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MAIL ART: THE NET OUT OF CONTROL

[FABIANE PIANOWSKI]

Mail art is like the history of unwritten history.
[Paulo Bruscky, 1976]

Breaking away from the official circuits of art galleries and museums, mail art heralds a new era for the circulation of artistic work, which focuses primarily on the collective. This alternative means of circulation for artistic proposals and ideas, brings forward the concept of network that would later with the birth of the Internet, become a highly significant issue for contemporaneity. Many conceptual artists developed pieces using networks destined for the circulation of goods and services as their medium, and thus gave visibility to the notions of network and circuit, which are by definition abstract and invisible. In the 1970s, some critics and art historians considered mail art as one of the great phenomena of the international avant-garde. In its broadest sense, its actions, according to Walter Zanini –an important art critic and historian in the Brazilian context- enabled the new artistic languages to trigger communicational and structural situations, such as for example, disobjectivation and anonymity [1].

The use of mail in the 1960s and 1970s, as a tactical instrument in the field of art relates to the appropriation of the means of communication by the period's artistic manifestations. A period in which establishing networks and communicating were crucial cultural elements.

The goal of the artists was to break away from media's one-way emitter-receiver flow, through the spectators' active participation in the piece itself. This would socialize authorship and dilute the borders that divide the artist and the public. In so doing, mail art democratizes art.

Mail art is a collection of varied aesthetics, whose means of expression is through official mail. Mail art appropriates this means of expression in a subversive manner to configure an alternative cultural channel for the exchange of artistic messages. The function of mail art as a network for subversive communication, added to the period's social context, pushed it to adopt a critical stance, together with Fluxus and

Situationism, aimed at revealing the oppressive and absurd conditions imposed by the social medium. According to Gache, the repressive context of dictatorship enabled the surfacing of mail art in Latin America. In this perspective, she adds, "in the 1960s and 1970s, mail art emerged as an activity strongly linked to resistance against the political and cultural repression that engulfed the continent"[2].

According to Freire [3], mail art in Latin American and Eastern European countries represented the acceleration and opening-up towards artistic contents that circulated beyond these countries. Furthermore, it permitted the exchange of ethical-aesthetic information, which in the repressive context of dictatorship became an effective subversive strategy, often articulated, through essentially political contents. As Paulo Bruscky points out, "in mail art, art recovers its main functions: information, protest and condemnation"[4].

Mail turned out to be a highly effective medium for the transmission of subversive messages, given the complexity of effectively controlling the enormous daily flow of sent and received correspondence. In order to defeat censorship, many postal artists also ciphered their messages, using visual poetry as an efficient means to transmit subversive messages. Therefore, in the Latin American context, mail art became a valuable means of communication with the outside world. Stamps, seals and slogans inserted into regular mail, condemned situations of oppression, torture and humiliation as experienced on the continent.

Some postal artists were imprisoned for organising controversial international exhibitions or for the protest and dissent expressed in their correspondence. This political and ideological activity within the network greatly discomforted repressive government's censorship, as Paulo Bruscky explains:

Beyond the problems caused by an outdated

postal bureaucracy, the added problem of censorship is almost exclusive to Latin America. This lead, for example, to the closure, minutes after its inauguration on the 27th of August 1976, of the Second International Mail Art Exhibition, in the vestibule of the Central Post Office in Recife (Brazil), who incidentally promoted the exhibition. Twenty-one countries were represented with 3,000 works of art, but only a few dozen people were able to view them. Not only did they close down the exhibition, Brazilian mail artists Paulo Bruscky and Daniel Santiago, who organised the event, were imprisoned for three days. They released the pieces after a month, and apart from the inflicted damages, various works of art from Brazilian and foreign artists are to this day still confiscated. Another absurd event within the dynamics of "cultural repression" in Latin America was the imprisonment by the Uruguayan government of mail artists Clemente Padín and Jorge Caraballo between 1977 and 1982. In April 1981, the military dictatorship in El Salvador kidnapped mail artist Jesús Galdamez Escobar, only avoiding assassination by fleeing and seeking exile in Mexico. It is always the same; those who pretend to "own culture" will always try to impose their methods.[5]

The mail art network has often associated with social movements, such as international amnesty committees. This channel permitted the condemnation of several imprisonments, putting pressure on dictatorial governments, and obtaining, in some cases, the liberation of prisoners before the end of their prison sentences. Clemente Padín, for example, attributes his early release to the international protests of other mail artists with whom he maintained correspondence.

Another way of outwitting the system is to use pseudonyms or collective monikers. These practices originate in use of *noms de guerre* within the realm of revolutionary tactics. There is nothing new in the use of pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity in the art world. Duchamp, for example, employed pseudonyms in more than one occasion, signing pieces under the names of R.Mutt or Rose Sélavy. Beyond criticising the defence of the alleged ownership of ideas that capitalist society sustains, together with the notion of copyright, we can also find,

underlying this practice, and given the repressive political context, the aim of granting invisibility to the authors, placing them, therefore beyond the reach of the oppressors

MAIL ART IN LATIN AMERICA

The first manifestations of mail art appear in Latin America at the end of the 1960s. Its forerunners in Argentina are: Edgardo Antonio Vigo (1927-1991), Horacio Zabala (1943), Liliana Porter (1941) and Juan Carlos Romero (1931); in Uruguay, Clemente Padín (1939) and Luis Camnitzer (1937); in Chile, Guillermo Deisler (1940); and Pedro Lyra (1949), Paulo Bruscky (1949), Ypiranga Filho (1936) and Daniel Santiago (1939), in Brazil.

Nonetheless, the movement did not establish itself firmly on the continent until 1974. In that year, Montevideo hosted the *Festival de la Postal Creativa* – the first documented mail art exhibition in Latin America. Since then, numerous expositions are organised, as in Argentina with the *Última Exposición Internacional de Arte Postal* (La Plata, 1975), organised by Edgardo Antonio Vigo and Horacio Zabala.

In Brazil, the *Primeira Internacional de Arte Postal*, held in São Paulo in September 1975, and organised by Ismael Assumpção, represents the first exhibition of this art form in the country. The event was restricted to internationally recognised practitioners in contact with the organiser. In December, that same year, the *Primeira Exposição Internacional de Arte Postal* (Recife, Pernambuco, 1975) was organised by Paulo Bruscky and Ypiranga Filho. This event was highly significant as it involved a large number of artists, and because it was held in the vestibule of a public hospital, a very unusual venue for artistic exhibitions. In 1976, Paulo Bruscky and Daniel Santiago organised the *Exibição Internacional de Arte Postal* (Recife).

The violent repression that characterised the successive military regimes that were in power

in various Latin American countries marked the political context in which these manifestations took place. Censorship, imposed ideologically through the control of information and cultural production, became the main instrument of social control in these regimes. As a result, a culture of protest marked this period, pushing art, in its many manifestations, to commit itself with social change. In the end, “art had a practical value, building awareness among the people, summoning them to fight for, and condemn, the realities of the disadvantaged peoples.” [6]

Mail art, together with other artistic manifestations were severely repressed during the dictatorial period, as art was the ground from where opposition against the regime would emerge. Clemente Padín confirms this:

[...] when a dictatorship establishes itself, the poets are the first to be imprisoned. Why? Because they force people to choose, to opt between different options and this kind of behaviour seeps through all human conduct. It is impossible to impose rules on those who are used to choice [7].

In this period, mail art focused exclusively on condemning the oppressive system, for which its practitioners paid a very high price. The military banned the 1976, the *Exposição Internacional de Arte Postal* in Brazil, ordering its closure an hour after its inauguration and imprisoning its organisers. This had international repercussions, showing the power of dictatorial repression to the world, as well as the reasons behind Latin American artists’ commitment to fight and condemn such practices from that day onwards. Added to this unfortunate event, various postal artists throughout Latin America, such as: Jorge Caraballo, Clemente Padín, Jesús Romeo Galdamez and Guillermo Deisler, among others, were arrested and tortured by the repressive and arbitrary system. Furthermore, these forces also led to the disappearance of Paulo Vigo, son of the Argentinean postal artist Edgardo Vigo.

According to Gerardo Yépiz [8], despite the fact that in other parts of the world mail art

succumbed to trivialisation and even commercialisation, in Latin American countries, local specificities and traditions gave this manifestation a particular nature in terms of struggle and condemnation. According to the author, we must add this to the effort of these peoples to strive for better and more humane living conditions, to obtain peace and social justice. Therefore, mail art wields significant power, and develops an intense activity in Latin American countries.

In the 1970s, that is to say, in the first phase of Latin American mail art, the more significant postal artists in Brazil were, Pedro Lyra, Joaquim Branco, U. Lisboa, Paulo Bruscky, Samaral, Julio Plaza, Avelino de Araújo, Daniel Santiago, L. M. Andrade, Leonhard Frank Duch and Odair Magalhães. In Argentina we can name, Edgardo Antonio Vigo, Horacio Zabala, Carlos Ginzburg, Graciela Gutierrez Marx, Juan Carlos Romero, Luis Iurcovich, Luis Catriel and Luis Pazos. As well as the Chilean Guillermo Deisler (exiled in Germany) and the Uruguayans Clemente Padín, Haroldo González and Jorge Caraballo.

After 1980, mail art gained renovated vigour; in this period, we can highlight the following events: the inclusion of a session on mail art in the XVI São Paulo Biennale, in 1981; the creation of the *Asociación Uruguaya de Artistas Postales*, in 1983; the foundation of the *Asociación Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Artistas Postales* in Argentina. Furthermore, numerous exhibitions and alternative publications appeared, focusing on the diffusion of mail art: *Diagonal Cero*, *Hexágono 70*, *Nuestro Libro Internacional de Sellos y Matasellos*, *Hoje, Hoja Hoy*, in Argentina; *La Pata de Palo* and *Margen*, in Brazil; *Post Arte* and *Marzo* in Mexico; *Ediciones Mimbre* in Chile; and *Ovum*, *Integración*, *Participación* and *O Dos* in Uruguay.

“ARTIST-ACTIVIST-ARCHIVIST”: PAULO BRUSCKY

This plastic artist and y draftsman, born in

Recife, Pernambuco, in 1949, is the son of a Polish photographer and a Pernambucan. In his work, he focuses primarily on experimental research. In 1969, he increases his production in the field of conceptual and experimental art, carrying out varied research involving spaces, atmospheres, interventions and diverse material, such as happenings, rubber stamps, copy art, audio art, etc. Starting in 1970, he develops his research in copy art (electrography or xerography). In 1973, he joins the International Mail Art Movement. In 1974, he inaugurates the Nadaist Movement/Manifesto, where he employs super-8.

The most frequent materials in his work are ice, smoke and technology, the use of time and “sensory things” as creative elements. He was a pioneer in the artistic application of multiple technologies, such as electric recordings, slide projections, *facsimiles*, super-8 films, video, reprography, *off-set* and mimeograph, as well as a pioneer of video art beyond the “Rio de Janeiro - São Paulo” axis.

More than a pioneer, Bruscky is the most enthusiastic promoter of mail art in Brazil. From the beginnings of the 1970s, he has published manifestoes and essays on the issue, and his name appears in the majority of events organised around the world. It is worth highlighting that, as a matter of personal choice, he has never sold any of his pieces.

Bruscky was frequently imprisoned because of the development of an intense and committed artistic activity understood to be subversive by the dictatorial power, and therefore uncomfortable for the repressive system. In this sense, he carried out numerous postal action projects in which the exchange of ideas/information within the network of virtual encounters strengthened collective memory -significantly weakened by repression. What was most relevant was the community that was starting to grow, given that artists could share their hopes and fears through mail art: “an imaginary tribalism that

was both individual and political circulated in the same space, defining a common ethos and vibration, specific to that historic moment.” [9]

Bruscky, a voracious hunter of images and information, possesses one of the richest legacies on Brazilian and international contemporary art. His collection comprises around 100,000 objects: paintings, magnetic tapes, videos, literary masterpieces, art books, scientific texts, aesthetic dissertations, treaties, piles of newspaper clippings, exhibition catalogues, postcards, the artist’s own work, the largest collection of mail art in the world, and other items related, directly or indirectly, with his own production and contemporary art as a whole.

The artist’s archive-workshop was completely recreated in the 26th São Paulo Biennale (2004) to show the artist’s universe to the public, to reflect the fluid nature of his work, enabling its interpretation as a process. Indeed, the fact that mail art appears as an archive and document amid contemporary art, uncorrupted by the alleged institutionalisation of the art system, marks its presence and relevance in art history, which persistently neglects it.

CONCLUSIONS

The exchange of correspondence facilitates encounters between different people from different cultures who aim to share their specific problems. In this sense, communication brings solidarity to local events, creating a global network of solidarity that produces innumerable proposals related to the condemnation of daily problems. Hence, mail art assumes a broad reaching political position that encompasses issues that go beyond ideology, spanning ethnic issues, sexual options, the environment, wherein every image suggests social commentary. Consequently, we can conclude that the political-ideological nature of mail art is not exclusively limited to societies that live under dictatorial rule –notwithstanding its enormous significance in such societies– but extend to

all societies.

Moreover, we must understand that although mail art asserts itself in the collective sphere through participation as promoted by the act of sending and receiving correspondence, it also configures itself as a political position. Seen in this light, its political stance is not necessarily located in its contents, but rather in its strategies and practices, the circulation and distribution of art. Indeed, the importance of mail art is not focused on the object (the correspondence), but on the process as a whole, which encompasses the circulation and contents of messages, as well as the relations of exchange between the emitter and the receiver.

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[6] STEPHANOU, Alexandre Ayub. Censura no Regime Militar e militarização das artes. Porto Alegre: EDIPUCRS, 2001. p. 139.

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SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CONTROL IN DIGITAL ART: FROM EXPERIMENTATION TO RADICAL CRITICISM

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A set of very diverse and plural creative practices emerged in the 20th Century together with the evolution and development of technology. These practices are characterised by their high degree of experimentation and fusion of innovative interdisciplinary creative processes. Many of these creations questioned the technological

panopticism that has imposed itself nowadays in all globalised societies.

Social technological control, a recurring issue in the most contemporary media art, is as ancient as the history of humanity. Only its ideological conditionings and its application have varied over time. From the end of the 20th Century, the revolution, both in technology, but also in audiovisual media has brought about changes in its own perception, becoming more subtle and globalised. Unfortunately, as we shall see, we are accepting the unbridled implementation of control and surveillance technology in our daily lives with apparent ease.

The idea of substituting human perception with photographic images helped to identify enemy areas during the First World War. The military industry perfected the technique given its need to avoid any existing source of danger. Having said this, the images that resulted from the substitution of the human eye with a technological eye are seemingly useless, unless accompanied by texts that reveal them and that make them imaginable [1].

The video graphic technology that was available in the 1970s significantly shattered the space-time binomial. Artists such as Dan Graham or Bruce Nauman researched the relation between public and private spheres or between objectivity and subjectivity as technology allows for a relatively simple manipulation of perception by creating temporal imbalances. There was also much experimentation with projections and work on the effectiveness of closed circuit video, where, at times, the observed spectator is actively and consciously involved.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Internet emerges as the greatest technological and communicative panacea of all times. Many works of art anticipate the concept of net art (global connection, broad and free access to the piece) and infringe the principles of ubiquity and participation. Control and surveillance applications developed initially with basic technologies that characterised