

ART AS A MEANS OF SURVIVAL UNDER COMMUNISM

Eastern European Mail Art has filled the Netmail archive from the beginning and certainly will continue. But the end of Communism has brought changes in matter and style. Before the 90s, I experienced the young art form of mail art as a valve in totalitarian societies, as a window to the world which we used both ways creating counter-publicity in the other system for the artistic expression suppressed at home.

Evident was the value of especially adequate media like black-and-white photography, an accessible self-made carrier of tongue-in-cheek messages--often enough produced overnight in the artists' bathroom to be posted then with all hopes and fears of Stasi or KGB interference. Numerous incidents showed me how immensely suspicious the quick, free and personal interchange of ideas among East European artists and above all with us Westerners seemed to the official and unofficial sniffers, even over here. The case of Winnes (GDR) shows all the tragic and dynamics of East European Mail Art, well documented in the Stasi archives. Think of the fears during nightly searches of the Galantais' home, when Hungarian Secret Service mistook our growing "network" for their own code-name "halo" (which means nothing but "network"). And I learned to search for Zigalov's hidden hand-carved stamps from Moscow's Samisdad underground on official postal documents. And every opening of a letter from Pawel Petasz in Poland was an irreversible celebration: to read it you had to destroy it, the message was interwoven spy-proof in the hand-made envelope, which gave you a very personal kick.

I had the pleasure to join some ambitious long-running projects which my Eastern European Mail Art friends worked on with amazing steadfastness that certainly gave them a stronghold of identity in their diversity, e.g. Guillermo Deisler's "univers" exhibitions and documentation in Bulgaria, later in the GDR. In Pawel Petasz' *Commonpress Series*, I published my own catalog, *Ein Berliner im Pariser*. Collating a new "Triangle" booklet together with Rea Nikonova in her blossoming Zaum garden near the Black Sea is a lasting memory for Angela and me who had meanwhile joined me personally and mail-art-wise and with whom I delivered Mail Art all over the world in postal uniforms for a whole year. This project led us all across Eastern Europe, also through the Balkan War, where we carried messages from Croatia to Serbia on our bodies at a time when no official mail existed.

A Slavist by trade, I had been lucky to travel the "East Bloc" already from the seventies and to meet all the above-mentioned personally, thus having the unique chance of investigating early into all these holistic personalities behind the outlandish and eclectic artistic objects in my mailbox. Personal contact helped me to give up prejudice against presumably rudimentary artistic expression and also to appreciate the immense personal engagement and often risk connected with a Mail Artist's life in the East. So I saw Segery Segay invest most of his wages into registering mail while still half of it never arrived. I understood what a return card meant to him. A continuous focus for pioneer work was the homely atmosphere of Robert Rehfeldt's studio in East Berlin, where we used to rubberstamp on artistamp sheets as collective German-German collages after we had paid our entrance fee of 25 DM for a day's visit to the grim border guards and that dreaded body-check at Checkpoint Friedrichstrasse. Robert still experienced German re-unification. The loss of his beloved studio forced him into a nomadic existence, and I blame his untimely death on the social harshness of the re-unification, which literally broke his heart.

I doubt that the end of Communism has improved Eastern European Mail Art. Certainly it has improved the unbearable situation of many a friend behind the Iron Curtain, and I share their relief. But I do regret the abrupt end of longtime contacts, when I get to read, "Sorry, no more time for art." As Rolf Staeck told me in a film interview, "In those days a letter from Venezuela with colorful stamps was a piece of Utopia, because we could never go there. Now the borders are open, and we could go. But now we must work and earn money." I hope that Eastern European Mail Art transforms into a new quality, sharp and close to life as ever, even without the pressures of totalitarianism.

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