Artistic models born from new expressive possibilities and media newly emerging out of technology in the 1960s and 1970s were indispensable to the consolidation of new art trends. While contemporary criticism is doing everything in its means to perpetuate and appropriate all that was produced during those years, there remain critical divisions that avoid uniformity in their consideration of the values that generated such practices, and that challenge the barriers that limit critical thinking and conventions that constrict dialogue. Most significantly, they contest the permanent denial of the real-life conditions, oftentimes foundational, of those artistic formations produced out of particular circumstances of social, economic, and political life. I refer here especially to the social political formations of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, in both Eastern Europe and most of Latin America, which today we do not hesitate to call antidemocratic and hostile to human rights.

The Anglo-Saxon critical model of conceptualism, forcefully imposed on official historiography and embedded in artistic institutions, especially museums, is unable to critically establish the foundations of conceptual art’s emergence nor the artistic practices of conceptualism in those Latin American countries and other parts of the world that faced dictatorships. The military and dictatorial regimes were decisive factors
in the forms of production and artistic distribution during those periods. Current research is recovering many documents, artworks, artists, collectives, and movements that are now being reconsidered.

The recovery of archives of practices and systems of alternative artistic circulation, greatly important during those years, suggests an emphasis placed on certain strategies and tactics through which we can identify other instruments of analysis. In this sense, conceptual strategies become very relevant when reconsidering the movements of institutions such as museums, galleries, exhibitions, and archives, in the face of globalization and neoliberal strategies that collectively devastate the political cultures of today’s world. One could go so far as to claim that by reconsidering the conceptual production of the 1960s and 1970s, we aim toward approaching a certain sense of utopia still capable of nurturing the horizon of the possible.

Only in this sense may we account for the period’s increase of certain art tendencies in Eastern European countries under the authority of Russian Communism and in those Latin American countries oppressed by dictators backed by the United States to challenge the expansion of the Castro ideology. Here we might consider the fact of the almost simultaneous fall of these regimes.

Most significant is the massive expansion of mail art as a means to denounce and document the situation and to communicate and diffuse artistic devices that were being elaborated in response to the political climate. Official mail was protected by international treaties that had to be respected by both democracies and dictatorships, and thus became one of the only possible means of communication between artists living under distinct political and economical conditions. As a result, mail art—which necessarily values the development of communication systems over the merely aesthetic—became the principal artistic medium. This was one of the many characteristics of mail art that allowed for communication between different artists within distinct fields, since what mattered most was not producing meaningful formulations or following artistic trends, but rather the quality of the product of communication, which was judged only on the basis of its expressive functionality, its capacity to divulge meaning.

We should similarly consider the expansion of conceptualism in these countries, categorically different from those metropolitan countries where the movement was originally born. On the one hand, we encounter the formal consideration of Joseph Kosuth’s “art as idea as idea,” and
on the other hand, the following statement made by Argentinean conceptual artists, the authors of the paradigmatic experience that goes by the name Tucumán Arde:

We would like to restore the words, the dramatic actions, and the images, to a place where they can fulfill a revolutionary role, where they will be useful, where they can be turned into “arms for the struggle.” Art is whatever mobilizes and agitates. Art is whatever radically rejects this way of living and says: let’s do something to change this.'

If we take into consideration Duchamp’s position that art can be born either from art or from life, we can make the claim that Anglo-Saxon conceptual art is born from art and that Latin American and Eastern European conceptual art is born from life.

Among countries with similar systems of government, such as those in Eastern Europe and in Latin America when they were governed by arbitrary dictatorships, a relationship emerges almost naturally between mail art and other forms of art that are not widely celebrated in contemporary criticism—for example, with experimental poetry and photography. It can be said that, formally speaking, we Latin Americans were in a better position to manage the production and diffusion of our works. By contrast, the repression of our spaces acquired an apocalyptic and disturbing character with the disappearances and deaths of thousands and thousands of the regime’s opponents.

Not much later than at the end of the 1960s, these international exchanges began to develop from tepidly passing along publications to swapping postcards and artworks, and later, at a more personal level, to sharing denunciations and manifestos. It was not coincidental that during these years we saw the first “weavings” of artists' networks devoted to communication, the inaugural networking that attempted to overcome, through “artistic coups,” the most difficult life conditions that were being imposed by tyrants. In my personal case, I had the opportunity to make space in my magazines, first in Los Huevos del Plata and then in OVUM 10 and OVUM, for numerous artists from Eastern Europe—for example, Robert Rehfeldt, Jeff Birger, Michael Groschopp, Birgen Jesch, Karsten

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Matthes, Detlef Kappia, Hans-Jürgen Hess, Friedrich Winnes, Uwe Dressler, Mathias Tietke, Knut Hartwich, Joachim Stange, Jens Barkschat, Sal-Gerd Beyer, Karla Sache, Stephan Jacob, Jörg Sonntag, and Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt from the German Democratic Republic; Jindřich Prochážka, Ladislav Nebeský, Milán Grygar, Jiří Valoch, Jiří Kocman, Milan Adamčiak, Karel Adamus, Zdeněk Barbenka, Bohumila Groverova, Josef Hiršal, Josef Honnys, Petr Štembera, Jan Wojnar, and Ladislav Novák from the former Czechoslovakia; Miroljub Todorović, Bálint Szombathy, Franci Zagoričnik, Milenko Matanović, Dreja Rotar, Andrzej Szubzda, Biljana Tomić, Ivan Jelinčić, Dobrica Kamperelić, Jaroslav Supek, Nicola Šindik, Nenad Bogdanović, Voik Branko, Ivan Jelinčić Merlin, and Radomir Mašić from the former Yugoslavia; K. Parczewska, Andrzej Dudek-Dürer, Andrzej Wielgosz, Pawel Petasz, Piotr Rogalski, Sztuka Wysyłkowa, Tomasz Schulz, Adam Kogociuk, Zdzisław Jurkiewicz, Roland Szefferski, Jaroslav Kozłowski, and Piotr Rypson from Poland; and Julian Mereutza from Romania. I mustn’t omit a fantastic figure, the Chilean artist Guillermo Deisler, who was exiled for many years, first in the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv and then in Halle (GDR). As a result of the sociopolitical conditions at that time, his famous cooperative editions UNI/vers served as a bridge between artists from Eastern Europe and colleagues in the West.

Around 1984, with the fall of the Uruguayan dictator, I had the opportunity to recover my passport and travel outside Uruguay. Subsequently, thanks to assistance from the North American Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, I managed to obtain a DAAD grant for a three-month stay in West Berlin, during the time when the West was being opened to the socialist camp. Thanks to certain actions taken that to this day remain unclear to me, I had the opportunity to visit artists in East Berlin on two occasions, together with the anthropologist Volker Haumann, who led me by the hand across the Wall in a subway that crossed the old capital. Consequently, in March 1984, I was able to meet Robert Rehfeldt and other artists. Unfortunately, during my first visit with him there was enough time only to exchange a few words, but we were able to arrange another more prolonged visit, during which I might add I attempted to cook a steak a la criolla, which means meat placed directly on top of burning logs. I still remind Robert that we passed the time by reading a fragment of the Ursonate by Schwitters. I left our meeting with artworks by almost every artist in the group that exhibited in Montevideo at the National Library in November 1986.
I should confess that Robert Rehfeldt’s personal ethics made a great impression on me. He was already a recognized artist in West Germany when he moved to the GDR out of his personal conviction that capitalism was an obsolete economic and social formation and couldn’t respond to the essential needs of the human being. For him, socialism was the only option. And when he discovered the limitations placed on public freedom in the GDR, he opted not to turn his back on the place but rather to put his best efforts into the fight to reestablish those rights. The truth is that real socialism, such as that which was practiced in Eastern Europe, was a failure that culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The premature death of Robert Rehfeldt disallowed him from finishing his work and participating in the historical events that marked his successes, including anthological expositions of mail art. However, his ideas and concepts follow us and will guide us for as long as the human being continues to struggle to prevail and preserve itself against economic systems that seem born to annihilate it, to destroy humans, their home, and the earth. We can find a reflection of this spirit in one of his sayings, “Your ideas help my ideas,” in which he expresses his conviction regarding fraternity between human beings.

The same goes for the cooperative magazine UNI/vers, led by Guillermo Deisler, Rehfeldt’s Latin American friend, exiled a few kilometers outside Berlin in Halle, whom Rehfeldt could not see because moving from one city to another was prohibited. For artists living in the countries of Europe and Latin America, mail art was one possible way of crossing borders without the need to travel, without the need for visas, passports, and police checkpoints. East German artists were not disappeared or assassinated like they were in Latin America, but they were silenced, sequestered in their cities, and incarcerated for their opposition to the communist regime. Mail art was considered, like other artistic forms, a subversive activity directed against the state and repressed as such. Guillermo Deisler, while in exile, wrote the following poem-concept: “... it happens that, at times, I tire of being foreign. ...” Upon first reading, this seems to make an allusion to his condition of political exile, far from his homeland and roots. However, in light of his work, one can perceive the suggestion of a movement toward absolute co-inhabiting of the earth, toward a world without borders, without nationalities, without patriotic chauvinisms, a world for man-birds sharing limitless space, an interminable sky. From this place, the feather, a symbol-object, also expresses
the thematic of his work. From there, too, Deisler’s cooperative magazine *UNI/vers,* a work by *uni/vers(al)* men, artists of the global network (*networking*) were brought together and taken toward (*vers*) a *UNI/que* homeland, without foreigners, without exiles. . . . *UNI/vers,* for many years, was the only means through which artists from Eastern Europe met their colleagues.

The activities of West German editor-artists serve as another example of an axis of inexplicit cooperation. One such individual was Klaus Groh, with whom I communicated by mail until 1973. Groh ran the small editorial *International Artist Cooperation (I.A.C.)* in Oldenburg and acted as a kind of hinge in the articulation of international communications, often with Latin American artists oppressed by dictators and also artists living in socialist countries, with their modest but fundamental zines (*cuadernillos*), never larger than a quarter of the DIN A4 format size. Their editions kept our denunciations and condemnations of the Latin dictators up-to-date, especially the denouncement of the terrible situation that our small towns faced under the regime of terror, where the military—fighting against democracy with the backing of the CIA and North American transnational corporations—acted with impunity. Moreover, Klaus Groh published *Instruments74* (1974), *Omaggio a Beuys* (1975), and *Sign(o)Graphics* (1976), booklets that I authored along with many others. Another editor I cannot leave out is the artist Klaus Staeck, who, together with Groh, kept alive our country’s alternative art, which was being repressed by Operation Condor, implemented by the CIA as a counteroffensive to the example set by socialist Cuba.

It was not coincidental that in April 1984, toward the end of my grant period, I organized the Latin American Mail Art exhibition (*Mail-Art aus Lateinamerika*) at Galeria Rene Black in West Berlin, and by doing so contradicted one the principles of mail art. I’m referring to the ecumenical character that exhibitions of mail art inherently possess (for this reason, I limited myself to inviting Latin American mail artists). As a counterpart to this show I organized another exhibition of mail art at the Public Library of Montevideo, Uruguay, with all the material that had been given to me by artists in East Berlin in December 1986. An accompanying text dedicated to Karsten Mathes, who died around that time, reads as follows:

Mail art, a multitudinous manifestation of contemporary art, involves hundreds upon hundreds of participants all over the world. Born in
the USA at the beginning of the 60s in reaction to the growing commercialization of art and the exacerbated elitism that isolated artists from their social environment, mail art quickly expanded massively as a result of the possibilities of free participation and advances in the fields of long distance communication, especially in the area of air navigation, allowing for the rapid distribution of mail, and also advances in the industry of graphic reproduction, which contributed to the important lowering of the cost of mailed artworks.

In this context, mail art generated its unspoken rules, today respected by all participants, which gave it its democratic and participatory character: free admission of received works without limitations of any order, including size (except those imposed by the mail), or particular technique; expositions without jury selection, but with the obligation of exhibiting all received works, in whatever language, verbal, visual, etc. These norms signified a clear rejection of commercial art and the entire apparatus established by the art market—galleries, journals, established criticism, museums, foundations, etc.—mainly because its followers did not expect any compensation or the return of their artworks, but were instead satisfied with the acknowledgment of being shown or having their participation recorded in a catalogue and the security that their works would not be sold.

In the German Democratic Republic, a member of the socialist camp where respect and free artistic expression are basic principles and organically integrated into the peoples’ daily lives, this form of art is widely supported because its nature is well suited to these principles. The theme of these artworks expresses the preoccupation and concern of an art that is committed above all to international solidarity: the tremendous need to establish firm bases for a lasting peace that would contribute to building a better world; the struggle against hunger and poverty, against irrational exploitation of natural goods, against consumerism, against colonialism and apartheid, against religious, philosophical or racial intolerance; to establish solidarity among all groups of people fighting for liberation or nationhood, etc. There is no shortage of mature and positive mechanisms for indicating areas for reform in order to improve the GDR, nor do we lack graphic testimonies of an intense cultural activity that too few are aware of.

This exhibition brings together 56 artists from the GDR and is organized by the Asociación Uruguaya de Artistas Correo. It will begin
on the 24th of November in the “J. P. Varela” room at the National Library and will last until December 4, 1968.²

Without a doubt, to evaluate this text one would have to turn back to the 1980s and imagine the terrible consequences that the exhibiting artists would have had to endure had the concepts and judgments included in this text been threatening to the GDR.

Based on the condition of being a “product of communication,” art requires the participation of at least two interlocutors in a situation of “dialogue,” thereby materializing one of the essential characteristics of being human: the social relation, and accordingly, respect for the “other,” the interlocutor. It is tragic that in generating the art market, the capitalist system deepens the alienation of the artist, who on the one hand feels an almost biological need to create and express his essence (and at the same time, to legitimize himself as a human being), and who on the other hand finds herself in the dramatic position of being inserted into an art market that obliges him or her to relinquish his aspiration to express himself freely for the exigencies of the style that responds best to the vicissitudes of buying, selling, and profit-making galleries. In other words, the artist sees himself obliged to work for art rather than to live for his art. The subaltern paths of assuming and deepening this contradiction—spitting oneself and producing directly for the market, or working for a salary outside of the area of artistic activity—in order to conserve aesthetic independence are options that bring with them the same risks but do not resolve the problem, at either the personal or the social level. There is no doubt that the artist aspires to live by and not for his or her work by transforming it into saleable goods, which only perpetuates the socioeconomic system. Moreover, the artist separates the art from its use value in order to generate an exchange function, or in other words, an art market, in which art loses its value (in order to gain in worth). The artist is the producer of works (not necessarily objects), predominantly artistic, in which the essence of the human is produced as something that manifests its “being in the world” (according to Sartre).

Artists are not special beings or illuminated by some higher power. They are normal creatures of flesh and bones, forced to reaffirm and legitimate the operative powers that make them believe that they are nothing

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more than employees at the service of the art market (and thus in a position to sell their labor power) and not beings who aspire, like everyone else, to live in peace with their work. If human nature pushes us to express our essence as human beings through symbolic activities called “artistic,” it is not possible to perform them in a context in which that essence is denied. This was the paradoxical situation faced by artists from countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America suffering under dictatorships: on the one hand, they wanted to live from their work, but to achieve this they had no choice but to indirectly feed the state and its ideology; on the other hand, they could not avoid addressing the reality in which they lived through their work, which immediately disqualified them.

The artist’s alienation from his or her work will be resolved only when the society in which he lives reverses the objectives of social production from that of profiting and earning to the full and real satisfaction of human needs.

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