Mail art is a form of conceptual art that is based, theoretically, on the artistic idea as a concept and that can practically renounce its materialization by an object of art. What is important is the content of the object—the conception and diffusion of ideas—and not the form. With its roots in the work of Marcel Duchamp, mail art was initiated in the 1960s as an artistic and political concept under the name of correspondence art by the American Ray Johnson. Thanks to the small format of the objects sent and the variety of the concept itself, mail art quickly found enthusiasts throughout the world.

Every visual expression has an individual identity before the context of an international social network built through the postal system between sender and recipient. Mail art thus existed through the creation of projects by a sender who required the recipients to send their work by post, in accordance with the three rules “No jury! No return! No fee!” In return, the initiator of the project was required to send documentation, which often amounted to

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1 With regard to the writing of such documentation, it should be noted that the East German artists were subject to the reproduction laws of the GDR of 20 July 1959, which prohibited any reproduction not authorized by the state, even on a small scale. This also applied to the tools of reproduction, such as the stamps
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a simple list of the names and addresses of the participants, and organize an exhibition of the project in the form of a mail art show. The creation of this kind of artistic and intellectual network, enabling communication beyond any geographical border between the countries of the Eastern Bloc, such as the GDR, and the rest of the world, was achieved despite the controls and censorship exercised by the Stasi, which ultimately became an integral part of this distance communication network. Because in the GDR, the distance communication systems, such as the post, the telephone, the radio or even the television, were controlled and censored by the state authorities. Despite this, mail art, which passed through the postal system and thus through an institution of the Stasi—which had installed control units within the East German postal establishments—was felt by the East German mail artists to be like “an open window onto the world,” like a sort of sign of existence. The majority of objects sent referred to surveillance by the Stasi and directly criticized the existing political system. Regarding this transgression of real borders through the postal system, the Polish mail artist Piotr Rypson wrote the following to the (West) German mail artist and art historian Klaus Groh:

“Mail Art is stateless, it needs neither visas nor passports. Mail Art promotes that the mail artists used to make. Some printing presses had special licenses for printing up to 250 copies without prior authorization, but only for the artists who were members of the artists’ union. One reproduction method that was fairly easily accessible in the GDR was photography, as many amateur photographers or artists had dark rooms.

2 The mail art shows were generally held on the premises of the East German Church, which played an important role with regard to the opposition as a political representative of the East German people. It was an independent social organization formally recognized as such since the meetings on 6 March 1978 in East Berlin between the head of state, Erich Honecker, and the General Committee of the League of Evangelical Churches in the GDR. From the mid-1970s, there was a multifarious oppositional scene at the heart of, and outside, the church. The conference on 6 March 1978 represented a sort of political truce that was intended to make the church a stabilizing factor to legitimize the SED dictatorship. From the beginning of the 1980s, more or less independent opposition groups formed within the church, which saw itself officially as neutral ground, with reference to its rights as set forth in the constitution of the GDR. During the 1980s, the church became an important place of artistic expression that did not conform with the doctrine of socialist realism. In the GDR, the church was an alternative place, a kind of other officialdom.


4 Klaus Groh is a German artist and art historian who was born in 1936 in what was then Poland and who lives in the Lower Saxony region (in northwest Germany). During the Cold War, he played an important role in the circulation of conceptual art in Europe. In 1972, he published a book in German entitled Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa which was dedicated to alternative art in Yugoslavia, Poland, Romania, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. Cf. Klaus Groh, Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa (Cologne: Dumont, 1972).
collective activities. Mail Art is common fun."\(^5\) The aesthetic objects received from all corners of the world also represented a real sense of hope and freedom for their recipients. The context of cultural control, censorship, and oppression created by the activities of the Stasi encouraged mail artists to play with these constraints in order to express their freedom of thought. The utterances communicated via mail art were intended to function as a kind of pacifist weapon, as the target gun project of Birger Jesch illustrated so well. The objects sent thus tended to have two addressees: a direct addressee who was the person whose address appeared on the object, and an indirect addressee, which was the Stasi.

For example, Robert Rehfeldt\(^6\) sent a card with the wording "Bitte denken Sie jetzt nicht an mich" (Please don't think of me now). Some artists also placed carbon paper in the envelopes, which, when opened with steam, stained the contents and made it impossible to read or deliver the contents without leaving traces of the envelope having been opened. Others placed multiple objects in different envelopes and then posted them in different post boxes situated far away from each other. To remove traces of having opened post or to make fake documents, Stasi agents recreated identical foreign stamps. Without knowing, the mail artists repeated this illegal act performed by the authorities by producing home-made stamps that looked official, or by ordering them in the GDR to have them illegally imported. The symbolism of the images and wording used by East German mail artists often presented the Stasi with a reading problem. Some objects escaped control, others were opened and copied by the secret services to then be resealed and deliv--

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\(^6\) Concerning the GDR, it was Robert Rehfeldt (1931–1993) who had his first mail art contact with, and according to, Klaus Groh, from 1967 and then thanks to the Polish artistic network, which he joined in 1971. Cf. Interview in Kornelia Berswordt-Wallrabe and Kornelia Röder, eds., *Mail Art: Osteuropa im internationalen Netzwerk* (Schwerin: Staatliches Museum, 1996), 125–45. Robert Rehfeldt was part of the alternative East Berlin scene of Prenzlauer Berg. It was from this scene that the concept of mail art was quickly distributed among other alternative scenes, such as the one surrounding the gallery and the group of artists of Clara Mosch in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz), or that in Dresden. Robert Rehfeldt took part in several international projects, and the French art critic Raoul-Jean Moulin—whose archives are located at MacVal in Vitry-sur-Seine—dedicated two articles to him in the French daily *L’Humanité*, without mentioning the alternative network in the GDR in which Robert Rehfeldt was involved. See Raoul-Jean Moulin, "Robert Rehfeldt," *L’Humanité*, 17 September 1974 and 17 May 1975.
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erated without major delay, or they were taken away and archived without ever reaching the direct addressee.

It should be noted that this form of conceptual art was, above all, of a subversive nature, but it could not necessarily be considered oppositional. It was a form of *Eigensinn* (self-will) because on the one hand, mail artists were trying to get round the political system by playing with the administrative system (the law, the postal service, the Stasi) and on the other hand, this art form served as a stabilizer for a system that artists did not want to see disappear (as was the case after the fall of the Wall), but that they wanted to change actively.

For the mail artists of the Western Bloc, it was the imaginary and material transgression of geopolitical borders and ideological norms that was relevant. At the same time, it was about questioning the commercial laws of the GDR art market, even though the latter was almost nonexistent. In the GDR, mail art was not recognized as an artistic form by the official discourse on art, and its import and export via the postal route were thus not subjected to the commercial constraints imposed by the authorities. In a communication from 1976 entitled “Alternativen in der sozialistischen Kunstproduktion” (Alternatives in the production of socialist art), Klaus Groh stressed the alternative nature of mail art in relation to the art market, but also lamented, as a consequence of this lack of commercial value, the fact that the alternative artists of the countries considered socialist were not respected by the art managers of the Western countries.

The East German mail artists, who amounted to some eighty people at the end of the GDR and of whom 10% were women, got round the authorities on several levels. Firstly, at the legal level with regard to the law on printing and reproduction. Secondly, at the postal level, as the mail artists used the postal service’s general conditions of sale to harm the system and claim compensation for lost post—a recorded delivery cost around 50 pfennig at the time and compensation of 40 marks was paid in the event of loss. Thirdly, the

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7 It was not until 1971 that the French art critic Jean-Marc Poinso introduced theoretically this notion in his work, written in French and English, entitled *Mail art, communication à distance, concept*. This notion then became widespread throughout the world. See Jean-Marc Poinso, *Mail art, communication à distance, concept* (Paris: CEDIC, 1971).


9 Compensation was sometimes refused as it apparently went against “socialist morals” to send certain objects.
mail artists played with the Stasi by sending them indirectly the contents of their post—and sometimes even in English, a language the Stasi agents knew less well than the mail artists. And finally, at the commercial level by getting round the laws of the art market concerning the spreading and recognition of works of art.

Finally, although mail art gave the impression of being a kind of window onto the world, this did not necessarily mean that the mail artists wanted to leave the GDR. A large majority of the actors in the East German alternative artistic scenes believed in creativity as a force to change society. Proceeding from this belief, it was also the context of the Cold War and the Western Bloc that was largely the generator of these forms of alternative, subversive, and critical art.

This was, therefore, an exchange of material and symbolic goods that communicated information in the form of messages intended to criticize the GDR system, denounce the destruction of the environment, protest against nuclear weapons or caricature human behavior. For the mail artists, this was about defending the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to travel and artistic freedom, among other things.\(^\text{10}\) Despite the violation of postal secrecy by the Stasi, which controlled, documented, and retained certain consignments, the establishment of contact was, nevertheless, the most important aspect. Moreover, Robert Rehfeldt created the notion of CONT-ART to describe this avant-gardist tendency that placed the emphasis on communication. For the Berlin mail artist Lutz Wohlrab, mail art represented a sort of psychotherapy for the participants.\(^\text{11}\)

One of the artists who was most engaged in the area of mail art was Birger Jesch, who lived in Dresden at the time. His first mail art contacts were, among others, Robert Rehfeldt, the Frenchman Robert Filliou (1926–1987) and the Chilean Dámaso Ogaz (1924–1990).\(^\text{12}\) He was also inspired by the photomontages of Klaus Staeck\(^\text{13}\) that were exhibited in the GDR at the end


\(^{13}\) Interview in Kornelia Berswordt-Wallrabe and Kornelia Röder, eds., *Mail Art: Osteuropa im internationalen Netzwerk*, 85.
of the 1970s. He also corresponded with a certain Volker Hamann, who lived in West Berlin at the time and who illegally imported texts on mail art for the artist by leaving them in East Berlin with Robert Rehfeldt and Joseph Huber.\textsuperscript{14} Together with the couple Martina and Steffen Giersch, Joachim Stange, and the printer and artist Jürgen Gottschalk, Birger Jesch formed, in Dresden, a small local network of mail artists which quickly became a target of the Stasi and the subject of an investigation procedure initially called OV “Postkunst” (Postal art) and then OV “Feind” (Enemy).

In the summer of 1980, Birger Jesch began his first mail art project—\textit{International Contact with Mail Art in the Spirit of Peaceful Coexistence} (summer 1980–February 1981)—which was also the first project publicly exhibited in the GDR. The subject of this project was the relationship with the first peace movements led by the Church which, as we know, were the precursors to the 1989 pacifist revolution movements. The project involved sending an official unused shooting target—industrially produced in the GDR—to some 300 dispatchers around the world asking them to rework it (Plate 20.1).

Concerning the shooting target motif, one must mention here the creation of the International Artists’ Cooperation (IAC) in February 1972 by Klaus Groh, who had already worked in 1975 on an unused target made in West Germany to signify that poetry was a way of shooting and that the IAC was a sporting association. But this was not about initiating a project by sending various identical objects—it was about an object of visual poetry.

Moreover, the target motif chosen by Birger Jesch transformed on the one hand the participating artists into pacifist marksmen of a kind and, on the other hand, the initiator of the project into a living target for the Stasi. Nonetheless, the mail artist received fifty objects back from twelve different countries in connection with this project. The documents and objects associated with this project are currently located at the mail art archives in Schwerin.\textsuperscript{15} Kornelia Röder, who is in charge of these archives, has devoted a few lines to this project in her 2006 doctoral dissertation “\textit{Topologie und Funktionsweise des Netzwerks der Mail Art}.”\textsuperscript{16} A few objects were also shown in

\textsuperscript{14} Interview, by Robert Sobotta and transcribed by Lutz Wohlrabkrauss, ERBEN gallery in Dresden, 4 May 2002.

\textsuperscript{15} See http://www.museum-schwerin.de/sammlungen/kupferstichkabinett/mail-art-archiv-3/.

1996 in the exhibition Osteuropa Mail Art im internationalen Netzwerk at the Schwerin Museum.

Not only did Birger Jesch initiate this project, he also contributed himself with the creation of a three-dimensional object, but without using as a theme the fact that he had been targeted by the Stasi. To do this, he included in the shooting target a plastic toy that was made in East Germany—a miniature soldier of the National People's Army in a crouching position and aiming with his gun, ready to shoot. All of this is surrounded by partitions with a text from 1979 by the East German author Dieter Schneider: Leb wohl, altes Haus! (Farewell, old friend!). To the right of this is the cutting of a press photo showing the bust of a person wearing a microphone and censored by a black strip across the eyes. This pacifist work was part of the cultural context of the expatriation in 1976 of the author and singer Wolf Biermann, who sang, among other things, “Soldaten seh'n sich alle gleich—lebendig und als Leich” (Soldiers all look the same, alive and dead), but also of the political context of the introduction of military service lessons in school. The project also seemed to be a response to the double decision by NATO on 12 December 1979, which planned for the installation of missiles in Western Europe in response to the Soviet SS-20s in order to begin negotiations and secure their removal within four years.17

The object of the project that has been most talked about, described, and reproduced by researchers dedicated to mail art in the GDR is that of Friedrich Winnes. His appeal lay in his fairly simple work, using graphic methods borrowed from the press, combining black, white and red; and he shocked people with the contents of photos showing the portraits of twelve men injured during the First World War.

Birger Jesch was aware of the link between the weak response to his project and the scrutiny of his post by the Stasi. Following these communication difficulties, he wrote a letter asking the senders to explain their failure to reply and to send the original post to the other participants. This action had a sort of snowball effect, and it allows us today to show, in relation to this project,

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17 It must be noted here that the East German government, which was committed by the 1972 Basic Treaty with the FRG to a policy of détente and also to increasingly pronounced cultural exchanges with France—which approved the installation of US missiles on West German territory—tried to stay outside of the Soviet policy pursued against the United States.
how much post was intercepted by the Stasi. Birger Jesch thus suggested a choice between three responses: (a) I did not have the time (inclination), (b) I did not receive an invitation, and (c) I have sent you something.

Among the objects received, that of Klaus Groh demonstrated the difficulty of sending objects. In the text accompanying his two-dimensional and purely graphic work, he stressed the fact that this was already the third piece he had sent.

In the documentation dated 14 February 1981, Birger Jesch commented: “Thanks to the jury competences of the postal and customs services, one can consider this exhibition as having already been checked and authorized.” This remark highlighted the fact that the mail artists were aware of the inevitable scrutiny of their post, without necessarily realizing the real extent of this surveillance and the methods of the Stasi. The project was framed not only by the documentation, but also by a touring exhibition showing all the objects that were sent back. These exhibitions took place on clerical premises in Dresden (February 1981, the Weinbergkirche), Radebeul, Meissen, Stralsund (13 November 1983), Greifswald (1983/84) and Rostock. On 15 October 1981, following the exhibitions for the project, the Stasi launched the “Feind” procedure—initially called “Postkunst”—which had the principle aim of breaking up the local network. The methods used consisted of confiscating post or refusing GDR entry visas to the invitees of the five Dresden friends who had become the Stasi’s target. Legal proceedings were also begun in 1982 against Birger Jesch and Steffen Giersch under the pretext of a customs offence, resulting in unequal fines of 500 marks for Jesch and 300 marks for Giersch. The closing report of the proceedings was submitted three years later, on 1 October 1984: the circle of artist friends was considered to have disbanded, and mail art was seen as an ineffective oppositional method. The person most affected by the Stasi methods was the

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19 Wohlrab, “Bitte sauber öffnen!”
artist and printer Jürgen Gottschalk, who was sentenced on 23 July 1984 to two years and two months in prison and was finally expatriated at the end of April 1985.21 In the GDR, mail art was an alternative form of art and communication that was born in the geopolitical and cultural interstice and aimed to transgress this border zone or theoretically displace it. This zone, this interstice, served as a sort of niche enabling mail artists to develop their own artistic identity despite the control by the state. The concept of mail art was a transnational concept enabling artists to go beyond the geopolitical realities of Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. With the fall of the Wall, the interstice of geopolitical and cultural limits in the GDR disappeared and with it the source of motivation and of identity creation.
