

## ARTISTS' NETWORKS IN LATIN AMERICA AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Latin America and Eastern Europe have yielded an abundance of independent artists' initiatives since the 1950s. The dynamic marginal art scenes that developed under Latin American military dictatorships and in late socialist Eastern Europe were often characterized by their commitment to free cultural exchange and networking. To the extent that direct exchange was controlled from above, its significance, from below, increased in inverse proportion. From the peripheries of the Cold War, a marginal cultural intelligentsia sought creative ways to inhabit countercartographies and an alternative sense of belonging. If networking offered a model of collective action with clear appeal to left-leaning artists in Latin America, it also appealed to many Eastern "bloc" artists, if often for different reasons, despite the general erosion of the idea of the collective in the context of "actually existing socialism." In both cases, artists' investment in networking was an alternative to local forms of state and military repression that also sought to circumvent the triumphalism of the official Western account of artistic individualism and subjectivity. Networking of the sort that peaked in the 1970s was conceived of as a passage from the logic of identity to the logic of identification. In some cases, artists were able to meet and share their ideas directly. In others, carefully compiled lists of global addresses became the means for initiating dialogues and friendships, and finding out about developments abroad. Alternative

artistic proposals were circulated directly among producers through the postal system in vast quantities and across vast distances, albeit occasionally intercepted and confiscated by censors of various persuasions.

“Latin America” and “Eastern Europe” are, each in their own way, both historically dystopian and utopian cartographical projections that rhetorically unite countries with distinct political and cultural chronologies, bound together by shared experiences. Despite their distinct historical relationships to capitalism, communism, and colonialism, artists working in the countries united beneath the umbrella terms *Latin America* and *Eastern Europe* experienced similar degrees of marginalization from the North American and Western European art historical narratives that came to dominate histories of twentieth-century art—constructed in relation to the frameworks dictated by the Cold War. Recent research has revealed, however, that this politically motivated experience of marginalization, far from limiting dialogue, often had the opposite effect: left-leaning artists in Latin America and their disaffected anticommunist or reform-communist colleagues in the Soviet satellite countries exchanged artistic propositions and views that often flew in the face of the political binaries that hindered productive cultural exchanges between the so-called East and West in the official arena of the Cold War.

This special section is devoted to “networking” at the grassroots level, examining artists’ complex motivations for engaging in ephemeral intermedial practices, local dialogues, and transnational networks. Latin American and Eastern European artists went to great lengths to escape the provincialism to which they had been consigned by history, geopolitics, and economics, by establishing contacts with like-minded artists at home and abroad. Networking tends to be classed as a strategy of subversion—a “tactic for thriving on adversity”—but we should be wary of constructing any artificially uniform, heroic narrative. One of the urgent tasks we face today, as a delayed audience of these artistic initiatives, is the need to foster a sense of the subtle differences at play in a range of contexts in diverse political situations. The traffic between Latin American and Eastern European artists in the Cold War period reveals that the territory of artistic practice served as a site for the development of common languages that scramble “top-down” approaches to history characterized by the rhetoric of cultural polarization. But there is little that is univocal about them, despite their shared commitment to artistic freedom, exchange, and dialogue. What is perhaps most extraordinary about the

experimental artists' networks of the 1960s and 1970s is the spectrum of political persuasions that the networks were able to embrace—from more or less fervent revolutionary communism, to reform communism, to anticommunism.

Nowadays, we increasingly view the development of an international art field as a *fait accompli*, sullied by the ambivalence of globalization. But it is worth pausing to reflect on how the emergence of an international artistic field is not solely a triumph of the “free market,” but was also, in part, the product of the painstaking and often dangerous endeavors of many alternative artists over the course of several decades. A crucial shared characteristic of the alternative economies of cultural exchange that developed across Latin American and Eastern European experimental art scenes was their emergence and operation outside of any market structures. Paradoxically, from today's perspective, it may precisely have been the absence of a market framework that paved the way for artistic practice to become a powerful alternative zone of contact. As we continue to experience the exponential thirst, worldwide, for recuperating formerly invisible artistic practices, we do well to remember that a side effect of this enthusiasm has been the rapid commodification of Latin American and Eastern European art and archives since the 1990s. We have to continually negotiate the responsibility for the fact that this trend, which now appears increasingly irreversible, often runs counter to the historical aims of the artists themselves. Thus, if, in view of canonical history's tendency to include only those names recognized by the market already, we feel the need to continue to point outward to less well-known artists, absent from the “official narratives” of international, and, in some cases, also even local, art histories, we are complicit in feeding the eternal desire for the “new” in neoliberal societies. The potential ambivalence of our desire to reconstruct this alternative history, today, was brought into sharp focus by one of our contributors, who categorically refused to sign the copyright agreement required by the press for the publication of her text. For her, the idea of copyright is a stark negation of the ethos of free exchange that characterized the networks we seek to foreground in our section.

Andrzej Kostołowski and Jarosław Kozłowski's NET Manifesto, sent from Poznań in Poland to over 350 artists worldwide in 1972, is an early example of this new framework for artistic exchange, beyond the limitations imposed by political or economical restrictions. It proposed a map of connectedness that ran counter to official narratives of isolation,

drawing together artists in distant places within a system of artistic exchange that has been likened to Foucault's ideas of heterotopy.<sup>1</sup> In Kozłowski's words, the NET came together

in semi-shadow, there were other artists at work, artists who were not interested in careers, commercial success, popularity or recognition: artists who devoted more attention to the issue of their own artistic, and therefore ethical, stance than to their position in the rankings, whether the ranking in question was based on the highest listing on the market, or the highest level of approval from the authorities. These artists professed other values, and other goals led them onward, they were focused on art, conceived as the realm of cognitive freedom and creative discourse.<sup>2</sup>

The artists' networks discussed in this section consisted of individuals who saw sharing their ideas as a key aspect of their work, and deployed the strategy of multiplication as an act of solidarity. Precarious periodicals, artists' books, postcards, stamps, and other low-tech reproductions circulated through the ever-expanding networks developed via a constant exchange of address lists, along with photographs, records of actions, visual poetry, and other experimental documents and proposals. So-called assembling magazines were another innovative form that proliferated thanks to the mail art network. These were publications organized by artist-editors or groups of artists, whose print run was determined by the number of participants who sent in their work—in a format and quantity previously arranged—in response to a letter of invitation. Many of these works, consisting of loose sheets in envelopes or plastic bags—clipped or spiral-bound—conveyed the precariousness of these types of production. Artists engaged in these networks soon found themselves accumulating substantial archives, which they soon began to share with friends, or, in those cases where this was possible, a wider audience.

One early example of an exhibition devoted to communication and the exchange of artistic information was *Creación/Creation*, organized

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- 1 See Luiza Nader, "Heterotopy: The NET and Galeria Akumulatory 2," in *Fluxus East: Fluxus Networks in Central Eastern Europe* (exhibition catalogue), ed. Petra Stegmann (Berlin: Künstlerhaus Bethanien, 2007), 111–25.
  - 2 Jarosław Kozłowski, "Art between the Red and the Golden Frames," in *Curating with Light Luggage*, ed. Liam Gillick and Maria Lindt (Frankfurt: Revolver Books, 2005), 44.

by Julio Plaza at the University of Puerto Rico in Mayaguez in 1972. Plaza was to go on to collaborate with Walter Zanini, at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo, a public museum that became a lively enclave of freedom at a time when many North American and Western European museums were considered sites of economic and artistic elitism. As Director, Zanini collaborated with artists to turn the museum into a laboratory for participation. Its exhibitions/statements on contemporary art were seen as unique opportunities for animating, rather than escaping from, social reality, often under the most difficult circumstances. Mail art and visual poetry flourished in Brazil, with important contributions from Paulo Bruscky, Daniel Santiago, J. Medeiros, Falves Silva, Regina Silveira, Gabriel Borba, and Mario Ishikawa, among others.

Clemente Padín, from Uruguay, has operated in various guises on the threshold of art and activism for the past forty years in an effort to overcome canonical forms of artistic creation and circulation, and the limits imposed by the military dictatorships that devastated the Latin American continent in the years 1960–70. Among the collaborative magazines he edited and circulated were *Los Huevos del Plata* (1965–69), *OVUM 10* (1969–72) and *OVUM* (1973–76), *Participación* (1984–86), and *Correo del Sur* (2000). Padín's archive bears witness to a period in history marked by alarming events and violent clashes. Information about atrocities circulated in the mail art network throughout the 1970s: the forced exile of Chilean artist Guillermo Deisler, following Pinochet's coup d'état; the torture and imprisonment of the Uruguayans Jorge Caraballo and Clemente Padín; as well as the disappearance of Palomo Vigo, son of the Argentine artist Edgardo Antonio Vigo, to name just a few. The release of information about abuse committed by the military regimes in Latin American countries, conveyed through the mail network, caused strong public pressure and, in some cases, even the review of lawsuits against artists persecuted by the dictatorships. Key participants in the mail art network in Argentina were Edgardo Antonio Vigo, Horacio Zabala, Carlos Pazos, and Juan Carlos Romero. Graciela Gutierrez-Marx, who worked with Edgardo Antonio Vigo under the pseudonym G.E. MarxVigo, and whose personal testimony is included in this section, stands out as one of the few women participating in this alternative circuit.

Among those in the Eastern bloc to develop the strongest dialogue with Latin American artists was German Democratic Republic-based Robert Rehfeldt. Together with Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, he developed the idea

of “contact culture,” and the pair became central figures in the global mail artists’ network, thus overcoming the relative cultural isolation of the GDR in the late socialist period. Robert Rehfeldt’s motto “Your ideas help my ideas,” printed in the graphic pieces that circulated beyond the Cold War information blockade, became the principle powering his “art letters.” Clemente Padín and Brazilian Paulo Bruscky were among those who sought to meet Rehfeldt when traveling to Europe. Carl Friedrich Klaus was also extremely active in the network, as was Klaus Groh, who headed an organization called the International Artists’ Cooperation after 1969, and was author of the internationally distributed IAC-INFO bulletin. Working in Oldenburg, he soon developed extensive contacts across the Eastern bloc, and used his lists to author a number of pioneering publications bringing together for the first time the work of Eastern European experimental artists within the framework of the same book projects, many of whom had, until then, been largely unaware of one another’s parallel activities.<sup>3</sup>

Political exile also frequently provided an impulse for alternative editorial projects. Paulina Varas’s essay for this issue is devoted to Guillermo Deisler’s unique contribution to Latin American and Eastern European mail art exchange. After leaving Chile, Deisler lived in exile in Bulgaria, before moving to the GDR. His editorial projects, particularly his magazine *UNI/vers*, are testimony of the role of graphic artists in the network. Visual poetry has also featured strongly in mail art exchanges since the 1960s, serving as a universal platform of sorts for forging connections that went beyond “translation” to explore deeper, subjective modes of solidarity that were often particularly precious for those artists living in exile. While living in Amsterdam in the 1970s, the Mexican Ulises Carrión created a personal and artistic enterprise, a mixture of gallery, archive, and editorial house, in order to disseminate artistic projects. Mexican artists Felipe Ehrenberg and Martha Hellion, exiled in England, created the Beau Geste Press, discussed in Zanna Gilbert’s essay. Both Carrión and the Beau Geste Press developed lively exchanges with Eastern European artists. Through their efforts, and those of others, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom were among the many vital external staging

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3 His earliest publications, in particular, were central to the development of contacts among artists in Eastern Europe. See Klaus Groh, *If I Had a Mind . . . (ich stelle mir vor . . .) Concept-Art, Project-Art* (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1971), and Klaus Groh, *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa—CSSR, Jugoslawien, Polen, Rumänien, UdSSR, Ungarn* (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1972).

posts for the relay of information internationally on behalf of artists in countries such as Czechoslovakia and Hungary, where forging direct links with one's neighbors was closely monitored by the secret police and censors.

An examination of the Hungarian and Czechoslovak issues of the magazine *Schmuck*, published by the Beau Geste Press, illustrates the diverse approaches to networking that characterized the Eastern European 1970s artistic scene. Milan Knížák, in Czechoslovakia, took advantage of the invitation to edit an issue of *Schmuck* to present, to an international audience, the activities of the experimental group Aktual, of which he had been a leading figure since its founding in the 1960s. The fact that Knížák did not opt for an overview of the contemporary Czechoslovak scene in 1974 may to some extent be symptomatic of an individualistic, locally oriented engagement with the network. But this in itself may also be symptomatic of the abnormality of the Czechoslovak art scene in the era of so-called normalization following the Warsaw Pact troops' invasion of Prague in 1968, and the intensive cultural repressions that followed, continuing throughout the 1970s.

An overview uniting the experimental scenes in the former Czechoslovakia would doubtless have included key figures such as Petr Štembera in Prague, Jiří Valoch and Jiří Kocman in Brno, and Alex Mlynárcik and Stano Filko, among others, in Bratislava, all of whom actively pursued international contacts and featured very prominently in the performance art, conceptual art, and concrete-poetry networks of the period. Paradoxically such artists tended to be better connected internationally than they were with their peers in other parts of Czechoslovakia. Even Jindřich Chaloupecký, the Director of the important avant-garde Václav Špála gallery, which hosted a legendary Duchamp exhibition in 1969, was unable to make these sorts of links, although he played a unique role in fostering direct exchange between artists from the Soviet Union and their Czechoslovak colleagues as of the late 1970s, with the support of Maria Slavecka, whose marriage to Viktor Pivovarov enabled the Moscow conceptualist to become an exile in Czechoslovakia, putting pressure on the almost invisible chinks in the armor of pre-perestroika Soviet isolationism. This, in turn, paved the way for an, as yet little studied, Czechoslovak/USSR network that saw a number of key Moscow conceptualists visit and meet artists such as Valoch and Kocman for the first time, in the early 1980s.

László Beke and Dora Maurer, arguably the most important international networkers in 1960s and 1970s Hungary, meanwhile, responded to the Beau Geste Press's invitation to edit an issue of *Schmuck* by present-

ing an inclusive overview of the Hungarian unofficial art scene as a whole, inviting a wide range of artists, working in different ways, to contribute documentation of their work. The exercise was one that Beke repeated in 1974, on the invitation of Jorje Glusberg, director of the Buenos Aires-based Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC), which hosted a major festival of Hungarian art, accompanied by a folder containing reproductions of the documentation displayed as part of the exhibition.<sup>4</sup>

Glusberg was a global networker of considerable means and traveled extensively in Eastern Europe in the early 1970s, developing contacts. In addition to the Hungarian Festival, his trips bore fruit in a little-documented Polish exhibition at CAYC. The Argentinean's visit to Poland made a marked impression on a generation of artists emerging in the 1970s, for whom the colorful CAYC bulletin, published and distributed in unprecedented quantities, particularly in view of the precariousness and small print run of most contemporary publications of its sort, was a precious source of information about artistic developments abroad. Among those in Warsaw to be graced by a visit from Glusberg was the self-taught artist and poet Andrzej Partum, who welcomed foreign visitors to what he called the Bureau de la Poésie, his narrow one-room apartment whose drab walls were covered with mailed poems and artistic propositions from all over the world. It was at Partum's that Glusberg met the artist duo KwieKulik, whose apartment, like Partum's, was a key meeting place for alternative art and its documentation from the 1970s onward. The Studio for Activities, Documentation and Propagation, as they called it (the PDDiU), played host to artists such as Jiří Kovanda and Petr Štembera from Prague, and Yugoslav artists Tomislav Gotovac and Goran Trbuljak, among others. Such meetings were lively and rare opportunities for artists who had hitherto met only through sharing the pages of international publications to exchange artistic thoughts and propositions in person. Poland undoubtedly served as a hub for Eastern European international exchanges throughout the late socialist period, and, by the late 1970s, the number of spaces that might be called, after the definition offered in the NET Manifesto, "points of the NET" became so numerous that we cannot do justice to all their activities here. György Galántai and Julia Klaniczay's apartment-based independent space Artpool in Budapest, founded in 1979, also remains a crucial point in the global net, and operates to this day as

4 See Annamária Szöke and Miklós Peternák, "Tomorrow Is Evidence!" in *Subversive Practices: Art under Conditions of Political Repression*, ed. Hans D. Christ and Iris Dressler (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 121–79.

a living archive for experimental and mail art networks (discussed in Jasmina Tumbas's contribution to this section).

In addition to the Hungarian and Polish exhibitions, CAYC in Buenos Aires also hosted an exhibition of work by artists from Yugoslavia. Surprisingly, but perhaps symptomatically of the specificity of the Yugoslav context, Yugoslavia was represented in Argentina by officially sanctioned artists whose names, today, are less familiar than those of their experimental colleagues who went on to achieve considerable recognition in the international field after the collapse of Yugoslav "self-management." This anomalous episode is indicative of the powerful vicissitudes engendered by state intervention in international artists' networking, and signals the impossibility of establishing clear-cut distinctions between official and unofficial artistic spheres in some situations, as well as the bureaucratic obstacles foreigners often confronted, in the late socialist context, in seeking to navigate a variety of local scenes and establish contacts with marginalized groups. If Yugoslav socialism was characterized by a far greater degree of openness to the West than the Soviet-style socialism of the satellite countries, not to mention the Soviet Union, which was uniquely isolated until the 1980s, the state's successful performance of openness, and Yugoslav citizens' relative freedom to travel, did not translate into an open ticket for experimental artists to represent the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in an international arena. Ivana Bago's essay analyzes the peculiarities of Yugoslav experimental artists' predicament with reference to two artist-run initiatives: the Galerie des Locataires, founded in 1972 by Ida Biard in Paris, and Podroom—The Working Community of Artists, active in Zagreb in the period 1978–80.

Artists' networks of the 1960s and 1970s continue to inspire contemporary art workers today. As Zdenka Badovinac has observed, fighting back against Eastern Europe's historical "lack of self-confidence which at times borders on servility to the West" has entailed becoming "producers of our own knowledge."<sup>5</sup> For "local bodies of knowledge, including the genealogies of local avant-gardes" are "a precondition for establishing any planetary negotiations."<sup>6</sup> Seeking to redefine the aims of the contemporary art museum after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Badovinac and Igor Zabel learned from "the experiences of artists and small non-institutional spaces that had, especially in the eighties in Slovenia, developed

5 Zdenka Badovinac, "Contemporaneity as Points of Connection," *e-flux Journal* 11 (December 2009): 5–7.

6 *Ibid.*, 5–7.

particular strategies for self-organization, alternative networking, and operating internationally, and that were significantly more successful at doing this than the official cultural policy was.”<sup>7</sup> But while the artists’ networks discussed in this issue represent powerful instances of cultural solidarity, we ought, perhaps, to be wary of claiming them as antecedents of today’s Internet-based social networks, for the 1960s and 1970s idea of the “network” stands in marked opposition to the neoliberal idea of the network as a competitive tool in the technocratic environment: on the one hand, we have the globalization of the art market; on the other, the possibility of Internet-based activism. Arguably, we can trace the germination of this ambivalence in some of the practices discussed in this issue.

The special section in this issue of *ARTMargins* emerged from the editors’ shared interest in artistic exchanges within Eastern European and Latin American art, and between the two. There are strong resonances between Cristina Freire’s exhibition and museum-based research project *Alternative Networks*, on the one hand, and Klara Kemp-Welch’s project *Networking the Bloc* on the other.<sup>8</sup> And *ARTMargins Online* has been a key site for forming links between national art histories within a translocal framework since its inception in 1999. Additionally, there are a number of international collaborative initiatives that rhyme strongly with the aims of this issue: the international archive-sharing project *Internationale*, and *Rede Conceitualismos do Sul*, an international network and thinking platform created by researchers involved with conceptualism in Latin America, and concerned about the current neutralization and obliteration of the political issues involved in the field. One of its concrete projects includes actions to secure public access to a series of important artists’ archives in Latin America, including that of Clemente Padín, in Montevideo, at the Universidad de la Republica.<sup>9</sup> We also acknowledge a number of other pioneering research projects, including Vivid [Radical] Memory

7 Ibid., 5–7.

8 Cristina Freire’s *Alternative Networks* was one of a series of exhibitions curated at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo as partial results of the long-term research project *Conceptual Art and Conceptualisms* developed at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo since the mid-1990s. See also Cristina Freire, *Poéticas do processo. Arte conceitual no museu* [Poetics of the Process. Conceptual Art in the Museum] (São Paulo: Iluminuras, 1999); Cristina Freire, *Paulo Bruscky: Art Archive and Utopia* (Recife: CEPE, 2007); among others.

9 It is important to note Museo Reina Sofia’s (Madrid) sustained support of *Rede Conceitualismos do Sul* initiatives. A recent alarming phenomenon has been the migration of such collections and archives, exiled and sold to museums and metropolitan collections.

(Barcelona), the exhibition *Subversive Practices* (Stuttgart), and *Meeting Margins* (United Kingdom), on whose initiatives we seek to build.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than defining a closed network, the testimonies and texts gathered here are intended as a means to expand the diversity of approaches to the networks pursued by artists in Latin America and Eastern Europe, proposing new methodologies. We highlight the need to continue this work, signaling past, present, and future fields of international exchange.

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10 Further information on these projects can be found online: Vivid [Radical] Memory, "Radical Conceptual Art Revisited: A Social and Political Perspective from the East and the South," accessed April 4, 2012, <http://www.vividradicalmemory.org/html/project/project.html>; *Subversive Practices*, accessed May 14, 2012, <http://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/en/programme/2009/exhibitions/subversive/>; *Meeting and Margins*, accessed April 4, 2012, [http://www.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/meeting\\_margins/Default.htm](http://www.essex.ac.uk/arhistory/meeting_margins/Default.htm).