on its cover ($4), something that Petasz likely did not approve of. Inside the issue, British artist Robin Crozier's page listed a long definition of eroticism that consisted of a long list of objects and gestures received from women artists, including the Eastern Europeans Ewa Partum and Dóra Maurer. In 1983, Crozier would publish a similar list in issue No. 48, "Selfexamination," where he labeled parts of his body that corresponded with words that could be traced to a numbered list of women artists. This functioned as a flirtation and

[78] It is difficult to establish the exact number of women mail artists since some have been known to work behind a male pseudonym.

pointed to the fact that in order for women to become visible in the Network, they had to be sexualized (by a man) or gathered together in their own isolated category.

If these examples seem to show that the mail art network's egalitarian unity was a bit of a fantasy, such egalitarianism nevertheless continued to be performed in mail art and alternative publishing projects that explored materiality as a medium for collective consciousness. In the early 1980s, at the time Petasz created the mail art suit for *The Intellectual Benefits of Art*, the artist also worked on another networked assembling project, *Artforum.*[79] The project consisted of a simple table of contents that listed the submissions. Ironically, in a performative gesture, Petasz had sourced the paper for that page from the pulped submissions themselves. In this way, as pulp, *Artforum* amalgamated fragments of the Network until they were an indistinguishable mass, with only their titles preserved and listed on the contents page. Petasz's point here was to stress the work's materiality by reducing *Artforum*'s submissions to their material substratum.

In mainstream art, turning submissions into pulp might be seen as destruction or an erasure of individual expression. In mail art's playful and anti-market practices, such projects were gestures reaffirming the Network's unity. A year later, in 1981, American mail artist Cracker Jack Kid (Chuck Welch) created what he described as a "ritual performance piece" ("Material" 2). The pulp for *Commonpress* 47 "Material Metamorphosis" (1981)[80] was in this case sourced from the contributors' "favorite old garment[s]" they sent (Welch, "Material" 3). The transformation of cloth into a magazine performed the network's unity

[79] To be distinguished from the American magazine by the same name, which was founded in 1962. Bryzgel argues that issues of the American magazine were available in the Eastern Bloc in the 1970s, for artists who knew how to acquire them (46). It is likely that Petasz's pulp-page project was a conceptual imitation of the famous magazine.

[80] The issue can be viewed in *Artpool*'s online archives: https://www.artpool.hu/MailArt/chrono/Commonpress/Commonpress47.html

and collectivity through a laborious, ritualized process, decentering the resulting aesthetic object.[81] Welch writes in the description of his project that "the objectives included (1) a conceptual mail art exchange, (2) a travelling exhibition, (3) written documentation of the project in *Commonpress* and (4) a ritual performance piece" ("Material" 2). The scope of this mail art project, which combined the artist's long experience in papermaking with networked collaboration, clearly went beyond the material issue of *Commonpress* that it produced. In his basement paper mill, Welch pulverized over twenty-five pounds of cotton garments that he received from 130 artists, turning them into envelopes that were then further manipulated by artists according to the theme of "self-identity" and then exhibited in transparent sleeves (Welch, "Material" 3). The participants in *Material Metamorphosis* were mostly from the United States. The only Eastern Europeans were four artists from Poland (including Petasz) and one from Yugoslavia, all men.

In the end, submissions from different locations were all mixed together until this unusual assembling had no particular nationality. Welch photographed (and then exhibited) different stages of his process and labeled them "Material Evidence" or "Evidence of Transition." The photograph of the artist wearing a hood while shredding cloth over a candle recalls the mood of a *ritual*. It is printed on the magazine page both as a negative and as a developed photograph. For Welch, the image represented the violence of the art establishment's "monetary overindulgence," a typical Western narrative in mail art works of the 1980s ("Material" 6). Paradoxically, Welch's shredding ritual represents both this

[81] Malgorzata Miśniakiewicz writes: "One of Pawel Petasz's mail art works from 1977, signed as a part of the Arriere-Garde project, stated ART IS NOT AESTHETIC BUT ETHICS. The slogan—held by a masked fighter with a machine gun, accompanied by a superhero and a priest—reflects on a moral paradigm of artistic activity. It privileges an artist's stance over a product he or she creates" (14).

violence *and* its artistic metamorphosis through collaboration, which justifies his use of two versions of the photograph.

Commonpress existed equally as performance and in the form of material objects. Kotun claims that therefore the project "was more than a two-dimensional collaged work since, at least, it broke out into the third dimension… many of magazine [works] can thus be regarded as object-works" (338). As both object and performance, the magazine presents itself as an archivable assembling. While it might be housed in many archives around the world, *Commonpress* is not necessarily concluded as a project. The idea of it is still available to be used by artists who are interested in filling in the gaps of the magazine's missing issue numbers. *Commonpress* was future-aware, leaving space for diversification by the assembling work of subsequent generations.

4. Mail Art in Bulgaria and the Entry of a Peripheral Language into the Network

Mail art did not reach Bulgaria until 1984, when ideas about assembling magazines were already developed, which is why it is not surprising that those who lived there and were interested in visual poetry reached for this particular publishing platform. The first Bulgarian-born mail artist and poet Vesselin Sariev (sometimes spelled "Sarieff") created mail art, visual poetry, and founded a visual poetry assembling magazine that expanded his artistic community in combination with a display of the artist's roots in the Eastern European historical avant-garde.[82] Along with the Chilean artist Guillermo Deisler, they were the first ones to exchange mail art in Bulgarian, enriching the linguistic diversity of the Network where English, German, and French were the default languages of exchange.

[82] Sariev's activities spanned the literary, visual, postal, and performative. He authored two poetry collections *Здраво Утро* (*Zdravo Utro*; "Healthy Morning") (1982) and *Преð Края на Кръга* (*Pred Kraya na Kruga*; "At the Borders of the Circle") (1989), published visual poems in Bulgarian magazines, and authored a postcard series (1990).

While reaching for contact with the international mail art network, Sariev, much like his fellow mail artists in the Soviet Union, rooted his practice in an Eastern European aesthetic tradition. In his concrete poems, Sariev directly built on the foundation of the Russian avant-garde, declaring his affiliation with that tradition. The three-page poem "Three poems after Malevich" (ca. 1990) is comprised of a series of carefully spaced and repeated letter "a"s that alludes to the geometric shapes of Suprematism and to primordial single-vowel vocalization. The first of the three Malevich-inspired poems performatively reenacts Malevich's 1915 *Black Square* (Fig. 4.1). Sariev's first square is outlined with "a"s, eleven on each side. The second square features the same arrangement, except that the grid of letters is now fully filled in, with a total of 121 "a"s (Fig. 4.2). The last of the three concrete poems inspired by Malevich uses only every other "a" from the previous full square; the grid-like structure allows the viewer-participant to decide if they see diagonals or diamonds of "a"s (Fig. 4.3).

There is both tradition and a reach towards universality in this poem because the letter "a" exists in various languages, and thus, the poem could be easily read by a broad audience. While Malevich believed that the *zero* degree of painting was a square devoid of light, Sariev went back to one of the basic building blocks of language—the first letter of the alphabet, coincidentally also identical in the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets. This gesture also goes back to avant-garde *zaum* poets Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov's manifesto "The Word as Such" (1913), but it stresses the visuality of language more than its auditory aspect. Even the cover of Sariev's assembling *SVEP* for issue 2 had the outline of a square in black ink, performing a connection to the Russian avant-garde and Malevich's Suprematism (Fig.

4.4), while issue 3 had a double-border square, continuing the theme (Fig. 4.5). Sariev's explorations of the square had transitioned from his visual poems into his assembling design.

In 1984, Sariev found mail art and the idea of assembling when he met Deisler at a gathering place for intellectuals—the trendy milk bar Млекото (*Mlekoto*, "The Milk"). They became friends and, together they collaborated with Chilean artists. Katrin Sarieva, the artist's wife, recounts how different The Milk was from other such hubs because it "gathered artists and intellectuals who did not fit in and were not tolerated by the official structures. They spoke on topics of philosophy, poetry, and ideas, while other 'artist places' were bohemian experiences." An outcast in his own country, Deisler easily fit in this dissident atmosphere. In the aftermath of the 1973 military coup, Deisler had been imprisoned in Chile for two months. He had left for France, and from there he had traveled to East Germany. By sheer luck, a refugee quota had him sent to Bulgaria in 1974, where he made a home in the city of Plovdiv. Sarieva remembers Deisler's various jobs as a scenographer and illustrator that drew upon his diverse talents as an artist. In 1986, Deisler was allowed to return to East Germany. Once there, he resided in Halle and sent many communications to Sariev before he passed away in 1995. Katrin Sarieva outlines the political similarities and differences between the two artists, stating that Deisler was "a left-leaning intellectual, communist, exiled by Pinochet's regime after the coup in 1972 [while Sariev] was antitotalitarian and anticommunist, but despite the different points of view, they shared their aversion towards dictatorship in all its forms" (K. Sarieva; my trans.). The political situations in Chile and Bulgaria were quite distinctive, which explains the artists' differing philosophies, but their interest in visual poetry and its unimpeded distribution united them against sociopolitical boundaries.

Ideas of democracy, celebration, and the promise of travel were in the air in Bulgaria shortly after 1989. Mail art performance matched this spirit of discovery through international collaborations. In 1990, Sariev founded the semi-assembling[83] magazine *СВЕП. списание за визуална и ескперименталнa поезия* (*SVEP. spisanie za vizualna i eksperimentalna poezia*, "SVEP. a magazine for visual and experimental poetry"). In the first issue of SVEP, Sariev wrote that visual poetry is "maybe the most democratic art. It relies on a happy whim, using all kinds of materials and means—collages, montages, prints, patterns, manuscripts, computer texts, packages, blanks, cards, views, seismograms" ("SVEP: a magazine"; my trans.). With its loose-leaf, four-issue run of a hundred copies per issue, *SVEP* was inspired by Deisler's visual poetry assembling *UNI/vers(;)*, which had a collage in issue No.5 that Sariev had made from Bulgarian newspaper cuttings (V. Sarieva 50). As a publication, *SVEP* performed mail art's democratic principles of inclusive genre definitions, issued no rejections, and did not engage in arguments over authorship or copyright. The magazine was born in the particularly festive period in Bulgaria after the fall of the Berlin Wall. As Sariev's daughter Vesselina Sarieva wrote about the atmosphere during the first free elections in Bulgaria after the end of Communism, "Plovdiv was one big hippy [sic] festival," in June 1990 (qtd. in Basciano). In August, Sariev wrote to the director of the expensive Sheraton Hotel in Sofia with a new initiative: "to open a Visual Poetry postcard booth" ("To the Director"). In the same letter, he mentioned the importance of mail art "as a metaphor of the traveller" ("To the Director"). With travel becoming more widely possible, mail art could embody the vision of being more connected to the rest of the world. This

[83] Perneczky's term. See the definition earlier in the chapter.

gesture of reaching to a notable institution like the hotel with a nonofficial art project had become freshly possible.

Through SVEP and Deisler's mentorship, Sariev was starting to become a more well-connected artist, which also led to exposing the world to works from Bulgaria. In January 1990, he had written to Deisler, called him his "teacher," and asked to include him in *SVEP*'s editorial collective. Deisler wrote back from Halle in January 1990, agreeing to be included. In the inaugural issue of SVEP, Sariev expressed his thoughts on visual poetry, which to him had become a symbol of a tightly-knit community:

> Presently, not more than several thousand people practice this modern art. For them, the Earth is a big village and they are a large family, whose members look for relatives… They do not see each other, but know each other by their visual messages… by the feelings incorporated in them (Sariev, "SVEP: a magazine").

Aligned with the idea that visual poetry allows for affective expression, Sariev belongs to the lineage of concrete and visual poetry that welcomes subjectivity as a binding force for groups of artists who practice these genres.

In the spirit of mail art, Sariev did not impose his ideas of what he considered visual poetry on those participating in his magazine. To the extent that they contained text and an awareness of visuality, collages, clippings, mixed-media, and intermedia works could co-exist. From *SVEP*'s perspective, the idea of the genre was very open indeed. Even artworks without text were accepted as more metaphorical interpretations of visual poetry. This did not mean, however, that the published work did not have a significant function when it came to artistic discourse and production. As Sariev noted, "Authors of visual poetry rehabilitate poetic language as a means of expression—an international language marked by the signs of

time… [P]oets react to equalization that oppresses free speech" (Sariev, "SVEP: a magazine"). Visual poetry for Sariev was a kind of medicine that refreshed language and served as a *lingua franca* for international collaborators to practice together and act as each other's audience.

Among the contributors to *SVEP*, there are not many names that are easily recognizable as belonging to women, even if it's true that sometimes, in mail art circles, pseudonyms were used by women who preferred to assume a gender-neutral or even masculine network role in order to avoid prejudice and objectification. In the fourth issue, we find Teresa Lucía from Santiago, Chile, and, possibly, E. Becker, whose non-experimental drawing of a mother and an infant says, "When I hold my child, I hold the world" ("When"). Non-experimental works like Becker's cannot easily be classified as visual poetry, but they were still included in Sariev's project.

Whether it was sent through the international mail art network or not, all of his visual work shows Sariev's familiarity with concrete poetry, although he did not expect the same from his SVEP collaborators whose work could be classified more broadly as visual poetry or as visual text-based work. The places where his contributors were located (Switzerland, Chile, Japan, and the USSR, among others) speak to the impressive reach of Sariev's mail art community. After 1990, the artist had an easier time engaging the farther nodes of his network than those who were closer to home, which mimicked the experience of other mail artists in Eastern Europe who oftentimes communicated more with Western artists than with each other. For example, the second issue of *SVEP* had only one contributor from Eastern Europe, apart from Sariev himself.

As a writer from a minor literature, in the Deleuzian sense of the term, Sariev knew that the poems he published in Bulgarian periodicals would not reach a large international public. He was in a better position to be aware that going visual was his ticket to perform in an international mail art community network where few were familiar with the Bulgarian language. He also ensured that the *SVEP* covers were easy to interpret for an international audience. For instance, issue 1's cover featured an arrangement of symbols and German letters (like *ü* and *ß*) overlayed with a dot-pixel image of a woman's lips, sourced from a postcard design by Deisler.[84] Among Sariev's own mail art postcards are various works of concrete poetry, featuring black typed letters and lines in several languages, mostly in Bulgarian, Russian, and German.

Guillermo Deisler's contributions, including his correspondence with Sariev in Bulgarian, played a significant and locally inspiring role as one of the few mail art exchanges in Bulgaria. The correspondence also shows how much the Bulgarian poet learned from his mail art mentor. When Deisler sent a postcard to Sariev in the mid-1980s, he translated his own portmanteau "CHLEXILIO" from Spanish into Bulgarian: "Веско, това значи: изкуство по поща • ЧИЛИЗГНАНИЕ •" (*Vesko, tova znachi: izkustvo po poshta • CHILIZGNANIE •*; "Vesko, this means: mail art • CHILEXILE •") (Deisler, Postcard). The Spanish rubber stamp on the card, "ARTE-CORREO CHILEXILIO," referred to the mail art performance of exiled Chileans, such as Deisler. *Chile* ends with the same letter that starts the word *exilio*, e, making it easy to merge the words into the Spanish portmanteau.

The translation of Deisler's lexical blend into Bulgarian has added new meaning to the phrase. Translating was not difficult because the Bulgarian spelling of *Чили* (*Chili*;

[84] It was sent earlier from Deisler to Sariev.

"Chile") ends in the same letter that starts the word *изгнание* (*izgnanie*; "exile"), *е*. However, in Bulgarian, the word is not the same as in Spanish or English ("CHILEXILE") and the conjunction *или* (*ili*; "or") emerges as its own word between *Ch* and *exile*, suggesting "Chile *or* exile" as a choice an artist such as Deisler is presented with. Yet, it is rather an impossible choice since the exiled cannot return unless they are prepared to face severe consequences. In this sense, *ARTE-CORREO CHILEXILIO* is the performance of mail art in *limbo*, a restless activity for those artists who have lost the connection with their home, a perpetual making of a home while corresponding in the network.

The introduction of Cyrillic as the language of mail art called for different spellings, which helped to enrich and rejuvenate some of its concepts. Deisler himself did not only translate his terms into Bulgarian but also composed Bulgarian concrete poetry. In a poem sent as mail art from Halle in 1990, various one-word terms, such as *война* (*vojna*; "war"), like *воин* (*voin*; "warrior") or *военнопленник* (*voennoplennik*; "prisoner of war"), are arranged in such a way that their *о*'s form a single vertical column. This column, like a string of beads, slips seven lines down the page, leaving the first seven words without their *о*'s. As a result, the words are transformed. *War* becomes *йната*[85] (*jnata*; "the stubbornness"), *воеводата*[86](*voevodata*; "the rebel chief") turns to *еводата* (*evodata*; "isthewater"), and *вождът* (*vozhdut*; the war chief) transforms into *ждът* (*zhdut*), a word similar to the Russian for *ждать* (*zhdat'*; "to wait"). Meanwhile, the edge of the page is surrounded with *в*-та ("v"s) and *а*-та ("a"s), except for a small outlet in the lower right corner that allows for the *о*'s to slink out of the poem and the frame. It is as if language cannot bear its *о*'s, a

[85] This is a slight misspelling of the word for *the stubbornness* because of the diacritic on *й*. Technically, the diacritic mark turns the letter into a consonant, making the word would be impossible to pronounce by stricter linguistic rules.
[86] Here, Deisler, knowingly or not, uses a Russian-like spelling of the noun to make the pun work more easily.

universal sound of pain, here expressed through a specific Eastern Slavic linguistic context. Exiled, the *o*'s perform an orderly departure like a row of soldiers leaving their regiment. The absence of the vowels is palpable because it completely changes the meaning of the poem to distance it from the theme of war. Once the cry of the *o*'s is released, the *war* loses its power.

This pacifist concrete poem aligns with Deisler's concern with mail art practice as a vehicle for peace actions. Both the poem's movement down and out of the page and the purposeful inclusion of Bulgarian reveal its performance aspect. The *o*'s, like the few main vowels, are the same symbol in the less peripheral Latin alphabet. Deisler could have chosen a Cyrillic character for the letter that leaves the page in the poem, yet, instead, he chose a letter that is shared in both alphabets, the roundest, most easily reproduced alphabetic symbol. Once the string of *o*'s leaves the poem, it becomes its own word, nineteen *o*'s long. It is not clear where the extra twelve *o*'s are from, and the audience is seeing only part of the poem. There must be words before *войната* (*vojnata*; "the war") from which letters have fallen, most likely other words with related meanings, words associated with the single-vowel vocal expression of *o* and with unrest in the world.

Deisler also uses the Cyrillic alphabet in his 1986 PEACEDREAM-PROJECT postcard to compel his audience to perform the alphabet with one vocalization after another. The entire order of the letters in the alphabet (including the Russian-specific letter *ы*) with some alterations is printed in bold typography, with each letter repeated several times. This repetition encourages the viewer to linger over each letter, "sounding it out." Deisler surely could have included all the extra characters for Russian, but he did not. He was interested in the specific linguistic experience of the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv where he lived and performed. His postcard is less an alphabet textbook guide than a performance score,

suggesting that the Cyrillic alphabet has entered international mail art and that those who can read it should feel free to speak it, no matter where they are located in the network.

While Deisler managed to travel to places like Plovdiv and learn a new language, the one journey that most mattered to him—flying back to Chile—was the journey he couldn't make. In 1986, Deisler moved from Plovdiv to East Berlin, still unable to return to his home in Chile. Mail art's theme of travel and the idea of sourcing materials from the Network helped Deisler perform the vision of flying through yet another project. He sent out a call to the Network, saying, "I need the feathers of all the world for my own flight" (Deisler, Letter). Deisler, who was highly popular and respected in the network, received many replies. Like a mail art Icarus, he collected feathers with the help of his community. While technically not an assembling magazine, the feathers, which are also a material for making writing quills, produced proverbial assembling *wings*. In 1989, the project was presented in Annaberg-Buchholz, the place where the noted GDR artist Carl-Friedrich Claus, whom Deiser exchanged correspondence with, lived. As if carrying change on its internationally-assembled wings, Deisler's project was also presented in Berlin during the demonstrations in the fall of 1989.

In 1987, Serge Segay[87] responded to Deisler's project *Federn der ganzen Welt für meinen Flug* ("Feathers of all the world for my flight") with a visual poem (*Mail* 66–67). This performative work takes on the theme of Icarus's flight by envisioning a symbolic journey through time, back to the avant-garde. The work features a feather stabbed through a black rectangle, which is a version of Nikonova and Segay's representations of Malevich's *Black Square*. The act of "stabbing" the square is practical since it serves to affix the feather

[87] For more information on Segay, see Chapter III.

to the work and symbolic because it points to Malevich's basic building block for an artwork. The *Black Square* served to anchor Nikonova and Segay in their tradition as they also embark on the flight joining the international mail art network. Part of the work is a drawing of a figure with broad angular shoulders that is waving a wing flag in each hand, symbolizing mobility and communication.

Segay's visual poem also underscores the importance of navigating flight by incorporating a nautical communication code. A parenthetical Russian text remains from the original flag: "Используется только к… составлении слов (Роумио)" (*Ispol'zuetsya tol'ko k… sostavlenii slov (Roumio)*; "Used only for… composing words (Romeo)") (Segay, *Mail* 67). Since Deisler could already read Cyrillic, this reference to visual poetry would not have been lost on him. The background to Segay's visual poem comprises two "R" (Romeo) Code of Signals flags, featuring a yellow cross on a red background,[88] which is likely chosen because it resembles Malevich's Suprematist work *Black Cross* (1915). The text over one flag reads, "action-visual poems for sailors op.N7" (Segay, *Mail* 67). The transportation theme envisions mail artists as sailors, holding encoded flags for each other from a distance to perform a continuing act of communication. Through images of flight, navigation, methods of signaling, and an allusion to avant-garde experimentation, Segay shows his support for Deisler's position of exile and suggests that when flying or sailing through the Network or otherwise, it is necessary to know where one is going.

5. *Samizdat* as a Form of Assembling

Some mail art works may not only be seen as cultural performance, but actually incorporated real performance art, some of it in line with the performances of the pre-

[88] The conclusions here are drawn from observations of a grayscale reproduction of the work. It is uncertain whether the original work was in color or grayscale.

revolutionary Russian Futurists. References to the historical avant-garde are common in international mail art practice, though in works outside the Soviet Union, the most frequently encountered reference point is Dada. Rea Nikonova, for example, performed with the group *Transfuturists*, using the mail art network to set off a neo-avantgarde Futurist revival.[89]

Long before becoming mail artists, Nikonova and Segay worked on unofficially distributed projects. They were part of the group *Anarfuts* (Anarcho-Futurists) in the 1960s. From 1979 to 1987, during the so-called "period of stagnation," Nikonova worked on the *samizdat* avant-garde journal *Транспонанс* (*Transponans*)[90] together with Segay and Boris Konstriktor (Boris Mikhailovich Axelrod), a Leningrad poet, novelist, artist, avant-garde author, and former Acmeist (Nikonova "Mail Art" 97). The group called itself *трансфуристы* (*transfuristy*; "transfurists") or *транспоэты* (*transpoety*; "transpoets"), and practiced what its members referred to as *транфуризм* (*transfurizm*; "transfurism"), a Neo-Futurist style. Nikonova stated that "this publication was considered a model avant-garde journal in the nation and it was the only journal which dealt with the subject of visual and action poetry in the USSR" (Nikonova, "Mail" 97). Because of the nonofficial status of the project, *samizdat* was the only way to distribute this periodical.

Due to the Soviet Union's isolation before the end of the 1980s, artists had to develop internal nonofficial networks of contacts. In this sense, they were already familiar with some of the methods of mail art before it even reached them. While not technically an assembling because its contributors were not from the mail art network, *Transponans* nevertheless shared many qualities and production practices with assemblings, suggesting a certain isomorphism

[89] There is otherwise only scant information regarding mail art references in the Soviet Union because mail art there was almost nonexistent.
[90] Issues can be found in this archive: https://collections.library.utoronto.ca/view/samizdat:transponans

between assemblings and Soviet *samizdat*. *Transponans*'s stapled or thread-bound issues are made with modest material, including originals, cutouts, and paper-clipped artifacts. Ilja Kukuj states that with only five copies made for hand-to-hand circulation, the journal could not be sold or have a subscriber base and thus, as with assemblings, it was not the quantity of its circulation that determined its cultural importance ("Сохранить"). The ritual of passing a few cherished *samizdat* copies from one person to another is a communal performance akin to the postal exchanges in the mail art network. Assemblings were, in themselves, not only similar to *samizdat* but can also be referred to as a form of multidirectional *tamizdat*, a way to publish *tam* ("there," not here) where the "there" did not necessarily imply the West.

Not surprisingly, the design of *Transponans* aligned itself with the travel imagery of mail art, with several of the thirty-six issues being set up as performative, flight-inspired formats. Nikonova recalled that the magazine resembled "an airplane with outstretched wings," but that it also had its "opponents…residents of capitals, accustomed to patronizing the provincials" (Nikonova, "Mail Art" 97-8). Working from the small town of Yeysk, Nikonova worked from the periphery, inspiring many mail artists like herself to join the Network. She explained that the advent of *glasnost'* was the end of many *samizdat* publications, including *Transponans* (Nikonova, "Mail Art" 98). Even after the demise of *Transponans* in 1987, Nikonova continued experimenting in a Neo-Futurist style, creating visual poetry, recordings, and performances. At that time, Nikonova and Segay had already been part of the mail art network for two years. Naturally, as Nikonova encountered international connections and began sending mail art, her preceding work entered into her mail art practice, infusing her networked art with Neo-Futurist references. This

amalgamation was not a mere coincidence since both Futurism and mail art deemphasize the material art object and privilege the work's performative aspects instead.

Nikonova also created her own assembling magazine. *Дубль* (*Dubl'*; "Double"), which ran from 1991 to 1994, was an "international mail art & visual poetry review," as its cover proclaimed. Nikonova called the journal layout "Rea-structure" and required contributors to conform to its unusual shape: a combination of a square and a triangle, suggesting a connection to Suprematism. *Дубль* (*Dubl'*) also means "take" in Russian, a term from cinematography. In this sense, the journal's shape could also be compared to the film production clapperboard. The design's visuality and movement align with an aesthetic recalling a take from a film. Greve connects Nikonova's geometrical "form language" to Malevich's *Black Square* and argues that "the challenge of this book form is a creation of a kinetic object which is perceived and handled like a sculpture" (465). The very design of the assembling is not static. The triangle pierces the square with its tip (which recalls Segay's square stabbed with the feather in 1987). It does so through the mirrored cutout of a triangle, creating a rhomboid shape underneath. This juxtaposition clearly alludes to the work of Russian constructivists such as El Lissitzky, who also experimented with book design (in collaboration with Vladimir Mayakovsky). Perneczky commented that "triangle pages alternate with square ones… [which] symboliz[es] a handshake between the products of visual poets and the mail artists" (*Magazine* 109). As such, the journal, which includes various collages and intersections of materials, is an intermedia work to a greater extent than other assemblings with simpler designs. As has been shown in this chapter, many mail artists were also visual poets. Through uniting the visual to the linguistic in explorations of the

materiality of language and the design of assembling publications, artists-turned-editors created inclusive opportunities for Network participants working in various media.

To conclude, during the 1990s in Eastern Europe, visual poetry became the focus of mail art assemblings. With their relatively egalitarian European distribution, at least geopolitically speaking, assemblings engaged artists from Eastern Europe's Easternmost periphery, such as Bulgaria and Russia, as well as exiled artists from South America. The aesthetics of these communal art distribution actions built an open network of trust and lack of judgment while retaining experimental vigor. Visual poetry comprises a spectrum of actions, speaking an international language and performing communication actions in the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. Artists were inspired by the geometry of their historic avant-gardes. Still, they transformed their subject matter to promote interconnectivity and free motion, both on the page, with the body, and between major and minor cities, where they built their networks from the periphery.

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Conclusion

In this dissertation, *Networks, Assemblings, Ephemera: East European Mail Art as Performance 1971-1994*, I have demonstrated that mail art of the 1970s, ’80s, and early ’90s in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc showed strong affinities with performance. This has allowed me to argue that mail art is a community action and a ritual and can only carry this name if it is created with a Network consciousness. This has important implications for ideas about Eastern Europe’s connectedness before 1989, both within the Bloc and outside of it. The goals of this project have been to underscore the empowering effects of decentralized distribution and intermedia collaboration for artists in the region whose official routes of aesthetic expression were limited. Through building alternative publishing platforms, experimenting with media and materiality, and connecting bureaucratic practices to somatic experience, Eastern European artists created a nonofficial realm where their mail art practices were respected and supported.

The works chosen for this dissertation were selected because they exemplify ideas about mail art as performance and explicitly show their conceptual entanglement with their existence in the Network. Furthermore, access to archives and documentation of mail art was another factor in these choices. The archives I had access to in California contained collections only from certain Eastern European artists. While by no means representative of all the work generated from the region, this sliver of the Network was very helpful in beginning to build a map of collaborations across the Atlantic. The works found in the currently expanding online archives, along with works from archives I examined in Germany and Bulgaria, provided some very productive artwork juxtapositions for this project. Some of the archival works examined here have never been discussed in scholarly texts and many of

the others have not been analyzed through the framework I offer. Pat Fish's archive at the University of California, Santa Barbara was recently donated to Special Collections and has yet to be fully examined by scholars.

It is in the nature of mail art research to have to consult multiple archives. Most importantly, in order to study the work coming from one geographic location, it is necessary to look far away from it as well. While mail artists kept some of their own works in their personal archives, each artist mostly possessed the works of other participants. Thus, the complete archive of one artist's work is an archive scattered around the world, along the vectors of their personal network. It would be virtually impossible to gather all the work by one artist in a single place; naturally, this was never the goal of mail art, whose entropic behavior tended towards expansion rather than contained order. While many of the works discussed in this dissertation are housed in Eastern European archives, the pieces sent abroad or contracted to be preserved later are now often found in the museums and archives of the former West. Their afterlives as fragments from complete chains of activity will be read by scholars in the act of media archeology.

Another question of interest to me in writing this dissertation has been: who was *really* welcome to the Network? Despite exhibiting a highly eccentric character, the mail art world was democratic, inspiring widely spread participation of artists and craft-oriented enthusiasts from different economic and cultural backgrounds. Anyone with access to the post office, basic craft materials, and a list of addresses of correspondents could participate. Unlike the demanding art gallery world, mail art had no rejections, no critics, and almost no relationships with formal institutions. Mail art represents an alternative to the capitalist art market, which emphasizes commercial exchange and the production of valuable art objects.

Mail art, then, especially when it is seen as performance, is a communication practice rather than an object-focused transaction. It has welcomed a diverse array of works, without any expectations for them to be sold, to be widely accepted as an aesthetic accomplishment, or to serve as a way for artists to make a living.

When participants in the Network organized shows, no fees were required, and all work was meant to be exhibited. Such initiatives provided a haven for less popular artists or amateurs, with some shows receiving so much work that setting up proper displays in the gallery was almost impossible. This was particularly important for Eastern European artists, whose nonofficial art was generally tolerated by the state but not supported or exhibited. Through participation in mail art initiatives, artists were given opportunities to display their work in galleries. Unfortunately, in the available archival materials, men's work primarily forms an overwhelming amount of the evidence.

While divisions within mail art might have been less applicable to Eastern Europe, in the West, there were parts of the Network that had more organization and were considered by some to be more established. In 1995, the Californian mail artist Leavenworth Jackson said, "There are women and men who either have dropped out of (what I will call for lack of a better term) 'official' mail art circles or who never bothered with them" (Jackson 219). By the mid-1990s, this stratification in the Network began to morph its rhizomatic structure to resemble more mainstream art systems. Speaking as a woman[91] on the "dearth of women in some 'official' mail art circles," she concludes, "[P]erhaps ours is the original 'Art Strike'" (Jackson 219). Jackson is referring to the idea that refraining from making art can be a

[91] Apart from the women creating or choosing not to create mail art, there also exists the invisible labor of women who archive, research, collect, and write about mail art. Collector Gene Brown, tattoo artist, mail artist, and archive benefactor Pat Fish, researcher and curator Zanna Gilbert, I, myself, and many other women contribute to the study of mail art in unique ways.

powerful protest (such as was practiced by the anti-war movement in the 1960s)—one that existed long before it became a project by that name for mail art in the early 1990s. The fact that these divisions existed does not fully undermine mail art's project. Network equality was a direction to move towards, not a static state. From the 1960s to the 1990s, mail art in the West had evolved in various directions, some quite distant from what Ray Johnson had started decades earlier in the predecessor of the practice, correspondence art.

Mail art arrived in Eastern Europe in the late 1960s, in part thanks to Johnson and in part thanks to local practices that were simultaneously evolving in that direction. Mail art's radical community practice permeated through the so-called "porousness" of the Iron Curtain (Bryzgel 1). It was no large-scale social revolution of the kind that would populate city squares. It was rather a quieter, snail-mail-paced form of networking that traveled along international communication pathways. The aesthetic of the intermedial mail art work in Eastern Europe reflected a Network identity distinct from Western mail art. The relative isolation of Eastern European mail artists catalyzed increased artist-to-artist communication that appropriated and subverted the mechanisms of officiality and bureaucracy. In countries like Poland and East Germany, mail art galvanized networks of participants, including women, to send collaborative work across the Iron Curtain and within the Eastern Bloc, where the individual states were discouraged from forming strong communication bonds.

Mail art in the Eastern Bloc was a community comprising both peripheral and central nodes, and engaging artists from small towns like Elbląg in Northern Poland or Eysk in the Eastern Soviet Union to networking hubs such as East Berlin or Budapest. As I have shown, it was an engagement with the body in the age of Body Art and a performance of desired or impossible travel. The presence of the body longing for connection was communicated

through rigorous explorations of materiality. The body's prints and labor contraposed mechanized bureaucratic cultures. Through minimal text and reproductions, artists were stating their right to send a message, even if the message merely stated that a message was being sent. Both conceptual in its texts and corporeal in its execution, mail art interrogated its own possibilities brazenly yet without trying to prove its superiority as an art practice to the state or art world.

As I argue in the preceding chapters, mail artists longed for connection through free travel within the Bloc and outside of it. This was not, however, a wish to escape Eastern Europe for the comforts and luxuries of the former West. It was an engagement with local symbols, materials, and technology, amalgamated with incoming mailings of foreign fabrics, papers, and other small objects able to pass customs. The mail art network was quite literally knit into the works and inseparable from them. The *one* existed in the many and the *many* in the *one*, as I showed to be the case with Paweł Petasz's assembled suit and dispersed self-portrait. It is difficult to call this kind of mail art purely *Eastern European* because, as much as it was rooted in specific locations inside the region, it was simultaneously inspired by ideas and materials from other regions and even continents, especially South America. This ongoing cultural exchange created brief communication pockets where some Eastern European artists could make the mostly egalitarian practice a centerpiece in their lives.

As I have shown, mail art practices between 1971 and 1994 contained temporal waves where different locations joined the Network at different times. Network accessibility was not equal across the Eastern Bloc. Practices also did not arrive at each state all at once; the timeline was based on the needs dictated by local conditions. Thus, depending on the time period and the location, it is possible to observe various approaches that might not be

used in another location until a decade later. For example, language experimentation was called for in East Berlin and Hungary, where saying almost nothing already meant saying too much. Petasz captured the diverse *killer waves* of mail art to reflect the individuality of every mail art climate. For the Soviet Union, mail art's time was frozen until the late 1980s, when it fueled the already energetic activities of the new Futurists with fresh potential for expansion. The Bulgarian language was also late to arrive, though it managed to extend the lively performance of visual poetry and mail art well into the 1990s while it waned elsewhere. It was as if mail art visited different countries in different decades, enriching itself with a mixture of their local and current nonofficial international practices.

What in Chapter II I refer to as "rhizome" (based on Deleuze and Guattari's theory) grew and could continue growing from its peripheries. As I demonstrate especially in that chapter, Eastern European mail art of the 1970s and '80s proceeded to diversify and decentralize its rhizomatic network of correspondents by empowering artists from small towns and expanding the genre and media embraced by the Network. It had the broad-mindedness to be both conceptual and representational, subversive and canonical, and appropriated symbols and codes from local bureaucracies and repurposed them for artistic or private use. Was it possible to focus solely on the Eastern Bloc? Once work escaped the temporal and geopolitical boundaries of the Bloc, it became confronted with what it fought against most: the market and institutions.

Becoming an object again can be problematic for mail art documentation. Mail art's ephemerality is an activity with a certain duration, a beginning, and an end, specific to its hybrid status. This question matters to mail art preservation efforts. Many artists from the mail art generation are still alive, and archiving their work is an ongoing project for the

community of the Network and museums, which are struggling to categorize a practice that has repeatedly distanced itself from categories, the art market, and institutions. Yet, museums frequently do not quite present mail art's ephemera accurately. It is challenging to present art that never aimed to be exhibited in a museum where audiences are not supposed to touch it. Mail art, Fluxus, and many historic avant-gardes advocated for being less *precious* about art: to act less formally around it and avoid its fetishization or reduction to a single dazzling artifact. Despite the movement's effort at decommodification, some mail art publications and ephemera, a few decades after their circulation, are beginning to be priced for purchase by collectors, and their status as artworks is going to become a more and more pressing question in the art world.

Is mail art valuable? The difference between *mailed art* and *mail art* is significant and is based on context. If, for example, an art dealer mails a Renaissance painting to a museum, this would be considered *mailed art*. On the other hand, if a postcard reproduction of this painting was transformed into an intermedia collage with text and mailed to participants in the Network during the 1980s, this action would be *mail art*. In their authentic, unarchived form, the mail art actions should cost nothing outside their materials. To give a more contemporary example, a single postcard with a drawing by the widely known minimalist Sol LeWitt (not mail art but mailed art) costs as much as an entire portfolio of mail art works from the *UNI/vers(;)* series, assembled by mail artist Guillermo Deisler.

Even beyond such comparisons, mail art has had a renegade status, categorized as *ephemera* rather than *artwork*. It has been largely neglected by scholars, publishers, museums, and collectors because, as Zanna Gilbert suggests, it challenges categorical thinking (74). Both object and activity, ephemeral and material, archived and unexhibitable,

historical and still present—the uncategorizable intermedia practice of mail art slips through the boundaries of academic and art market containers. In the 1990s, Held commented that the market "side of the … team doesn't care to find out what the field is really about" (108). This could lead to some semblance of mail art being traded for what it is not, which might be one of mail art's last jokes on the systems it aimed to exist outside of. To expedite collectors' understanding of the genre, an offering of special *artifact viewing glasses* might help to bridge the gap. The glasses should superimpose this text on the archival piece: "This is not the whole work. Selling it would destroy it. What you might buy here is not mail art."

What is different today is that networked art did indeed go viral in the shape of social media broadcasting. Are we all involved with the new *dispatch art* of the attention economy, except conned into a for-profit network populated with ads and filtered through the invisible censorship of algorithms? Are the network rituals we perform today designed for a different purpose? Will they age any better with changing media technologies and geopolitical conditions than mail art did? Perhaps the point is not to persevere into the next cultural era but to be relevant in one's moment like mail art was. Maybe we have no use for mail art in the 2020s or 30s, not for our smooth passage through late capitalism's exploitative system of overconsumption and extreme wealth polarization. Instead, we should learn from mail art's values and methods and their occasional failures. Mail art might be our ticket out, a radical refiguring of network infrastructure and a serious interrogation of who (or what) we network *for*.

Craig Saper observed, "So much mail in the box, and so little of it addressed to you… You wonder: What if culture used these endless bureaucracies for other ends?" (150–151). What if, instead of mainly finding bills, catalogs, and institutional questionnaires in our

analog or digital mailboxes, we found mailings addressed to us from real people whose touch inspired a return to our somatic existence and sustainable use of materials available in the immediate surroundings? Are these utopian situations incompatible with our current world or early Eastern Bloc bureaucracy? While Saper observes that assembling works would probably never be graced with the title of "masterpiece," their value does not reside in climbing the aesthetic hierarchy and being pointed out widely as outstanding cultural legacy (150).

Countercultural strategies relying on ephemera and performance exist largely outside this popularity competition and are building local community-oriented alternative networks. Reinhard Braun argues that practices like mail art, Fluxus, video art, or conceptual art create unique pockets of activity where

> [t]hey produce constellations of time and space that are removed from representation and can be reconstructed only through process… They are spaces that find completion only in the recipient's imagination or that can be manufactured in or by the activities of participants. (Braun 77)

These are the constellations of communal mail art performance, engaging materiality and corporeality through process but uncapturable in artifacts, recordings, or gallery auction events. What is unique about mail art is that it engages communities in alternative spaces built around acceptance and the desire for ongoing work that cannot be traced to a single author.

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Figures

Figure 1.1: Robert Rehfeldt, DIESE KARTE TEILT IHNEN MEINE GEDANKE MIT… DENKE SIE WEITER (1979)

Figure 1.2: Robert Rehfeldt, Artworker Contart News (1980)

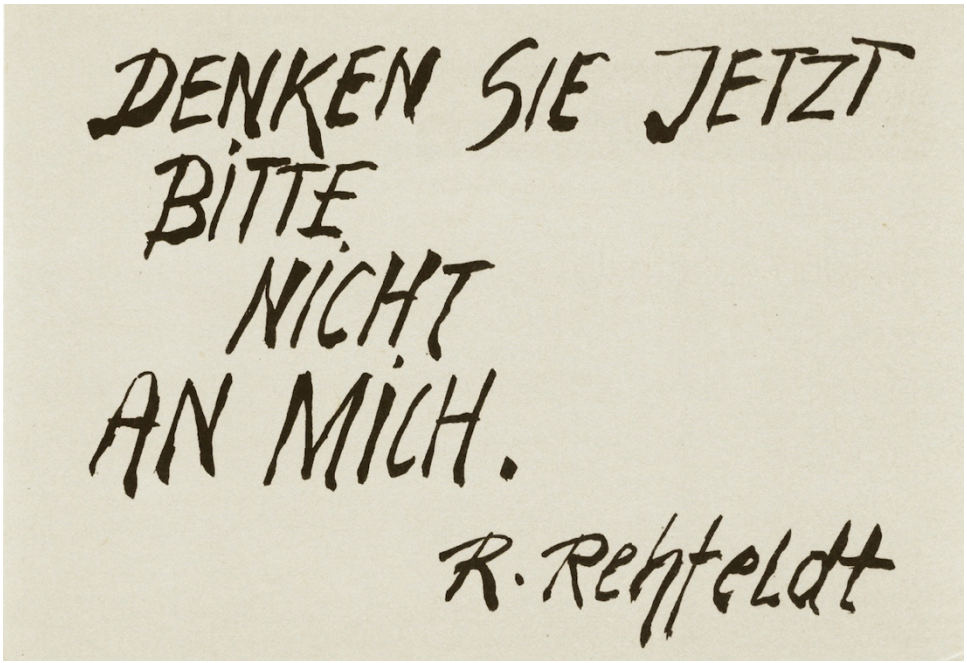


Figure 1.3: Robert Rehfeldt, DENKEN SIE JETZT BITTE NICHT AN MICH. (1991)

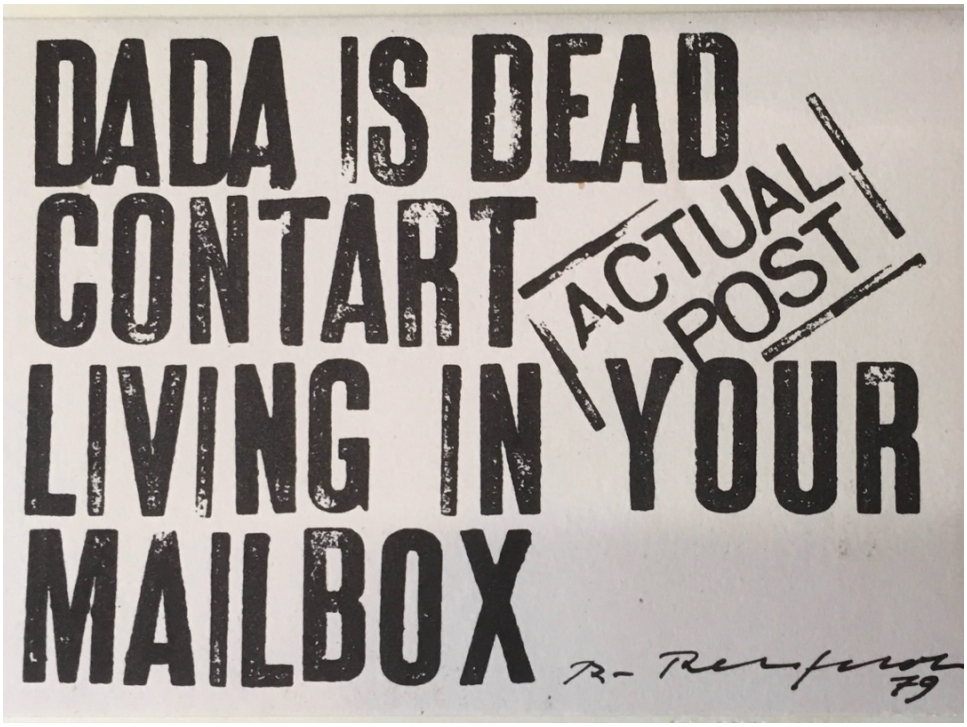
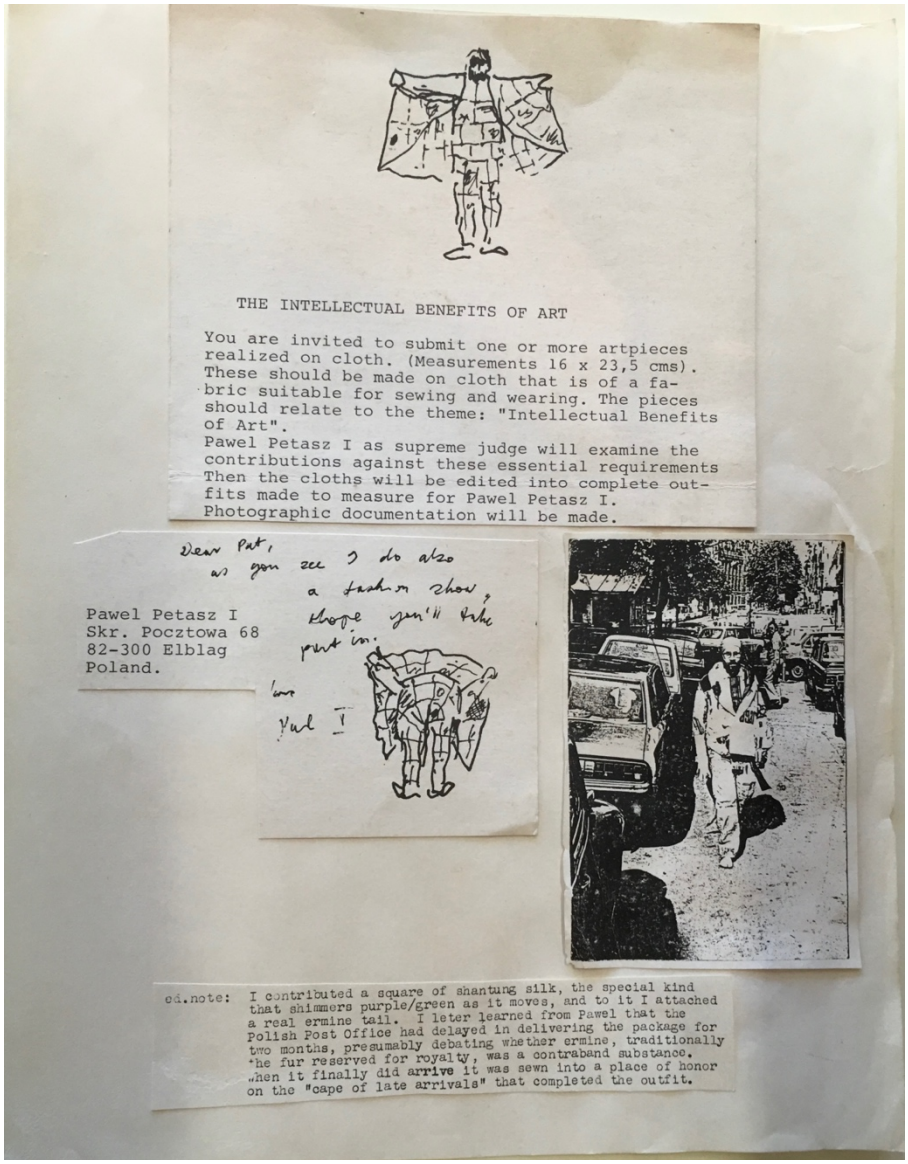


Figure 1.4: Robert Rehfeldt. DADA IS DEAD[.] CONTART LIVING IN YOUR MAILBOX (1979).

Figure 1.5: Pawel Petasz, Censor's Trinity, Model #3 (1980)

Figure 1.6: Paweł Petasz, Censor's Trinity, Model #2 (1980)

Figure 1.7: Paweł Petasz, Censor's Trinity, Model #1 (1980)



THE INTELLECTUAL BENEFITS OF ART

You are invited to submit one or more artpieces realized on cloth. (Measurements 16 x 23,5 cms). These should be made on cloth that is of a fabric suitable for sewing and wearing. The pieces should relate to the theme: "Intellectual Benefits of Art".
Pawel Petasz I as supreme judge will examine the contributions against these essential requirements Then the cloths will be edited into complete outfits made to measure for Pawel Petasz I.
Photographic documentation will be made.

Dear Pat,
as you see I do also a fashion show, hope you'll take part in.
Love
Yul I

Pawel Petasz I
Skr. Pocztowa 68
82-300 Elblag
Poland.

ed.note: I contributed a square of shantung silk, the special kind that shimmers purple/green as it moves, and to it I attached a real ermine tail. I leter learned from Pawel that the Polish Post Office had delayed in delivering the package for two months, presumably debating whether ermine, traditionally the fur reserved for royalty, was a contraband substance. When it finally did arrive it was sewn into a place of honor on the "cape of late arrivals" that completed the outfit.

Figure 2.1: Paweł Petasz, THE INTELLECTUAL BENEFITS OF ART (1980). Handwritten note from Petasz to Fish and typed comment, a later addition to the archive, by Fish.

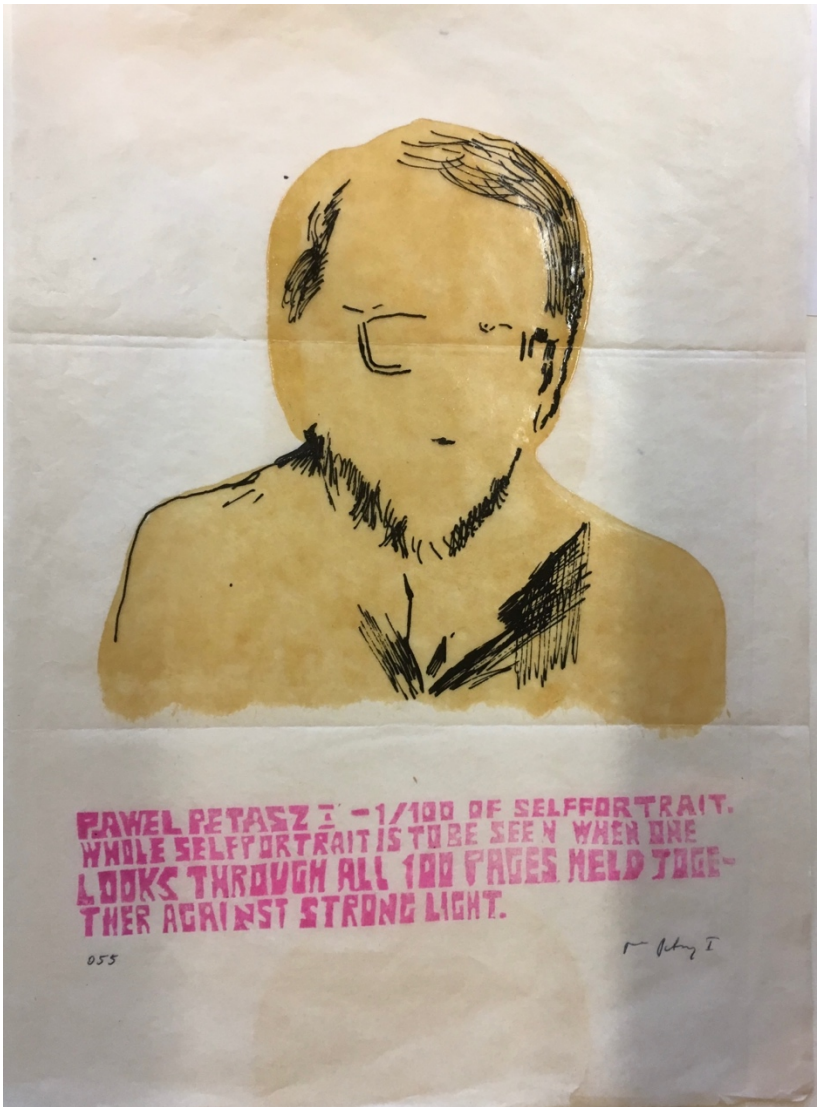


Figure 2.2: Paweł Petasz, SELFPORTRAIT (1979)

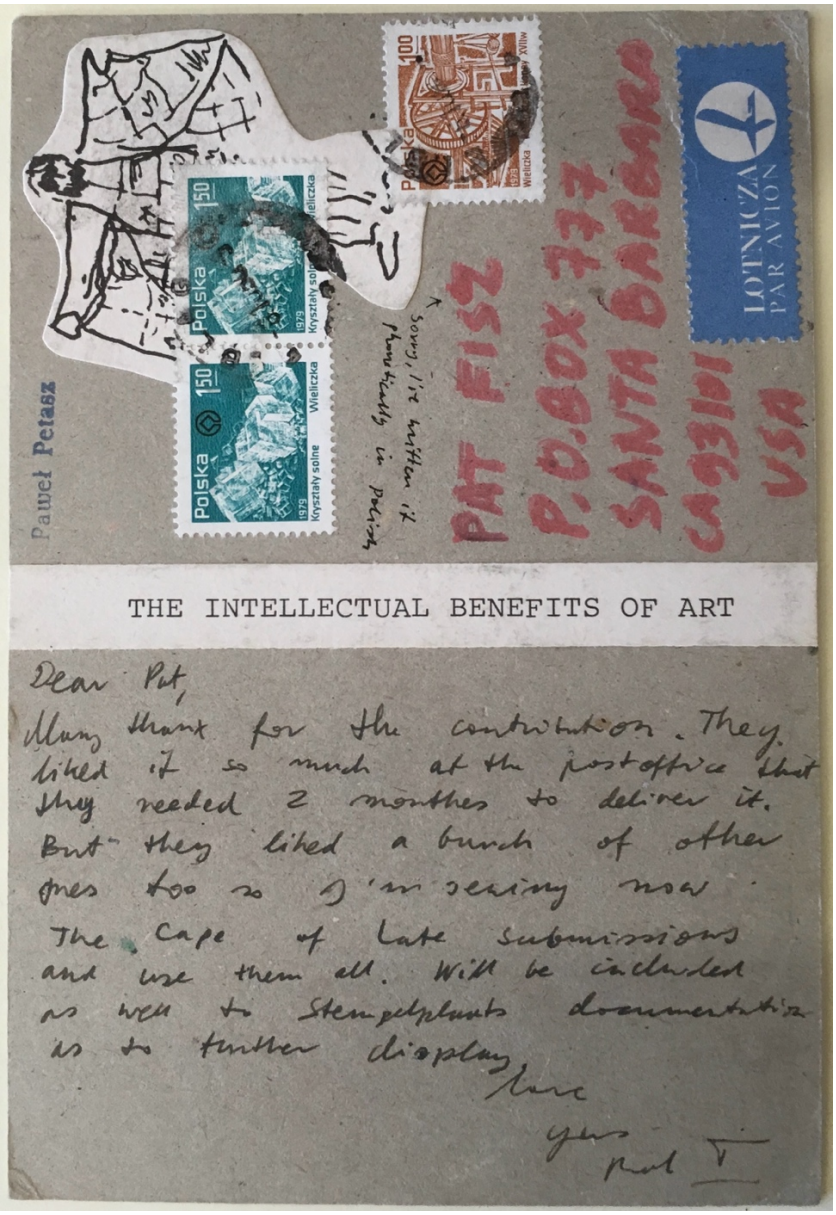


Figure 2.3: Postcard from Pawel Petasz to Pat Fish (1980)

Figure 3.1: Paweł Petasz, Homages to Some People, Vol. II: Waves (1980)

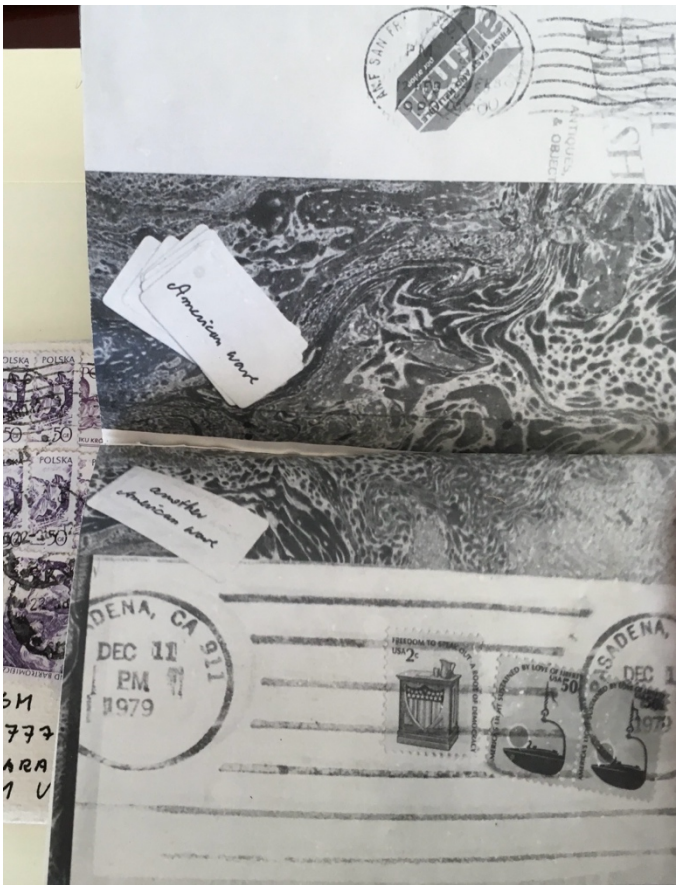


Figure 3.2: Paweł Petasz, Homages to Some People, Vol. II: Waves (1980)

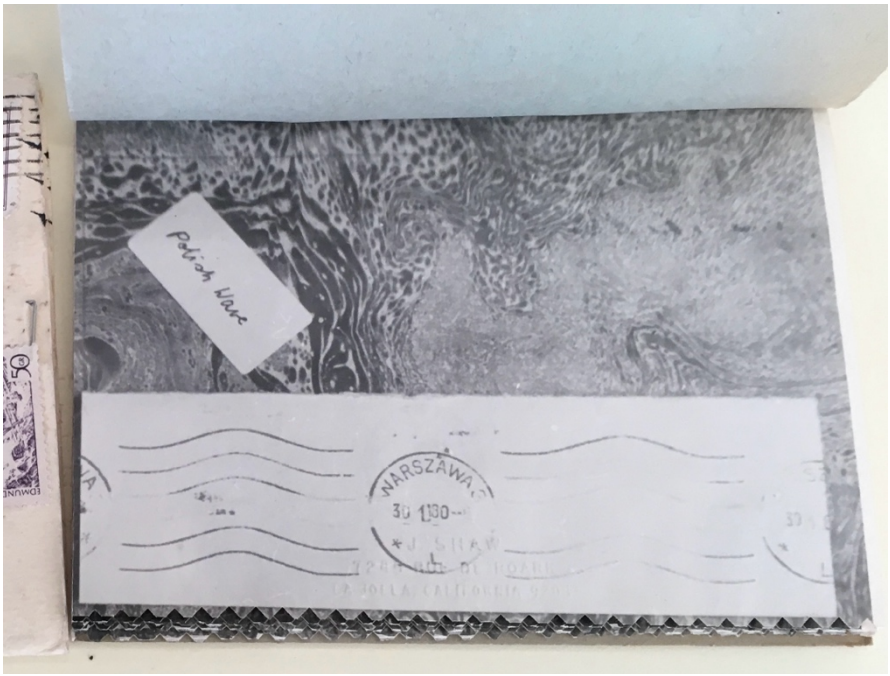


Figure 3.3: Paweł Petasz, Homages to Some People, Vol. II: Waves (1980)

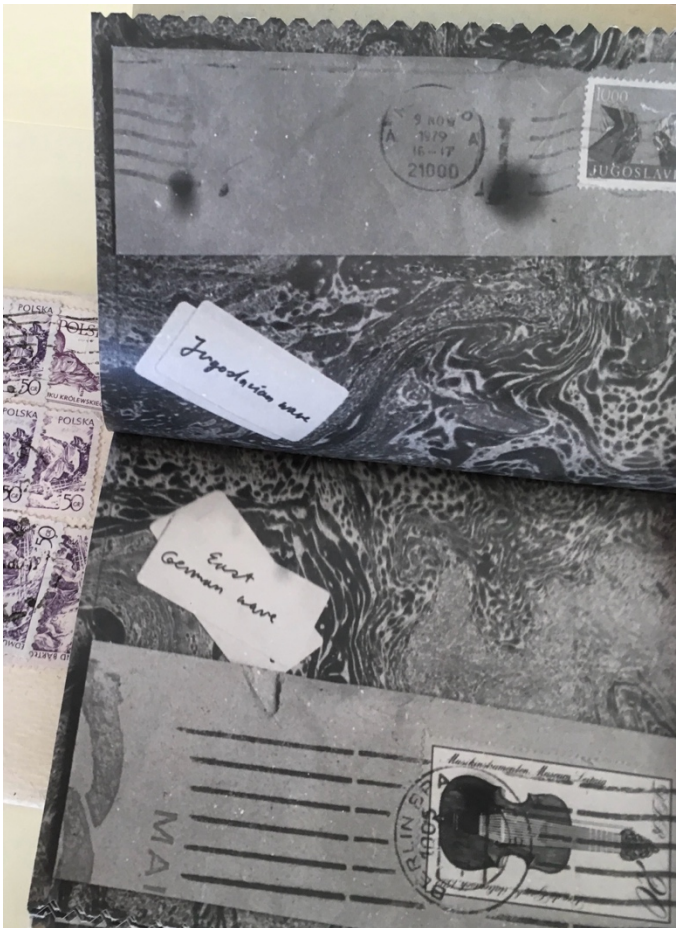


Figure 3.4: Paweł Petasz, Homages to Some People, Vol. II: Waves (1980)

Figure 3.5: Paweł Petasz, ARRIÈRE-GARDE, a rubber-stamped image on the inside of the envelope for Censor's Trinity (1980)

Figure 3.6–3.11: Paweł Petasz, How to Fly Like a Bird (1978)

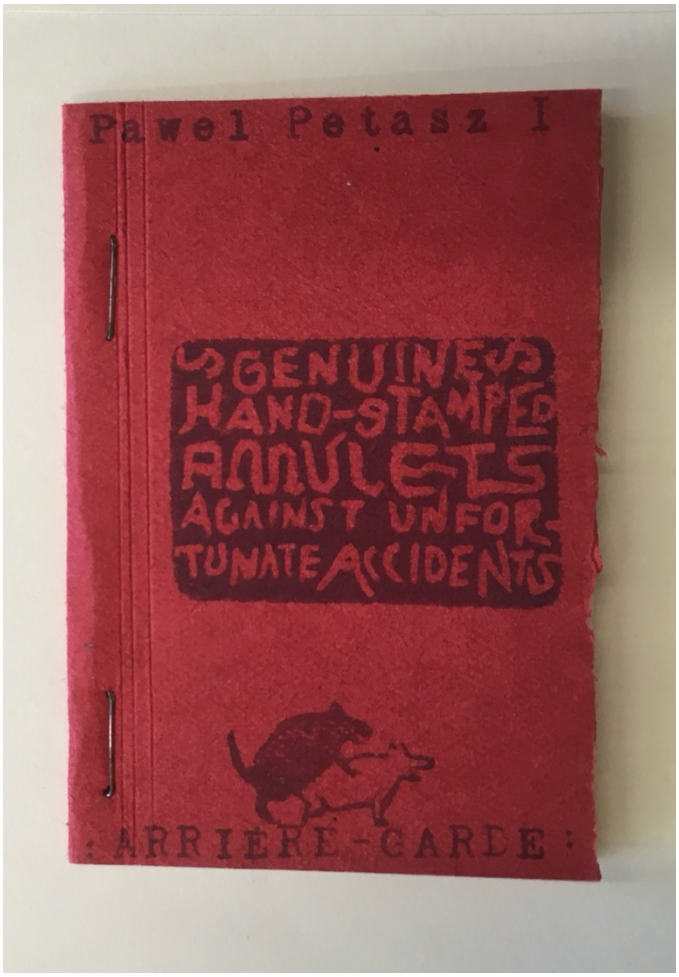


Figure 3.12: Paweł Petasz, Genuine Hand-Stamped Amulets Against Unfortunate Accidents (1979)

Figure 3.13–3.18: Paweł Petasz, Genuine Hand-Stamped Amulets Against Unfortunate Accidents (1979)

Figure 3.19: Paweł Petasz, Postcard to Pat Fish (1979)

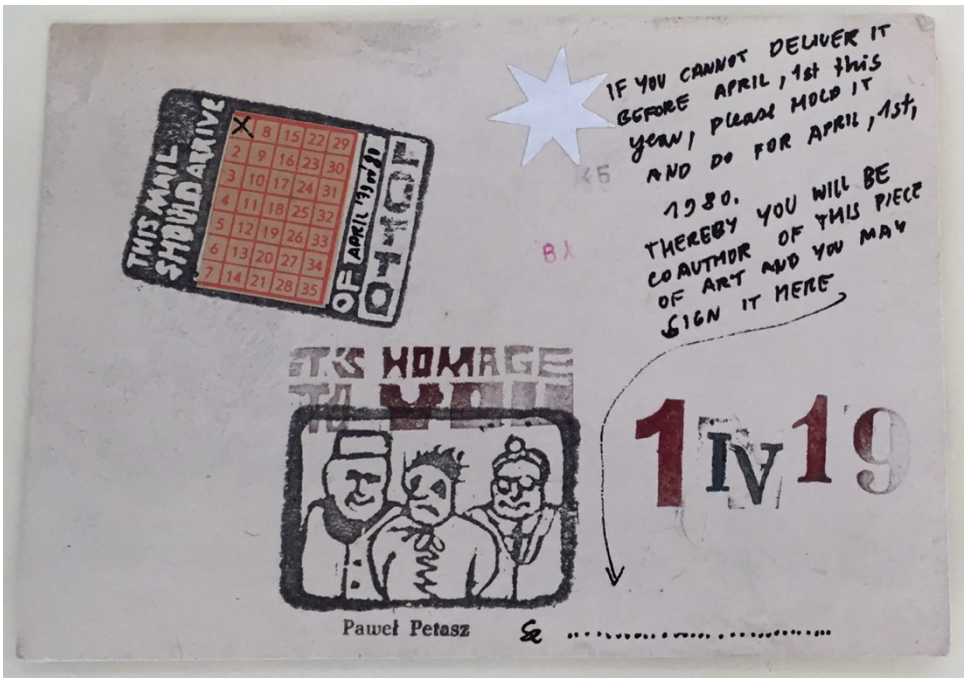


Figure 3.20: Paweł Petasz, Postcard to Pat Fish (1979)

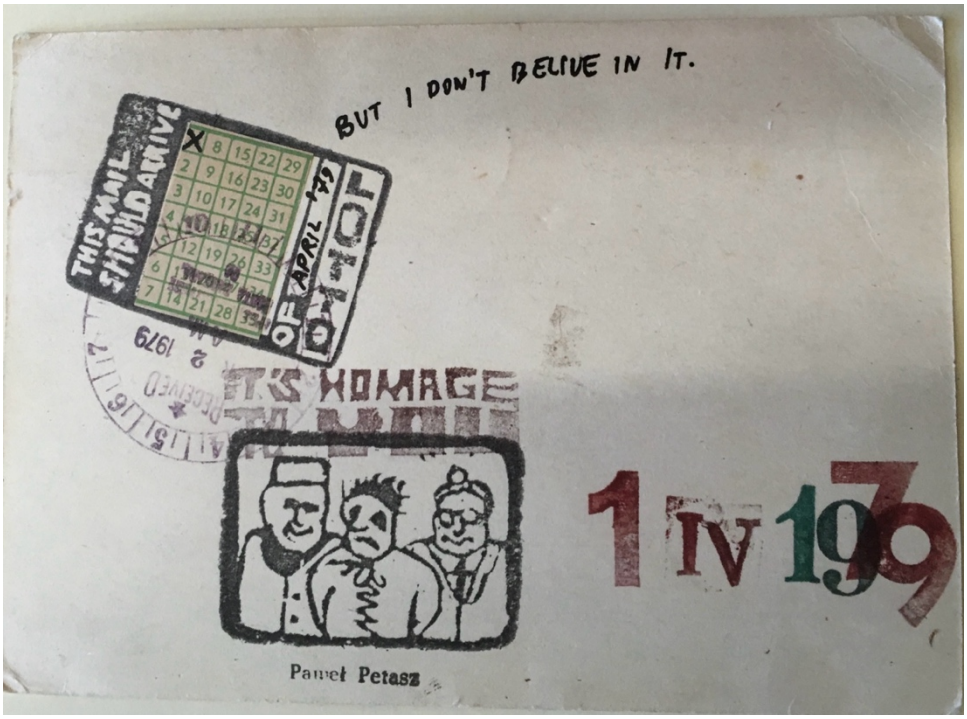


Figure 3.21: Pawel Petasz, Postcard 2 to Pat Fish (1979)

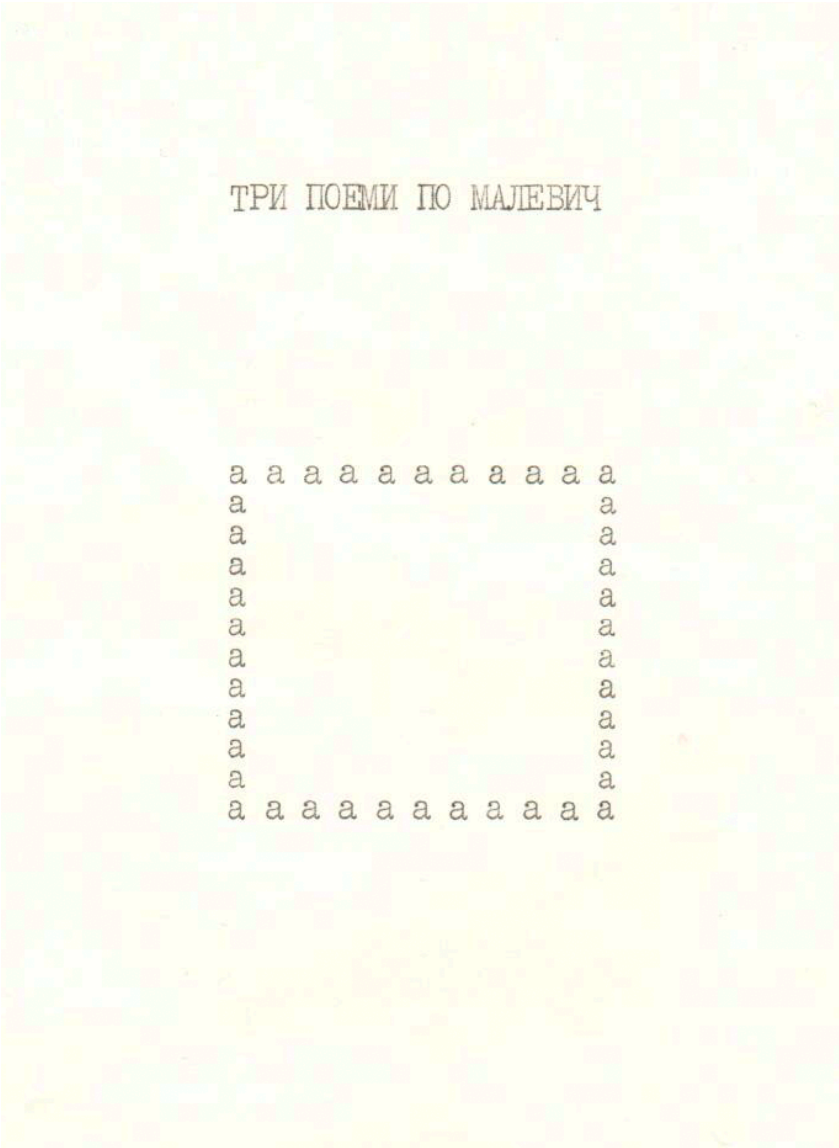


Figure 4.1: Vesselin Sariev, "Three Poems After Malevich" 1 (ca. 1990), Courtesy: Katrin and Vesselina Sarieva / Sariev Gallery

Figure 4.2: Vesselin Sariev, "Three Poems After Malevich" 2 (ca. 1990), Courtesy: Katrin and Vesselina Sarieva / Sariev Gallery

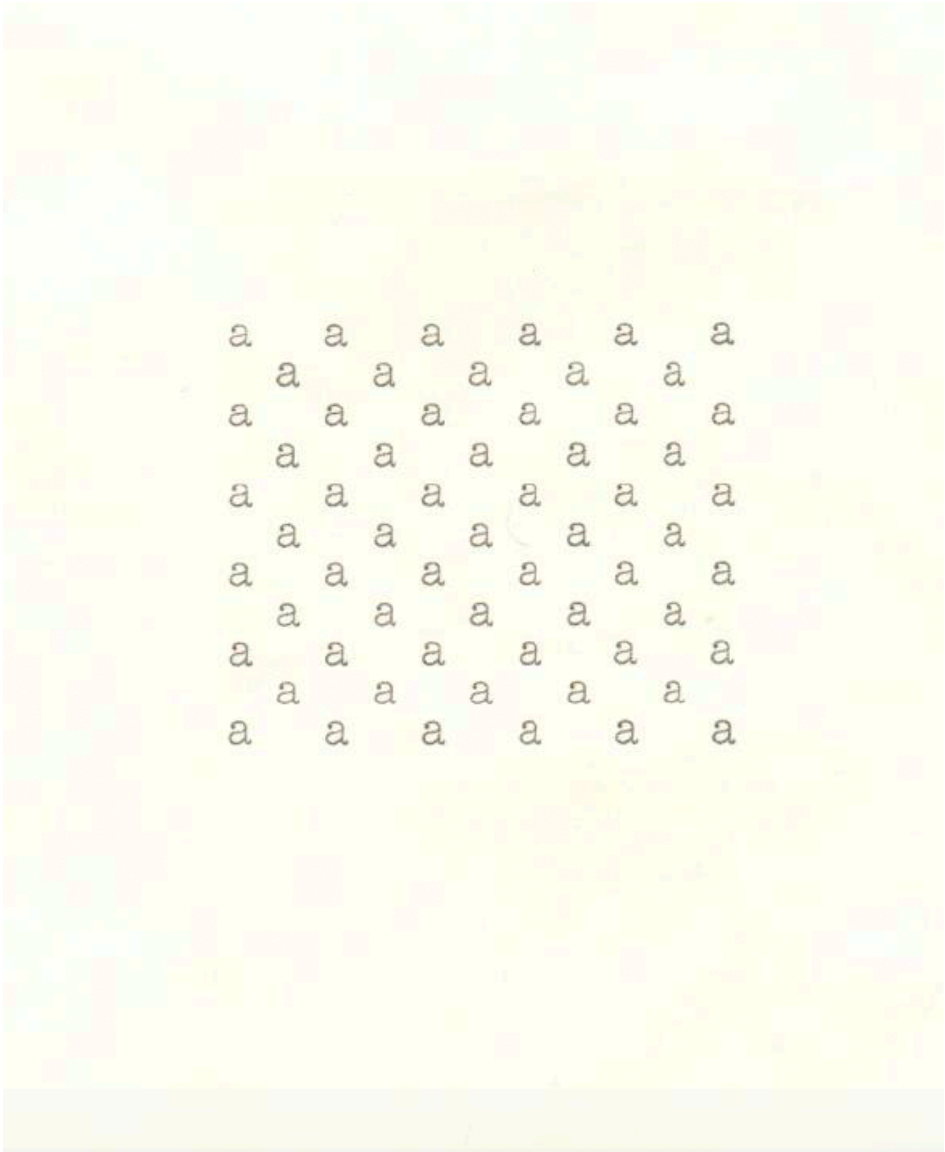


Figure 4.3: Vesselin Sariev, "Three Poems After Malevich" 3 (ca. 1990), Courtesy: Katrin and Vesselina Sarieva / Sariev Gallery

Figure 4.4: Vesselin Sariev, SVEP, issue 2 (cover), Courtesy: Katrin and Vesselina Sarieva / Sariev Gallery

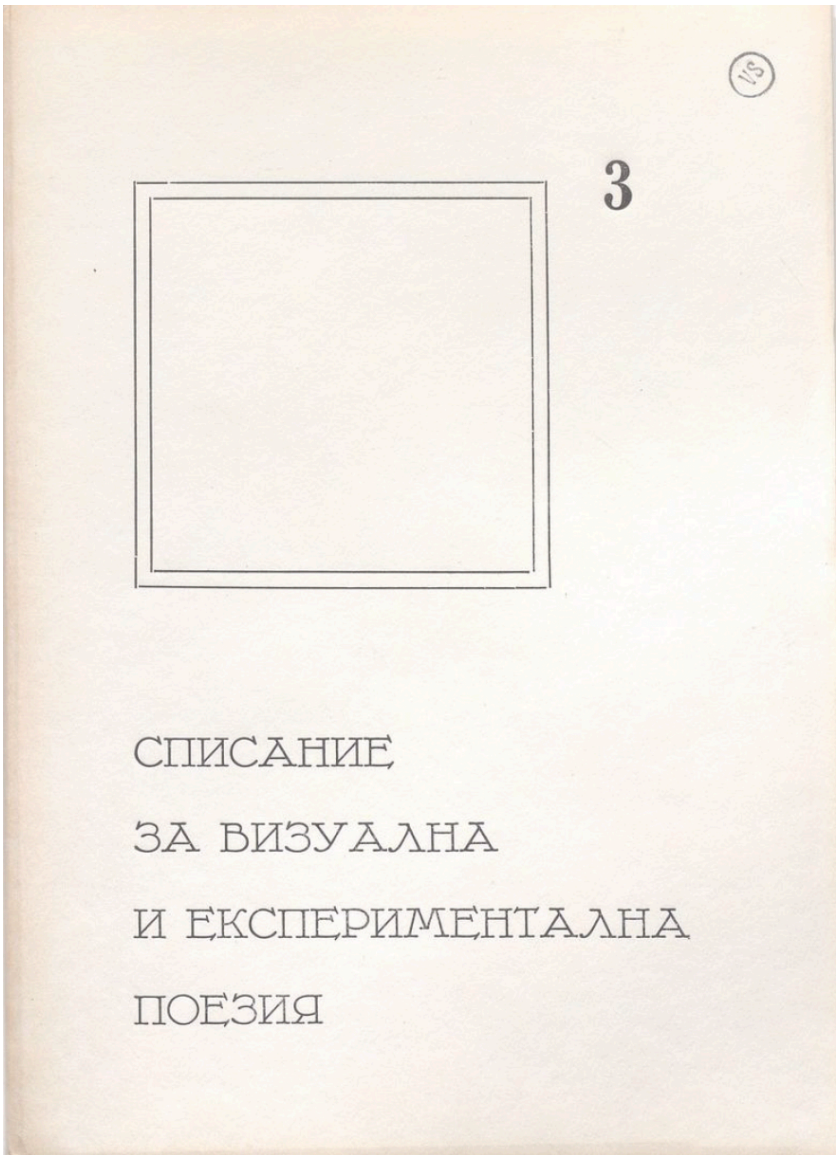


Figure 4.5: Vesselin Sariev, SVEP, issue 3 (cover), Courtesy: Katrin and Vesselina Sarieva / Sariev Gallery