Women and Mail Art. Gendered Perspectives on Marginal Artistic Practices

Online (Bern/Warsaw), Oct 11–25, 2024

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The workshop series “Women and Mail Art. Gendered Perspectives on Marginal Artistic Practices” took place in three separate online meetings on consecutive Friday afternoons on October 11, 18, and 25, 2024. This format enabled participation from contributors in the USA, the UK, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Poland, and Bulgaria. In assembling international researchers, “Women and Mail Art” was able to make a crucial contribution to its field: connecting the growing number of (mostly female) scholars currently investigating the genre and network of mail art that operated across the Americas, Europe, and parts of Asia since the late 1960s.

The opening presentations offered particularly great insights. Zanna Gilbert and Elena Shtromberg introduced their exhibition project “Transgresoras,” exploring mail art and its global connections to and from Latin America through the work of women artists from the 1960s to the present. From an intergenerational perspective, it examines how mail art provided (and perhaps still provides) a platform for political protest. Their talk was followed by a contribution by the project’s curatorial assistant and PhD candidate Alexandra Schoolman, who emphasized the “tangible connections” that mail art allowed artists to forge, particularly under Latin American military dictatorships in the 1970s, a theme that also set the scene for several other presentations on Latin American women artists. Schoolman highlighted that Chilean artist Virginia Errázurriz, in addition to her activity in the mail art network, was a human rights activist opposed to Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship. Another nod at mail art’s potential as a form of political resistance was taken by Marie Meyerding, who presented postcards and public art/interventions by (East) German artist Karla Sachse.

Emese Kürti elaborated on how (Yugoslavian) Hungarian artist Katalin Ladik developed her practice both in dependence on and in emancipation from her male colleagues. Her contribution underscored how feminist thought differed amongst global regions and/or political ideologies and Ileana Parvu, in her discussion on Romanian artist Ana Lupas’s use of mail art as a “message in a bottle” to distribute her work more widely, also stressed the need to critically consider different types of historical feminist thought and expression. The cartography of the mail art network resurfaced when Agata Jakubowska questioned the use of the term “global” to describe the network. She rightfully assumed that few to no connections were made with Africa and Asia, adding that the advocacy for world peace by some mail artists might be better understood within the framework of socialist internationalism, the ‘global South,’ or the then so-called ‘third world.’ Building on Gabriela Daris’s insights on Yoko Ono, Mieko Shiomi’s “Spatial Poems” (1965-75), and the Fluxus movement, Henar Rivière noted that mail art has its art historical roots in the ‘global North’. Thus, the workshop’s focus on transcontinental mail art relationships among Latin America, North Amer-

ica, and Europe illuminated the role of (marginalized) art within the power structures of the Cold War world order.

In discussing language and barriers within the mail art network, Rivière also made a notable observation on the term "marginal," which, she said, has a more positive connotation in Spanish, where it suggests potential for change. She added that Mexican mail artist Graciela Gutiérrez Marx viewed the use of faulty English in mail art as an act of radical resistance. Rivière's brilliant presentation on Gutiérrez Marx' project "Mamablanca" (1980) focused on the mythicization of female reproductive labor and care work and showcased how the artist's understanding of mail art as an "inmost art" poetically operated on both personal and political levels. In line with this, the term "epistolary" entered many workshop discussions, although the tight lecture schedule limited deeper exploration of its traditionally gendered, domestic associations. [1] Here, a more interactive workshop format could have offered participants even richer insights because epistolary practices already facilitated transregional networks of cultural policymakers as early in the 17th century, a tradition that continued in 20th century mail art. [2]

It is significant to note, that women's influence as archivists, collectors, cultural managers and distributors—and the fact that their contributions are often overlooked by attributing collective artworks or archives to male artists alone—emerged as another key theme of the workshop. In this regard, an engaging presentation that delved into male-dominated spaces within mail art was Liz Hirsch's paper on American publisher Linda Frye Burnham's connections within the North American mail art network. Hirsch positioned Burnham, editor of the magazine "High Performance," as a well-connected female disseminator of mail art and its theories, proposing her as a liberated female networker who supported prominent male and female mail artists in their attempt to bypass traditional art institutions. Hirsch's emphasis on a female figure as a central, influential gatekeeper resonated with Jakubowska's contribution on Italian curator Mirella Bentivoglio, as well as with recent academic interest in mail art as a bridge to understanding networked practices by curators, cultural managers, policymakers, public intellectuals, and "art workers," as (East) German mail artists Robert Rehfeldt and Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt would call them.

This aligns with the established academic understanding of mail art as a networked practice which operated in parallel public spheres through printed matter and encompassed haptic, physical and performative aspects, as underlined in two presentations on Argentine artist Mirtha Demirsache by Rada Georgieva and Ine Engels. Georgieva interpreted Demirsache's asemic (hand)writing as a way of confronting authoritarian regimes through "mail art as a cultural sub-semiosphere," while Engels examined the artist's relationship with Belgian publishers Guy Schraenen and Anne Marsily, giving special attention to hand- and fingerprints—a very important formal aspect of mail art, regarding its tactility and potential exposition to the control of state polices.

Maggie Borowitz's presentation on the artist books/micro-exhibitions by Mexican artist Magali Lara tied many of these threads together, exploring the contrast between the public engagement with an artwork in an exhibition and the intimacy of opening an envelope or reading a letter at home. Her and many other contributions stressed the fact that inherently, mail art contains a tension between the intimate or private and the public or political. Later, Borowitz also raised the topic of humor in mail art as a tool to undermine authority—pinning another area for the exploration of mail art.

For “Women and Mail Art,” organizers Agata Jakubowska and Elize Mazadiego brought together their expertise in neo-avantgarde art in Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America of the Cold War period to examine the “largely ignored gender aspects” [3] of mail art. In doing so, they however overlooked the historical dimension of earlier contributions to the field: None of their cautious moderations addressed the fact that, since 1986, mail art congresses were held regularly within the historical artistic network, addressing issues of institutional critique, archiving, historicization, and the political intentions of mail art—all topics the “Women and Mail Art” discussions touched on. [4] Also, as early as in the 1970s, mail art enabled women to collectively become politically active on a global scale in opposition to gendered and sexual discrimination and marginalization. [5] This feminist solidarity and mail art’s potential to critically address and subvert (or to “queer” [6]) social norms, however, unfortunately did not receive the attention it deserves in the program of the workshop. Because instead of organizing its outline along discursive issues such as this one, the program consisted solely of monographic contributions about women artists in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, the USA, the former GDR and Yugoslavia, Italy, and Romania, all active within the historical network—thus exposing itself to the danger of reproducing the structures it intended to critically investigate.

Due to this somewhat conservative setting, promising points of departure such as the investigation of mail art in the framework of a global conceptualism, or its interpretation as an articulation of micropolitics were only pointed out in the last discussion. With this in mind, it may prospectively also be worthwhile to investigate ‘feminist topics’ such as reproductive and invisible labor, family and care work, intimacy, or the body and its politics, as issues that male artists, too, engaged with—even if ever so often in problematic ways. Because ultimately, “Women and Mail Art” effectively demonstrated that women “and” mail art are no separate entities but that women were important, active participants “in” the network.

[1] A point of departure might be Kristine Stiles (ed.), “Correspondence Course. An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and her Circle”, Duke University Press, Durham and London: 2010.

[2] See Marie Egger, Books About Important Matters? Tomasz Schulz’s COOP-Books in the Context of Mail Art, in: Kathrin Barutzki und Franziska Rauh (eds.), “FKW // Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und Visuelle Kultur”, vol. 77, nr. 2 (2025) (in preparation).

[3] CFP: “Women and Mail Art” (online, October 11–25, 24), in: ArtHist.net, 02.05.2024, https://arthist.net/archive/41768 (last access 10/31/2024).

[4] The most important of them being a three-day-conference and exhibition project at Staatliches Museum Schwerin in 1996 (see Kornelia von Berswordt-Wallrabe, Kornelia Röder, and Staatliches Museum Schwerin [eds.]: “Mail Art: Osteuropa im internationalen Netzwerk, Kongressdokumentation”, Staatliches Museum Schwerin: Schwerin 1997).

[5] An example for this are the transcontinental feminist network activities of US-American artist Suzanne Lacy, Mexican artist Monica Mayer, and (East) German artist Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, who collaborated in solidarity with the women’s movement: In 1979, Mayer's postcards were part of the exhibition “Postkarten & Künstlerkarten” (1978) at Galerie Arkade in East Berlin (where Wolf-Rehfeldt probably saw them). (I presented this in the lecture “Signs of Solidarity and Traces of Togetherness” during the Transcultural Academy 2024 at Albertinum Dresden, on October 22, 2024).

[6] An elaboration on the term “queer” regarding mail art was proposed by Mela Dávila Freire’s highly important contribution “Cruising by the Book – Vaginal Cream Davis’ Queer Publishing to Women and Mail Art” (online, October 11, 2024) and by Miriam Kienle’s

monograph “Queering the Network” (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and London 2023).

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