

SUBVERTED, SEALED, DELIVERED: Mail Art in Latin America

Your questions, answered.

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Do we know how Latin American postal carriers reacted to Mail Art? Did the artists ever report on this? Was any of this mail art ever confiscated by authorities because it was considered propaganda?

In terms of Edgardo Antonio Vigo's situation in La Plata, his friend and frequent collaborator (and wonderful Mail Artist in her own right, see below) Graciela Gutiérrez Marx observed in an interview with me that even mail art activities were considered subversive during the Dirty War and were under surveillance. "They opened everything of ours. We realized that... Much correspondence arrived broken open, they put it in bags and said that it had arrived destroyed in that way, and also for example mailings from Japan arrived with fresh seals. So everything, everything was controlled, we knew that." Mail art sent out of Argentina was also censored, as American mail artist Anna Banana alerted Gutiérrez Marx and Vigo in a letter sent on November 8th, 1979. Writing on a photocopy of an envelope sent by the two artists, she highlighted portions that had been excised before delivery. She writes: "I think you should be careful with your art stamps...It seems that Argentine authorities have little sense of humor about such activities... Maybe you should keep your stamps inside the envelope?"

As for Paulo Bruscky in Brazil, he staged multiple exhibitions of mail art in Recife, bringing private correspondence to a large audience. These exhibitions were held far afield from art galleries and museums. As he noted: "The mails were an uncontrollable medium of communication. In this regard, every place is an exhibition space, we had no need of a gallery or a museum. We created spaces in places of confluence like bookstores, metros, post offices, bus stations. In this way, we created alternative spaces." Bruscky's 1975 *1st Exhibition of Postal Art*, held at the Hospital Agamenon Magalhães where he worked, occurred without incident.

But Bruscky and Daniel Santiago's 1976 *International Exhibition of Mail Art* at Recife's post office building was shut down by the Federal Police on opening day. The artists were arrested and incarcerated for three days, and the mail art materials on exhibition were confiscated and ultimately returned to Bruscky partially destroyed.

As he remembers: "They initiated an inquiry; they said they were going to make telephone calls throughout Brazil to find out if mail art had any connections with international communists. A thousand insinuations, silliness, and nonsense. In the end they said 'You don't have anything. You're going to be watched. Don't make any more

mail art.” Bruscky continues: “I refused to sign the document saying that I hadn’t suffered any physical or psychological torture. I didn’t suffer any physical abuse, but I certainly suffered psychological torture. [...] They threatened to do things to my family. They broke into my house when I was in prison and wrecked a lot of things.”

Undeterred, Bruscky continued to create Mail Art, but his early pieces are difficult to study because he donated the majority of them to the library of the Museum of Fine Arts in Caracas, Venezuela, for safekeeping (despite multiple attempts to contact the Museum to inquire about these works, e-mails went unanswered). The artist explains: “When I got out of prison, I got a letter from the library at the Museum of Caracas, wanting to buy my mail art work. I was so indignant about what had happened that when I got home, I packed everything up, all my work, and sent it there. I explained that my mail art would be safer there than in Brazil, because I had just been imprisoned and they had damaged a lot of my work and confiscated a number of pieces.” Evidently, even making Mail Art was considered a subversive activity in the volatile environment of 1970s Brazil.

Did email kill mail art? What would be the difference between works circulated through the mail and works circulated through the internet network today?

That is a very good question, and one that is extremely relevant in today’s climate. It is important to remember that while art sent via the internet can reach a far wider audience, Mail Art was developed as person-to-person communication on an intimate scale. In its early stages, Mail Art was never intended for a mass audience like the internet; even when artists created multiples of the same artwork, they usually included a personal message or were building upon a previously established relationship. It is also important to note that, during dictatorship in Latin America, sending Mail Art was in and of itself a political statement: subversion of the ready-made communication network afforded by the postal system for artistic ends; attempts to share artworks that could not be shown at home for fear of persecution; and trying to evade censorship by circumventing traditional art circuits: all of these were political acts in and of themselves.

Edgardo Antonio Vigo was the most prolific writer on mail art in Latin America, and I’ll let his words elucidate the other important aspects of Mail Art that distance it from art circulated on the internet. His first musings on this subject appear in a 1975 article entitled “Arte-Correo: Una nueva forma de expresión” (Mail Art: A New Form of Expression), first published in the magazine *Poetas Argentinos* and subsequently reprinted in Venezuelan mail artist Diego Barboza’s broadsheet *Buzón de Arte*, or *Art Mailbox*, and widely circulated throughout Latin America and beyond. Written in collaboration with Argentine artist Horacio Zabala, the article states:

“When a sculpture is sent by mail, the creator is limited to utilizing a fixed means of transport to move an already created work. When the sculpture was being

created, this transfer was not taken into account. On the contrary, in the new art language we are analyzing, the fact that the work must travel a set distance is part of its structure, is the work itself. The work has been created to be sent through the mail [...] The postal system, then, does not exhaust its function in the transfer of the work but incorporates and conditions it. And the artist changes, in turn, the function of this medium of communication.”

Further confirmation that the internet did not do away with Mail Art is the fact that we received artworks from 444 artists from 35 countries for the *Focus Latin America: Art Is Our Last Hope* Mail Art exhibition I co-curated with John Held Jr. in 2014. This was the largest exhibition of contemporary Mail Art to be organized by a major US institution since the 1980s. The received artworks are now housed in the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Follow-up to the collection history: Some of Vanessa’s examples seem to come from Jacky Barnitz’s collections. Was she particularly focused on this movement as a collector?

FLOR:

Dr. Jacqueline Barnitz was a distinguished Emerita professor of Latin American art at the University of Texas at Austin, where she taught for almost 30 years. Jacqueline knew many of the artists personally and very often they sent her catalogues and examples of their works on paper in the mail, which she lovingly collected. Before she passed away in 2017, she donated most of her art collection to the Blanton Museum of Art, including wonderful examples of Mail Art by Paulo Bruscky.

Was this art made with the idea of being collected? has it been sold in auction?

Eugenio Dittborn, who made the circulation of his *Airmail Paintings* through the mail an important aspect of his work, participated in the art market and wanted his work to be collected by museums. Dittborn also practiced mail art during the early 1980s, and his musings on the differences between mail art and his own mailed art are revelatory. Regarding other examples at the Blanton, Mail Art became a museum collecting item through gifts by artists to such seminal recipients as Jacqueline Barnitz and Mari Carmen Ramírez. Our works by Vigo and Bruscky did not go through the art market (in fact, it is hard to place a valuation on them). It is important to note that neither Vigo nor Bruscky sold their work until late in their careers, as both were wary of commercial art circuits and strove to exhibit their works outside of them in non-traditional spaces. Indeed, bypassing the gallery system was an essential aspect of Mail Art, both early on and after it had developed into a wide-spread artform. As mail artist John P. Jacob stated: “Mail art was not created for the real world, or the real-world galleries. It was created by artists, for artists.” International Mail Art has, however,

become a collectors' item and is indeed now sold in certain galleries. But, as far as we know, it has never been sold in auctions.

This is more a comment than a question. When is that work by Claudia del Rio with the model and the soap dated again? It is formally very similar to a work by Italian Ketty La Rocca titled "Sana come il pane quotidiano" (healthy like the daily bread) 1965. They both employ collage and the figures of the pin up which was all over newspapers I guess

FLOR:

I was not aware of the work by Ketty La Rocca. Thank you for pointing this out. Next time I correspond with Claudia del Río I will ask her if she knew her work.

art that blurred the lines between life and art was a theme in art in latin america beyond just mail art — can you talk about the relationship between mail art and conceptual art/performance art? Was mail art part of a greater conversation during the time?

This is such a great question, one that gets straight to the heart of the matter. I could write a book on this, since it is relevant throughout Latin America, and especially in Argentina and Brazil (as well as Chile and other countries in the region during this time). In fact, I focused on all three artforms in Vigo's and Bruscky's work in my Ph.D. dissertation: it is subtitled "Pioneers in Alternative Communication Networks, Conceptualism, and Performance (1960s-1980s)." Both artists also created conceptual works and practiced performance art, each in his own idiosyncratic way, and both cultivated audience participation in their multifaceted activities. My dissertation constituted the first comparative analysis of Vigo's and Bruscky's multifaceted works, as well as the first devoted to the collective study of mail art, artist's journals and books, conceptualism, and performance in South America

Vigo's performances were most often solitary actions witnessed only by the cameraman; on the other hand, Bruscky's performative pieces were usually meant to be seen by as many people as possible. And while Vigo's conceptual work is invariably text-based and intended for mailing, Bruscky's conceptualism is less easily defined and often intertwined with his performance pieces. Taken together, these artists' bodies of work offer insights into the diverse modes of creating mail art, conceptualism, and performance under the repressive military dictatorships that stifled most conventional artists' creativity from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.

On one hand, Vigo's performance pieces were often part of his *Señalamientos* (Signaling) series. These performances were frequently executed only in the presence of the photographer who documented the action, and, as such, have the feel of ritual. Others were enacted before only a handful of witnesses, who were asked

to sign documents stating that they were present for the events. Heretofore unexplored as performance art by scholars of Vigo's work, in my thesis I considered these works in comparison to performances by international artists.

On the other hand, Bruscky's conceptualism, participatory art, and performances were often playful practices with strong conceptual ties to Fluxus activities. His 1981-82 New York Guggenheim Fellowship enabled him to spend time with Fluxus artists Dick Higgins and Ken Friedman, with whom he corresponded regularly, and to meet John Cage, as well as to participate in Happenings. Bruscky's earliest conceptual pieces took shape in the form of classified advertisements for absurd events placed in local and international newspapers. Other early pieces often went unrealized, as they were submitted to and mostly rejected by Brazilian Salon Exhibitions. The artist's performance works constituted provocative events that often transformed the streets of Recife into a stage.

Vigo's and Bruscky's strategies for creating mail art, their differing approaches to conceptualism, and their opposing performance tactics were, for me, fascinating to study. They share many points in common, especially an approach to art that is at once participatory and playful, and often political. Developed under the dark shroud of dictatorships, their varied works provide an outlet for voicing outrage and dissent, albeit usually under the radar of censors and outside of the realm of persecution. These artists are fundamentally united in their embrace of humor, irony, and the absurd as potent strategies for engaging audiences and alleviating, if only momentarily, the climate of fear and oppression that pervaded their countries under military rule. In addition, both artists' emphasis on audience participation provided their compatriots with rare opportunities for creativity and play during the darkest of times. Vigo's and Bruscky's diverse projects position them at the avant-garde of artistic activities in their respective countries during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, despite their geographic marginality.

Vanessa, why do you think mail art has never quite entered the art history cannon in a more significant way? Though we have many exhibitions, there is still such a limited amount of scholarly attention to mail art.

This is a tremendously important question. When I began my research in 2007, the Latin American Mail Artworks that I first encountered in New York were in disarray in artist files in the MoMA library. (Of note here is the excellent 2014 exhibition of Vigo materials from the MoMA library archives by Zanna Gilbert and Jenny Tobias, entitled *Edgardo Antonio Vigo: The Unmaker of Objects*). Indeed, since US scholars have encountered so many challenges classifying these works, they have mostly been stored in art library archives, such as the Clarence Ward Art Library at Oberlin College, for example, which has a wonderful collection of works on paper by Vigo. So, not only are they hard to find, but they also pose difficulties for researchers in how to dig deeply into the contexts in which they were created and that fundamentally conditioned them.

Given the revolutionary nature of their esthetic practices, it is surprising that Vigo and Bruscky were previously absent from the national histories of art in their respective countries, but this has already begun to change. Argentine curators began to “discover” Vigo’s works beginning in the 1990s, and their Brazilian counterparts initiated studies of Bruscky’s art following his participation in the 2004 São Paulo Biennial, in which he was invited by Artistic Director Alfons Hug to transport his entire studio/archive from Recife to São Paulo, where it was reconstructed in the Biennial pavilion as a work of art in and of itself.

And, despite the relative lack of scholarship and recognition of Mail Art as an important artistic phenomenon that should be incorporated into canons of art history in the US, curators and scholars in Latin America have indeed made efforts to raise awareness and recognition of their importance. If you go to the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, you will encounter Vigo works on display; If you explore the MAC USP (Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo) in Brazil, you will find works by Bruscky and many other Brazilian mail artists. And scholarship by art historians in Latin America has followed suit.

Scholarship began with exhibition catalogues, but has now expanded to independent publications. A short list of essential early publications on Vigo would include contributions by Natalia Aguerre, Gonzalo Aguilar, Ricardo Alvarez Martín, Carlos Basualdo, Ana Bugnone, Fernando Davis, Silvia Dolinko, Maria Amelia García, Andrea Giunta, Mario Gradowczyk, Ana María Gualtieri, María José Herrera, Victoria Noorthoorn, Magdalena Pérez Balbi, Mariana Santamaria, and Horacio Zabala, among others. Bruscky’s work has received great attention in Brazil, especially due to the ground-breaking efforts of Cristina Freire, as well as Cauê Alves, Rich Boike, Felipe Soeiro Chaimovich, Fernando Pedro da Silva, Marconi Drummond, Fernanda Marcondes Nogueira; Adolfo Montejó Navas, Simone Osthoff, Marília Andrés Ribeiro, and Cristiana Tejo, and outside Brazil by Antonio Sergio Bessa, Jorge Blasco Gallardo, Clara Kim, and Silvia Longueira Castro.

All in all, we are moving in the right direction.

In the Radical Women show at the Hammer in 2017, mail art, in the figure of Mónica Mayer, was centrally displayed. Have you looked into women's presence in this domain? Thank you!

Great question. I have indeed studied women mail artists, focusing principally on Graciela Gutiérrez Marx, who lived in La Plata and collaborated with Vigo, especially during the years between 1977 and 1983. She is a fascinating figure who provided me with keen insights in interviews, and her works, like those of Mónica Mayer and many other female mail artists in Latin America, are long overdue for further research.

I noticed that Duch's "I am an artist" series seems to have intentionally used English, rather than Portuguese, to send this message. I wonder if he envisioned his works to have an international audience at some point? Or if there were any other reasons he may have made this choice?

English was the *lingua franca* of the Mail Art Movement. Duch corresponded with artists far beyond Latin America, which explains this choice.

Hi Flor, Ondine Chavoya writes about the ASCO-mail art connection in his Axis Mundo catalog. Abrazo, George F. (thanks for fantastic session)

FLOR:

I remember seeing Mail Art pieces by Edgardo Antonio Vigo displayed in the remarkable *Axis Mundo* exhibition that Ondine Chavoya and David Evans Frantz curated. It was great to see that connection between Argentine and Chicano conceptualists and recognize how effective the strategies of Mail Art have been in linking artists across the Americas and beyond. This connection also pointed out to me that Chicano art had a higher international profile that had been previously discussed in the scholarship of this art movement—which is always a wonderful avenue for new research.