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Mail Art as a Forerunner of net.art: Clemente Padín

[Michela Rosso]

"*Nowadays […], many critics are astounded by the populous and interactive nature of the art that is generated on the Net and that the Internet is promoting, without being aware of the fact that these networks and features have existed since the end of the 1960s, in the artistic work of those pioneers who saw, in communication at a distance (Mail Art or* Arte Correo*), the medium through which to broadcast their ideals of understanding among all peoples in an atmosphere of mutual respect. By reappropriating the original function of communication at the service of the community, Mail Art clearly opened the door to the kind of interactivity that is now boasted by Net Art*"[1]. With these words, Clemente Padín (Lascano, Rocha, Uruguay, 1939), poet, graphic designer, multimedia performer and active participant in the Mail Art movement since the end of the 1960s, summarises the role of this trend of artistic expression as a forerunner of net.art. Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s Mail Art mainly represented a closed circuit of communication between intellectuals of the art world, under the very immediate influence of its creator Ray Johnson, towards the end of the 1960s it starts to incorporate the concept of Eternal Network [2] created around 1968 by the Fluxus artist, Robert Filliou (1926-1987) to express a model of permanent and collaborative creation that would be open to everyone. Many *mailartists* adopt this utopian project regarding the continuous expansion of worldwide communications through all expressive forms

and mediums of aesthetic production, to the extent that the term Eternal Network came to be used to refer to Mail Art as such.

Born with the aim of eliminating the existing distance between the artist and the public, and in general, between art and life, the Eternal Network concept rejects the exclusivity of the art world's institutions in order to espouse open and collaborative exchanges through the postal services. Towards the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s a geographically disperse community of networkers (artists in a network) establishes itself, promoting an anti-bureaucratic counterculture that is also anti-hierarchical, transnational and global. According to the Hungarian mailartist and art critic Perneczky, "*the purpose behind the network was not to establish a system of contacts through the postal services (as might be suggested superficially) but rather to create a homogenous chain of communications in which all of the components are equal, doing away with the market laws as well as the traditional dichotomy between the artist and the public*"[3].

These goals implied a series of operational guidelines which were adopted the increasing number of Mail Art exhibits as of 1970: no fees are levied for participation; there are no juries nor selection processes and all pieces, sent by mail, are exhibited; the documentation is sent to all collaborators (the recipients are required to acknowledge receipt by sending a list of participants or a catalogue with the addresses) and no piece is returned nor marketed [4].

Equally fundamental are the pioneering publications in the promotion of Mail Art, which served as an alternative space for exhibits, as a medium to call for the participation in projects and as sources for the diffusion of lists of participants' addresses (lists that helped to expand the network increasing the possibilities of contact between individuals). In countries where the access to printing and publishing technology was limited (such as in Latin America and Eastern

Europe) publications were mainly produced through an assembling process, magazines were created with materials sent by mail by the participants, and later distributing them through the mail. Clemente Padín employed this strategy in the *OVUM* magazine [5], which started to publish in 1973 in Uruguay as a reaction to the need for communications brought about by censorship and the dictatorial regime that had just taken over the country.

The political commitment that is taken on by Mail Art in Latin American countries during the era of dictatorships (which also characterises mail art produced in Eastern Europe during the Cold War) transformed it into an important tool in the denunciation and struggle against the prevailing repression. Moreover, the price that some mailartists ended up paying for their political activism was extremely harsh: in 1977 Padín, who organized the first documented Mail Art exhibit in Latin America (the Creative Postcard Festival in the Galería U in Montevideo in 1974) and co-organizer of the Contrabienal de Arte (New York-Paris, 1977) that opposed the Latin American Section of the 10th Paris Biennale, organized by the Office of the National Museum of Visual Arts of Montevideo, was arrested by the civilian and military dictatorship and condemned to a four-year sentence for the crime of vilifying and insulting the morale of the Armed Forces. The worldwide solidarity campaign in favour of Padín and his compatriot Jorge Caraballo, that was carried out through the mail services, gathering thousands of signatures in three continents, and the organization of several Mail Art exhibits, contributed to their early release.

This fact demonstrates the enormous diffusion that the Eternal Network obtained only a decade after its conceptualization by Filliou. Having said this, some participants with a solid reputation in the art world distanced themselves from the Mail Art network in the 1970s, while many isolated artists appeared from all around the world broadening and strengthening the community of networkers. This phenomenon can be associated with the main attribute of the Eternal Network, a network involving innumerable interconnected and juxtaposed circuits in which anyone can, with the greatest possible freedom, enter or exit at any given moment; in fact this continuous flow is its vital motion. This characteristic that distinguishes Mail Art from other, more static, forms of art can still be observed at present in the networks that are maintained throughout the world.

The continued existence of Mail Art throughout five decades and the broader application of its communication model at present through computer networking manifest the persistence of the Eternal Network's underlying concepts: its invitation to collective dialogue and exchange.

Doubtlessly, Mail Art has contributed to open the path towards interactivity and the multitudinous nature of art generated on the Net, with which it shares an interest in collective creation and collaborative work: "*The most significant contribution of Mail Art has not been in terms of the pieces that it has created, but rather in the interactive structure that it has developed. As such, Mail Art pieces are the perfect expression of a collective personality of the medium*"[6].

Although it is true that the new technological developments (fax, email, etc.) have contributed to enrich the potential of Mail Art communication, we must not forget the issue of accessibility to these mediums: "*As Latin Americans, born in peripheral and dependent nations, where modernism has barely taken root, exposed to all the fashions that reach us from the developed world, we are constantly besieged by the appearance of trends that [...] pretend to adapt art to the new discoveries and techno-scientific developments, in central countries, with the aggravating circumstance that, soon after we adopt these innovations, the emergence of new developments ridicule and outdate our latest products. We cannot compete in the use of the new products' extraordinary*

potential for communication, which are unattainable for us. Neither can we change their consumerist logic; all we can do is adopt the conventions or rules of this usage to our own particularities. These particularities must face up to the violent reality that ravages "poor" Latin America, eroded by constant and/ or permanent economic and political crises, owing excessively large foreign debts to international financial bodies, with a level of "critical poverty" that implies that many millions of citizens lack the resources with which to live on, or even a place to die in" [7].

Among some of the other current issues regarding Mail Art, we must refer to its growing acceptance by the established art world. As Padín points out, Mail Art's disruptive power of has inevitably petered out over the last five decades: "*Its institutionalisation is now highly advanced, it is accepted in Biennales, it is the subject of academic studies, imprisoned in books and anthologies, dissected in university departments, and has become the reluctant starlet of all art magazines worth their salt, it is on the verge of being socially integrated to legitimate its current social status, to consolidate and perpetuate it; the typical process of uptake and recovery of a cultural structure in society*"[8]. Moreover, towards the end of the 1980s Mail Art's incipient anti-consumerist and anti-commercial stance (position that is summarised in the motto "*Money and Mail Art don't mix*", by the Californian Lon Spielgelmann) originated an intense debate that still persists to this day among the participants of the Mail Art network. As for the marketing of Mail Art pieces, Padín states that: "*In fact, much of the "network's" power is found in these conventions for which all of the "networkers" are paying a high price, firstly in terms of the monetary cost of mail services and accessing the "internet", which is implicit to the proposal and irrecoverable, and secondly, because by excluding themselves from the market, they run the risk of being left out of*

their own country's fine art milieu. Nevertheless, the effort is worthwhile: it marks a clear opposition against the compulsive reorganisation that economic neo-liberalism tries to impose on everyone, cleaning the slate of values, feelings and motivations, that correspond to what is considered to be human"[9]. These words clearly summarise Clemente Padín's position, interpreting Mail Art as a tool for social and political transformation. Having said this, faced with the unstoppable process of institutionalisation of Mail Art, Padín is aware of the need to control and optimise the "nets" in terms of their new function. On the occasion of the campaign that he organised in 1988 together with Hans Braumüller, Fernando García Delgado, Tartarugo and César Reglero against the British government's granting of political immunity to the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, Padín adds that: "*The Pinochet issue will be solved in one way or another, our friend Humberto Nilo may, or may not, be able to resume his job (let us hope that he will), the case is that we have developed a tool to defend and struggle for our rights, which with some degree of caution and avoiding undue excesses, will be of great use to us. This is what is known as creating an institution from below, from the roots, not because of any imposition but from necessity. An open Networker chain.*"[10]

Despite any considerations on the effectiveness of actions carried out by networkers in terms of specific political results, what is still most interesting is Mail (and e-Mail) Art's capacity to mobilise large numbers of people through an open and democratic network that incorporates a highly effective mechanism for the rapid diffusion of ideas.

The Eternal Network, with its de-territorialised structure that adapts itself perfectly to the new challenges of globalised society, represents an extraordinary potential for the interaction between specific cultures and for the reconciliation of multinational differences: "*If under modernism the challenge was to*

prevent a nuclear holocaust following an upward slope of progress and universal goodwill, under postmodernism the challenge seems to be focused on tolerance in the face of a multiplicity of perspectives and points of view, together with respect for the particularities of others in an atmosphere of cultural, ethnic, religious, sexual, social, economic and political pluralism, and finally the satisfaction of the legitimate demands of all peoples for a dignified existence, within an inalienable framework of justice and respect."[11]

Notes

[1] PADÍN, Clemente, *El Arte Correo y su consecuencia natural: el arte en la Red o Net Art*, [on-line], Santiago de Chile, 2000, [viewed on: 29-02-2008], Escáner Cultural (Number 14), Available on the: http://www.escaner.cl/escaner14/acorreo.html.

[2] The English term "network" can be translated into Spanish as "*red de comunicación*" (communication network), but can also indicate the kind of work carried out on the net (best known as "networking") as well as the international alternative art movement that is developed through the Net. According to Padín, "*The term 'network' stresses a concept of art in terms of a communications product, the fruit of human work (the 'work') as well as the fabric of relations between consumers, united within the Net, the circuit that allows them to be interconnected (the 'Net'). Akin to a computer network, without a single central core, wherein each 'networker' (artist in the Net) acts as a switchboard for the recycling and creation of communications*"; PADÍN, C., *El Network y el rol del artista. Antes y después de Lyotard*, [on-line], Santiago de Chile, 2001, [viewed on: 29-02-2008], Escáner Cultural (Number 27), Available on the Internet:http://www.escaner.cl/escaner27/acorreo.html.

[3] Quoted in PADÍN, C., *El network: la red internacional de poetas*, [on-line], Barcelona, 1995, [viewed on: 17-05-2008], P.O.BOX (Number 8), Available on the Internet: http://www.merzmail.net/network.htm, ISSN 1136-4807.

[4]"*The widely acknowledged source for the open format of mail art exhibitions lies in Ken Friedman's groundbreaking 1973 exhibition Omaha Flow Systems. It was the first exhibition to use a large list, a democratic and all-inclusive guideline, and individual viewer participation. Many mail artists, including Michael Crane, regularly refer to it as 'a direct forerunner of the mail art exhibition as it is known today'*"; FERRANTO, Matt, *Moticos and Mail Art: A History*, [on-line], New York, undated, [viewed on: 31-05-2008], Available on the Internet: http://www.spareroom.org/mailart/mis_2.html. See also, FRIEDMAN, Ken, *Flowing in Omaha*, [on-line], Iowa City, The University of Iowa Museum of Art, undated, [viewed on: 04-06-2008], Available on the Internet: http://sdrc.lib.uiowa.edu/atca/subjugated/five_14.htm.

[5] Clemente Padín has worked as an editor for various magazines, such as, for example, *Los Huevos del Plata* (1965-1969), *OVUM 10* and *OVUM* (1969-1975), *Participación* (1984-1986), *Integración* and *0 Dos*.

[6] HELD, John Jr., *Tres Ensayos Sobre Arte Correo*, [on-line], Barcelona, 1997, [viewed on: 19-02-2008], P.O. BOX (Number 28), Available on the Internet: http://www.merzmail.net/held.htm, ISSN 1136-4807.

[7] PADÍN, C., *El Network y el rol del artista. Antes y después de Lyotard (2da. parte)*, [on-line], Santiago de Chile, 2001, [viewed on: 29-02-2008], Escáner Cultural (Number 28), Available on the Internet: http://www.escaner.cl/escaner28/acorreo.html.

[8] PADÍN, C., *El arte correo en Latinoamérica*, [on-line], Montevideo, 1988, [viewed on: 29-02-2008], Available on the Internet: http://www.merzmail.net/latino.htm.

[9] PADÍN, C., *El Network y el rol del artista. Antes y después de Lyotard (2da. parte)*, [on-line], Santiago de Chile, 2001, [viewed on: 29-02-2008], Escáner Cultural (Number 28), Available on the Internet: http://www.esca-

ner.cl/escaner28/acorreo.html.

[10] Quoted in: *Detalles de la Campaña* [on-line], Buenos Aires, [1998], [viewed on: 29-02-2008], Available on the Internet: http://www.vorticeargentina.com.ar/auma/detalles.html. The campaign, "*Por la Libertad de la Enseñanza en las Artes"* also included, among its goals, an appeal for the readmission of Humberto Nilo, a Chilean art professor who was dismissed from the university by the *de facto* authorities of the Chilean dictatorship. Further details on the campaigns carried out by AU MA + Gom@ (Acciones Urgentes de Mail Art + Global Organization of Mail Artists) can be viewed on: http://www.geocities.com/tartarug/AUMA/.

[11] PADÍN, C., *El Network y el rol del artista. Antes y después de Lyotard (2da. parte)*, [on-line], Santiago de Chile, 2001, [viewed on: 29-02-2008], Escáner Cultural (Number 28), Available on the Internet: http://www.escaner.cl/escaner28/acorreo.html.

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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 democratises 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