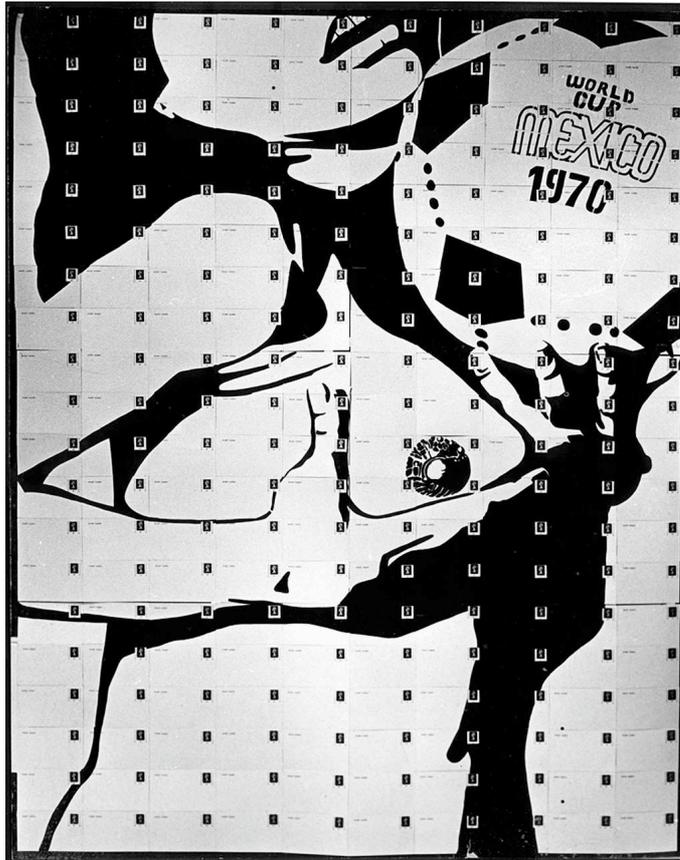


Converting the Systems into Poetry: Art and the Mail

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Felipe Ehrenberg, *Arriba y Adelante... Y Si No, Pos También*, (1970)

Intimate Bureaucracies: Art and the Mail explores the ingenuity and complexity of artistic interruptions in the postal system. Small and intimate in scale itself, the exhibition cannot provide a history of art's relationship with the mail, but demonstrates the significance of this idiosyncratic practice in which notions of journeys, distance, flux, resistance, humour, communication and collaboration all come into play.

In his *Telegraphic Work* (1970) the artist Felipe Ehrenberg transmitted a message far removed from the customary bureaucratic use of telegrams: he

called for the conversion of 'all the systems into poetry'. The statement, however, illustrates a much broader strategy: that of hijacking or co-opting powerful structures in order to appropriate them for different, sometimes opposing ends. The idea of 'converting the systems into poetry' celebrates the artistic gesture in the 'real' world that transforms the mundane into the marvellous. At the same time, it makes use of systems to spread that vision of the world as broadly as possible. Cildo Meireles' *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* (1970) intervene in the financial and commercial systems of modern capitalism. His circulation of banknotes and Coca-Cola bottles bearing politically-motivated slogans were radical because they both depended on the systems and were directed against them. The strategy relates closely to the strategy of mail circulation (indeed, Meireles circulated some banknotes through the post). Meireles' work *Zero Cruzeiro* (1978), shown in the exhibition, not only examines capitalism's structures, but also exposes the effects of the monetary system on individuals in society.

Artistic engagement with the mail as a modern bureaucratic structure is notable throughout the history of twentieth century art. Marcel Duchamp created a work of art using postcards in 1916; Surrealists were enchanted by the epistolary, particularly their Postman Chevalier; and the Futurists embraced the postal system as an emblem of modernity. The certification of Yves Klein's 'fraudulent' blue stamp by an anonymous postal clerk and On Kawara's daily mailings of postcards are now legendary. As Mark Bloch reminds us, 'as long as there have been artists and there has been post, there has been postal art'. The use of the postal system by these artists is not incidental, but part of the meaning of the work: officious bureaucratic stamps and national symbols are subverted, ironized or used to aesthetic effect. The anonymous hands that the mailing passes through become implicit in the works' participatory nature; and the crossing of geographical borders is made manifest, as the voyage makes visible the distance between the 'here' and 'there'.

Ray Johnson is widely considered to be the founding father of mail art. Johnson's New York Correspondence School was a humorous play on the New York School painters, and a dig at the art world. Johnson's witty mailing practices involved sending works to friends and colleagues, requesting them to 'add something and return'. Johnson's oddball humour set itself against the machinations of the art world and much of his work deals with his alternative world constructed through the mail. Other works in the exhibition also question notions of value, authenticity and the original - Ferrari's *Architectures of Madness* (1981-2000) for example, are infinite editions that attempt to eliminate the aura of the artwork as a rare commodity. For this reason, some of the works on display are replicas, we have taken this approach to affirm that the works are able to have the same effect whether they are 'original' or not. All these works have in common their ability to question and present an alternative to art world values.

A number of the works in the exhibition are by artists from Latin America and date to the 1970s and 1980s. These artists used the post as a strategy to question the restrictions on artistic production under the conditions of military dictatorship. Mail art practice was an attempt to resist the dehumanising actions of the state, to communicate the injustice of these conditions globally, but also simply to reassert friendship and experimentation as essential human freedoms. Some of these artists, such as Edgardo Antonio Vigo, could be defined as mail artists, others, including León Ferrari, Felipe Ehrenberg, Carlos Ginzburg and Eugenio Dittborn, used the mail as a strategy for the broad dissemination of their work.

The more recent works in *Intimate Bureaucracies: Art and the Mail*, by Walead Beshty, David Horvitz and Cristiano Lenhardt, take extremely different approaches to the bureaucracy of the mail and other global delivery systems. Beshty's work circulates within an art world aesthetic and organisational framework, but also puts that framework in question by suggesting broader contexts, stimulating reflections on geopolitical borders and restrictions on the movement of human beings as opposed to consumer objects. Lenhardt attempts to open up circulation in his actions; through his poetic gestures he

provokes a reflection on fleeting moments of love and tenderness. His statement, 'I'm interested in the miracle', is testament to the temporal magic and sense of possibility created by his works. Horvitz's practice meditates on distance, journeys, communication and exchange, as well as the changes to the ways we interact and consume information.



Cristiano Lenhardt, *Hug Collector*, (2002)

Horvitz has been commissioned to create a new work for the exhibition. His work *Some Cut Flowers* is a mailing project in which the artist will send individual flowers from the United States to the exhibition. Due to customs regulations controlling the import and export of fresh cut flowers, it is likely that some of the flowers will be confiscated. But this is Horvitz's intention - the flowers are meant for the customs officials, not their ostensible destination.

The project will be subject to chance, perhaps some or all of the flowers will arrive, or perhaps the installation will be a collection of empty containers, only a remnant of Horvitz's gentle gift to the custom officials.

Another aspect of chance introduced to the exhibition project is the open invitation for people to send their work under the theme *Send Me a Flower, etc.* In the spirit of mail art's founding principles all works submitted will be displayed. Furthermore, as mail art rejects the selection of works for exhibition, these contributions will gradually take over the exhibition space, creeping into the curated space and reasserting the vitality of the mail art exhibition model, which stands for communication, chance and chaos. I'm not able to foresee how this element of the exhibition will play out, but I would like to thank all of those who participated by sending their poetic gestures.

The catalogue is more than a mere record of the exhibition; it contains one hidden work and other works that do not appear in the gallery. The hidden work is an 'animated gift' created by Milena Galli. Although it is not part of the physical exhibition, it can be activated outside of the gallery space. In this way, Galli's proposition re-establishes the participatory nature of some of the works in the exhibition, such as Vigo's *(In)complete Works*, which can only be activated or completed by the recipient.

Zanna Gilbert, curator of *Intimate Bureaucracies: Art and the Mail*, is an AHRC Collaborative Doctoral Award Holder with the University of Essex and Tate Research.