(1) forming a network
(2) getting into the network
(3) offering and receiving, giving feedback to the circuit

GUILLERMO DEISLER

At the end of the 1970s in the city of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, the Chilean artist Guillermo Deisler asked a question and created a visual poem to accompany it. It consisted of the word “THE” written once in very large letters over the word “us” written fifty times. Whenever I have thought of the title or the text of this piece, I thought of the “us” as a question. Perhaps it was a little manifesto by the artist, sent from exile and from another territory, and evoking some kind of lost collectivity, suspended in time and propelled by the poetics of the place. Today we can review this action based on two factors: the mail art network as a geography of language, and the letter as a series of trajectories and territories of translation.

The recent exposition Alternative Networks proposed a certain relationship between the spatiotemporal trajectories that supported Latin

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Guillermo Deisler (1940–95), artist, engraver, editor, set designer, poet, and mail artist. Deisler was born in Santiago de Chile and died in Halle, Germany, where he resided after his political exile.
American and Eastern European artists. What these artists had in common was that they proposed escape routes from the censorship and repression imposed by the dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s: “The relationship between the artists of Eastern Europe and Hispanic America highlights the situation that existed at that time. The transversal South-Eastern axis was consolidating its ties beyond the political poles and dominant ideologies.” An example of this was the information network that was generated by using the postal service based on the deferred presence of the sender. This was complemented by other forms of supportive exchange that involved personal trips for the delivery of shipments, or even the actual presence of the sender, who handed a package over by hand.

2 Exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum at the Universidad de São Paulo in June 2011 (Cristina Freire, curator).
The people who created the mail art network often did not know each other personally, but they nevertheless established an intense and emotional relationship based on the presence or absence of their bodies, which allowed for the emergence of a different way of understanding the relationship between political subjectivity and its physical representation:

The simultaneity of this search for communication between experimenters in art and poetry on other continents and in different corners of the globe is already an undisputed fact. . . . The internationalization of the search for contacts, publics, readers, and spectators for this mail art began to indirectly influence its creators who began to experiment with messages that one could read without any language barriers—a return to sign systems that allowed for direct reading. In this sense the visual began to concern them from then on.⁴

In the special case of the artist Guillermo Deisler, his epistolary operations and visual language amplify the hermeneutic vision of sending and return that characterizes the postal system on a daily basis. The act of receiving implicitly preserves the act of sending and undoubtedly considers the translation of a received object or letter to be fundamental. The act of translating spaces and fictions with multiple languages and meanings in a poetic-visual key inscribes the idea of transfiguration insofar as it multiplies the deferred meaning. This refers not only to the translation of languages, since this type of “absence of languages” chooses a body as catalyst and “an organizational structure in a state of evolution.”⁵ Such an idea of translation is vital for activating meaning in the new context where the letter’s content unfolds. Here I would like to propose that the system of mail art works like a body of linked, reverberant, contaminated, and affective trajectories that are at the same time atemporal and physically displaced.

**TRANSLATION**

Mail art produces a relationship across trajectories that generate systems of communal affect. The journey of the artworks as well as their reproducibility and loss of origin are strategically visualized in this postal con-

⁴ Guillermo Deisler, unpublished manuscript.  
text by means of a “collecting of places” and by means of the expulsion of what is in circulation. Guillermo Deisler, Clemente Padín, Edgardo Vigo, Wladimir Dias-Pino, and Álvaro and Neidé de Sá regularly used the state postal service for sending their visual material, but there was also an intense network of relationships built for and with travelers who carried the letters and materials in their baggage in order to hand them over to others once they arrived at their destination, including even the direct presence of the sender at the recipient’s house with the letter in hand. The suggestion by the artist Ulises Carrión of the “Sistema Internacional de Arte Correo Errático (SIACE)” (International System of Erratic Mail Art) for an “alternative to the official post offices” (1977) gave rise to other possibilities of transmitting messages at the margins of the established system, inventing in the process new forms of exchange: “The message should be sent to the SIACE office by any method except the official postal service. It can be delivered by the author or by anyone else. . . . By using SIACE, you are contributing to the only alternative to the national bureaucracies and you are strengthening the international community of artists.” The urgent necessity to create new forms of exchange not only was due to the expansion of the art system for an established community, but it also represented a sort of questioning of communication systems in a political context. The machineries of repression of the dictatorships in Latin America and Eastern Europe were unable to control the large quantity of mail that passed through the territories under their control. In this way a kind of gap opened through which letters and shipments could slip uncontrolled. For those artists in the network who, like Guillermo Deisler, lived in political exile, this took on the value of a kind of “epistolary survival”:

For Latin Americans—and there are already many creative people who like me have been forced into exile either voluntarily or through political circumstances—“art by mail” becomes the palliative that neutralizes our situation as “deceased citizens,” as the Paraguayan writer Augusto Roa Bastos called this massive emigration of cultural workers from the South American continent.

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7 Ibid., 246.
8 Deisler, unpublished manuscript.
These collaborative networks were very effective, and they gave rise to ways of creating art that activated spaces that salon art never occupied. The system proposed a relational way of production that was mindful of the distribution of objects, poems, letters, or drawings that had the capacity to transform and that functioned in their turn as crucibles for critique. They fulfilled this function by acting transversally between art and everyday life, an issue that today permits us not only to rethink what is being distributed as art, but also to recognize the different layers of semiotic reading and innovative techniques designed to produce new objects of exchange that would be closer to their potential translation as a system of registration or a cartography of simultaneities and cultural shifts.

The mass media of communication and their focus on individual consumption was one of the principal targets for mail art. By spreading counterinformation, mail art exposed and ironized the way in which people were being manipulated, prevented from thinking autonomously, and transformed into subjects that were easy to control. Therefore, the signs used in mail art networks under the logic of “visual poetry” were characterized by the demand for emancipation and communication that passed through the order of signs in order to transform them into new forms for the activation of poetic-political contents.

Circulation brought with it responsibility to the extent that it entailed a type of collective creation that was foreign to the official art circuit. As such it fostered specific forms of collaboration and solidarity, as in the case of the Uruguayan artist Clemente Padín, who besides being arrested by the Uruguayan security forces during the last military dictatorship, also had many of his books and his personal archives taken away by a regime that controlled bodies as much as their daily memories. One way to recover the confiscated material was through the collaboration of those people who received Padín’s mail during the period prior to his arrest. The mail art network here functioned as a depository of shared responsibilities; the postal system’s connectivity in its turn became inseparable from its own memory and its history of transformation; it became connected with the tasks of the postal system, producing “correlated activity.”

It is also important to point out that Padín’s freedom was gained thanks to an international movement made up of a variety of different groups, some of them members of the mail art network who fought for the artist’s freedom from the outside: “The idea of a unique, authentic

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9 Francisco Varela, Conocer. Las ciencias cognitivas: Tendencias y perspectivas. Cartografía de las ideas actuales (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2005), 53.
and original artwork is meaningless in the universe of exchange. And the
distinction between original and copy turns out to be obsolete, regard-
less of the interests of an art market that stubbornly wants to save this type
of conceptual production.”

It is possible then to think of the network of mail art as an extension
of the body beyond its physical limitations. We may wonder in what the
political subjectivity constructed by the mail art network consists, putting
aside its institutionalization beginning in the 1980s by museums and
private collections that paid attention to its products, but not necessarily
to the way in which mail art disrupted the established artistic, political,
and social circuits. Today this tendency represents a task that needs to be
critically addressed and investigated.

One common characteristic of many of the artists in the mail art net-
work was their participation in publishing platforms, many of them cre-
ated by the artists themselves and distinguished from industrial publishing
by the fact that their editions were handmade, opening themselves up to
new voices that were not necessarily part of the official system. An exam-
ple of this is the folder called UNI/vers(4), developed by Guillermo Deisler
from 1987 to 1995 from his home in Halle (Germany) where he invited

many mail art artists: “The periodic character of the publication forced the editor to design a model of self management that would permit the project’s survival over time”11—and, I might add, give a sustainable objective to his initial ideas regarding the “Peace Dream Project” (this was the subtitle of all the files). UNI/vers(;) and the large quantity of mail that was being distributed by Deisler was a tactic for the exchange and distribution of content, as well as a new strategy for inserting oneself into the ideological circuits; it was a way of influencing politics and of accompanying a collective process of contestation and co-construction oriented toward the future.

Today it is necessary to identify what it is that—recognizing the different forms of collaboration in the mail art network—permits us to think of a distribution of experience that does not remain attached to objects alone but that is linked instead to exchanges of moments, affects, preoccupations, political postures, and collective desires that are being anticipated in the correspondence. The stories and collections that following our archive fever we revisit today erase any fixed image of mail art because our mobility prevents us from entering canonical history in a

homogenous way. The “mail art network” system can no longer be represented in two dimensions like traced trajectories on a map. Rather, these trajectories should be thought of in three dimensions, as lines of flight that originate in territories and even in the language of art itself, whose operations and internal practices go beyond the system of relations that we imagine. In that sense, no archive of mail art could be complete, since in this system of correspondences each object or letter mirrors another place.

**LANGUAGE AS A GEOGRAPHY OF THE SOUTH**

Sooner or later

we noticed . . . that it is impossible to reclaim and represent mail art;
we understood that each piece of mail nourished the network
and with each piece the network changed. The network, one might think, is infinite.12

The mail art network can be thought of as an organic and dialogic entity. That is to say that it cannot be mapped statically, since its form is mobile. In our time this gives rise to the question of how and where the networks of artistic collaboration are positioned. To what degree do they occupy places in space, expand, contract, manifest their flexibility? How do they disperse the center-periphery dialectic that the networks of mail art displace based on the collection of places? One concept that can determine collective cross-relations could be referred to as “translating ourselves”—an operation that we could find suitable for this particular dialogue. However, in this entire process there are also plenty of residual elements and surpluses, as Nelly Richard points out: “The ‘Southern’ rhythm should fill the texts of culture from the Latin American periphery with roughness and dissonance, so that a refracted mark—negativity, excess, remainders, impurities—may oppose the relativistic discourse of cultural assimilation.”13

Richard problematizes the translation of the idea of the “South” by recalling James Clifford and his notion of “imperfect translations” in order to avoid the homogenization or neutralization of the emancipatory potentialities of that “imperfect” place where the experience of difference

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takes refuge in order to protect itself. Therefore the cadence or rhythm of what remains to be called “South” seems to turn on its local dimension, announcing its context as an untranslatable experience.

Undoubtedly, to enunciate the notion of periphery or rather to displace its critical condensation from the point of view of geopolitics is a critical task that has long since been assumed by mail artists, among others. Today we wonder about the significance of the “local” in a context where the globalization of subjectivity—built with economic models of devalued signs—erases markings and silences the collective choirs of those who emancipate themselves through the gaps that have been wrested away from the control of cognitive capitalism.

What would “the South” be in the context of “the local”? It would be that “juncture and decentralization” of which Richard writes in a recent text in which he assures us that “South is the in-between place that displays the traces of its Latin American creation and its cultural-historic relevance; yet at the same time it produces mismatches so that what is split or deviant in its sub-locations may find shelter from the narratives of full integration within a continental frame of reference.”14 If we observe the contemporary productions in what we call “the South,” we recognize a series of movements inside this space—or, as Richard calls it, this “in-between space”—as these organic spaces and dialogic fictions begin to translate the idea of the network into a series of actions, operations, or spaces that permit us to think and construct a residence in an interstice where “the pre-existence of an I is no longer a referential sign but an erosion of experience.”15 As experience and the practice of subjectivity become connected through educational initiatives by means of which collectives or local groups become empowered, they are capable of translating context while at the same time mobilizing body and speech. This leads toward the desire for oneself and for the Other in order to interpret and “choreograph oneself,”16 based on those means and procedures that are different at certain moments, and that appear to be similar in others.

The network experience calls us toward exchange and the language of the Other, it appeals for translation, and it demands our capacity to

14 Ibid., 28.
translate ourselves within that specific event in time and space we call “residence.” To situate someone who has a place of residence means to adopt a location, so that the discourse and its practices are viewed as strategies that persistently require the recipient to be involved and to be part of the collective experience. This is how we can identify projects in relation to the way they distribute experience, and to the production of affections within the economy of solidarity that has developed in the context of a network of autonomous and independent spaces.

Why is “autonomy” a factor or a tool for speaking of network? The social spaces that are being generated through “residing in the other” always represent a form of exchange; “there is no neutral administration or pedagogical projects” since the reformulation or redistribution of this collective experience always feeds back into knowledge. The creation of learning communities presupposes spaces for negotiation and collective production, but it also provides for the production of a continuous network of collaboration and types of knowledge that multiply signification, questioning participation and pedagogy as forms of cultural production and producing a new form for communicating and imagining on the basis of what is called “a place.”

An example of this is the recent experience of exchanges involving independent art spaces in Latin America and Spain that have generated

17 Paulo Freire, La educación en la ciudad (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2007), 48.
a series of residencies that seek to activate ways of sharing knowledge, cultural management, affects, and resources:

*Residencies in the Network* . . . is a Spanish-Latin American platform of spaces for the investigation, production and exhibition of art and contemporary culture that are linked basically through their residency programs. The network brings together different residency formats. . . . It is made up of private and mixed (public/private) initiatives, with a whole range of administrative and legal structures. The network was created in 2008 as a result of the desire for Latin American integration and of an affective desire for community and joint work between its members, so that through this they might gain representation and dialogue at both the micro and the macro level of international cultural politics.18

Some of the projects carried out through the Network since 2008 are the “editorial residency” where “El Levante” from Rosario, Argentina, and “Oficina #1” (Office #1) from Caracas, Venezuela, were conceived in order to publish “Entre” (Between), which will systematize information concerning a series of exchanges that took place between 2008 and 2009, based on the residency of the editor Miren Eraso. Eraso proposed this publication as a tool for action and interaction. The publication includes results and reflections about projects such as the “Expanded Residency” set up jointly by CRAC and Can Xalant of Barcelona, based on an investigation of large cultural projects in Caracas and Barcelona and of the dangers of speculation in the sphere of culture; a management residency between “Lugar a Dudas” from Cali and “FAC” from Montevideo; and another between “Lugar a Dudas” and “Can Xalant” in which cultural administrators exchanged their expertise in order to understand how to build relationships inside and out of each space; an archive-related residency between CRAC and Casa13 from Córdoba where an artist was invited to investigate the possibilities for visualizing the archives of Casa13, opening them to the city’s public; and finally the project “Frontera compartida” (Shared Border), which was organized by Ceroinspiración, Casa Tres Patios, and Escuelab, involving a temporary community for work and geographic exploration near the border between Peru and Ecuador that produced a publication and a video about the experience.

Many other projects have developed in relation to these diverse ways of intertwining cultural production with possibilities for cultural management and production that involve strengthening the bonds of cooperation. Without a doubt, one current challenge for the Network’s functioning is the idea of “autonomy” that might develop, suggesting a model of cultural development that encourages the independence of every project and its management. It was for this reason that in 2011 a management and mediation residency was organized with the financial support of AECID. The idea was that one person would take on the role of mediator within those areas that were defined and deemed crucial for the internal functioning of this network: Management, Projects, and Communication. Together with this, there was a proposal to systematize information based on a project that would identify the management and knowledge production models for each space, as well as evolving methodologies for participation that might be key to the conception of new forms of social and economic organization in cultural politics, both on a local and a regional level.

One of the future challenges is the possibility of decentralizing the territories of a South that is no longer thought of geopolitically but rather epistemologically, allowing us to establish relationships between shifting regions on the basis of more complex trajectories modeled on subjective and collective desires, and determined by forms of transfer that have an impact on daily life and its economies and that refer to politics by mobilizing modifications and accelerations in local geographies. At this point the question arises whether on the map of contemporary artistic practice there is a geography for what is collective. If emphasis has already been placed on the need for the global discourses to give way to a series of minorities without representation or central legitimacy—even if resistance evokes a variety of dissimilar options—we have to ask: where can we deposit our desires derived from untranslatable places so we can confirm that our desire for collective articulation is possible? In more concrete terms, where do we translate ourselves collectively?

19 This economic support involves the costs of this and other network projects, although each of the network’s spaces has independent funding from different public and private sources. This specific initiative required money for lodging, airfare, production, and organization. The agreement was carried out with the support of the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation for Development through a network project by the Spanish Cultural Centers in São Paulo (Brazil), Lima (Perú), Montevideo (Uruguay), and Buenos Aires, Córdoba y Rosario (Argentina).
We might construct a moment and a narrative where dissent and opposition to totalitarian definitions reverberate with what reactivates itself every so often. This reactivation emerges from a series of articulations and crossovers as well as the cooperative, decentralized, and autonomous working networks where we can locate self-translation as a new potentiality and emancipatory energy with respect to our genealogies and memories.

Translated by Sven Spieker