

SHARED UTOPIAS. TOMASZ SCHULZ'S COOP-BOOKS (1979–1988) IN THE CONTEXT OF MAIL ART

ABSTRACT — This paper presents the first art historical analysis of Polish mail artist Tomasz Schulz's (*1951) COOP-Books, focusing on *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* (1979–ca. 1986). By examining selected pages, it explores how the book embodies strategies typical of the international mail art network of the 1970s and 1980s and how contributors used it to share artistic ideas, political views, and insights into their personal lives. By comparing the book and its entries with Birger Jesch's *The First Mail Art Project of Dresden* (1980), the concepts of *CONTART* by Robert Rehfeldt and Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, and *arte íntimo* by Graciela Gutiérrez Marx, as well as relating it to the notion of a "tautological feminist sign" by Ewa Partum, *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* is interpreted as a particularly intimate mail art object. While operating in a pre-political sphere, it blends politically engaged and deeply personal content, exemplifying the concept of contact as art and contributing to the utopian vision of a global artists' union shared within mail art.

Dear Friend, this is [a] COOP-Book about the very important matters. What's important for you? Add. . . & send to your[']s art friend that will repeat the operation when you find this book finished—return please to: Tomasz Schulz [. . .] keep in touch keep in touch keep in touch keep in touch keep in touch keep in touch keep in touch keep in touch¹⁾

— With this note, the teacher, artist, and cultural manager Tomasz Schulz introduced readers and potential contributors to his COOP-Book *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters*. From 1979, when he initiated it, to 1988, when he left his home country Poland and moved to Germany, Schulz launched approximately 30 such artists' books. Conceived as collaborative works, they were realized in two ways: Most of them grew in a rhizomatic manner, with Schulz leaving the creation to unknown contributors, who independently decided whom to pass the book on to next.²⁾ Others were tied to his physical presence, as he carried them on his travels and used them as diaries. They featured entries by himself, by the artists he encountered, or by both together.³⁾ In this way, each COOP-Book was realized through the rapidly expanding international artist networks of the time.

1)

Schulz 1979: 6–7; I thank Tomasz Schulz for answering my questions, Marie Gerbaulet for introducing me to his work, Kathrin Barutzki and Franziska Rauh for inviting me to present this research in Bremen and reviewing this text, the participants of the seminar series *Intellectual Art History in Eastern Europe* (Vienna, October 2024 – January 2025) for their critical input, and Evangelisches Studienwerk Villigst for financially supporting this research. This investigation also benefitted from the online workshop *Women and Mail Art. Gendered Perspectives on Marginal Artistic Practices* (Bern/Warsaw, October 2024; see Egger 2024b).

2)

Schulz's personal archive in Potsdam holds five such COOP-Books: *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* (1979–ca. 1986), *Dada is. . . . as Dada* (1979–ca. 1984), *1980* (1980–1981), *Signs, Numbers, Letters, Words* (ca. 1986), and *Rubber, Rubber* (ca. 1988), the second in a three-part series on rubber stamps.

3)

Schulz's personal archive in Potsdam holds four such COOP-Books: *Radioactive Passport* (1981–1984), *Identiteitskaart van Mars* (1984–1986), *Contact Non Stop. Make Art Daily* (1984–1988), and *Th. Schulz. . . on the road* (1988).

THE COOP-BOOKS: EPISTOLARY DOCUMENTS OF A PRE-POLITICAL SPHERE ON THE ROADS OF TRANSNATIONAL ARTISTIC NETWORKS IN THE 1970S AND 1980S

— In 1975, after studying Polish linguistics in Toruń, Tomasz Schulz moved to Łądek Zdrój, a Polish city near the Czech border, to work as a schoolteacher. He actively followed the Polish Conceptual art scene, where, four years earlier, curator Andrzej Kostolowski and artist Jarosław Kozłowski had launched the non-commercial, independent, international artist network *NET*. It stated that “points of the net can be anywhere” and that they “are in contact among themselves and exchange concepts, propositions, projects and other forms of articulation” (Kemp-Welch 2018: 98). At around the same time, West German art historian and mail artist Klaus Groh began to establish a similar infrastructure for international artist collaborations. His *International Artists’ Cooperation* (IAC) circulated a newsletter to connect artists across both Eastern and Western bloc states who sought to participate in transnational projects (Groh 1972). Through these initiatives, Schulz discovered mail art—a form of artistic exchange practiced primarily in Europe and the Americas, open to anyone, and relatively easy to access through discreetly circulated contact lists (see, for example, Röder 2008; Mrotzek/Röder 1996).

— Mail art consisted in the international postal exchange of graphic works on paper through the abovementioned networks to assert independence from traditional artistic institutions on a global scale. Through the network, artists, art professionals, and enthusiasts shared ideas, personal encounters, and practical information. This decentralized approach encouraged amateurs like Schulz to join and develop their mail art practices from the peripheries of national and international art centers.

— During the Cold War, postal activities in the countries addressed here were monitored, censored, and obstructed by state authorities. In Poland, this was carried out by the Security Service; in East Germany (German Democratic Republic, GDR), by the Stasi; in Argentina, by the military junta; and even in the United States (U.S.), by postmasters (Kienle 2022: 6). The Stasifile of German mail artist Friedrich Winnes, with whom Schulz frequently corresponded, for example, confirms that at least one COOP-Book was confiscated by the GDR (Winnes/Wohlrab 1994: 108). The fact that censorship and the issue of how to deal with it were fundamental concerns of mail art is occasionally reflected in *Artist’s Contact Book About Important Matters*. The COOP-Books represent these clandestine or immaterial intellectual networks by actively circu-

lating and distributing mail art in ways that were similar to, yet distinct from, the letters, postcards, and other projects researchers have previously studied.

— Created from blank notebooks measuring 15 × 21 cm, the COOP-Books are compact containers for numerous artistic contributions that comprise several characteristics of mail art. They resemble the format of a mail art project, are created collaboratively, and adopt influential artistic ideas that frame human contact as a form of art. A closer look at how this unfolds in *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* reveals that—like mail art in general—the COOP-Books can be understood as epistolary documents of a “pre-political sphere,”⁴⁾ (Zanichelli 2015: 102, 118) raising questions about the interplay between public and private realms in mail art. Compared to other projects, this book's unedited content offers a particularly unfiltered glimpse into how the transnational network of mail art facilitated the sharing of what might be termed “private utopias.” Because at a time when the private was increasingly considered to be political, mail art represented a “parallel public” (Blaylock 2022) or “second public sphere” (Cesh-Varga 2022) within state socialism, military dictatorships, and marginalized communities, in which various artistic concepts could be circulated clandestinely. *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* provides valuable insights into the artistic concepts and the role of the private, where domestic and intimate matters, such as friendship, family, love, and everyday life, emerged as integral components of the networked practice of mail art.

AN INTIMATE MAIL ART PROJECT: THE COOP-BOOK ARTIST'S CONTACT BOOK ABOUT IMPORTANT MATTERS (1979–CA. 1986)

— In the 1970s and 1980s, mail art projects typically started with a call to action, often featuring a conceptual, humorous, poetic, or politically engaged theme. German artist Birger Jesch launched *The First Mail Art Project of Dresden* (1980) with a paper clip, asking recipients to “mail it. . .to Dresden!” and thus place the city on the map of international artist networks (Jesch 1980a; Egger 2024a). The call includes a deadline, an address for submissions, suggestions for size and technique, and a promise to create a documentation afterward, and adheres to the network's rule for mail art projects: “no jury, no fee, no return” (Freire 2017: 50; Jesch 1994: 96). Schulz's introduction to *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* strongly resembles such a call, following the rule in the form of an add-and-pass book.

— Jesch's *First Mail Art Project of Dresden* served as an anti-war campaign. To convey this agenda to the recipients, he included

4)

Zanichelli, quoting Hannah Arendt (2010 [1958]: 27, 31), offers a historical definition of the private in the arts, considering a “feminist critique of the liberal term of privacy and its consolidation as a pre-political realm.” Drawing on Beate Rössler (2001), she recounts a 1970s feminist critique of the private as a non-public space that enabled women's oppression and led to the call to eliminate the distinction between public and private.

an artistically altered shooting target with each paper clip (Jesch 1980b; Egger 2024a). With a frontispiece of a dancing figure at whose hands and feet four flames were penciled in (Schulz 1979), *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* adopted a similar visual strategy.⁵⁾ Just like an eye focusing on an unseen entity outside the frame, that Jesch added to his shooting target, Schulz's allegory of a play with fire, too, suggests the book could be a risky endeavor if intercepted by a third party, such as the Stasi. Schulz himself was the first to contribute, with an entry featuring a collage of a black-and-white self-portrait and a portrait of Lenin on a red background, merging the revolutionary's head with his own ([Fig. 1]; Schulz 1979: 10–11). Echoing the famous Marxist slogan, Schulz called on “artists of all countries [to] unite,” linking the project to the idea of building a global artists' union through the international artistic networks—an “important matter” the book meant to contribute to.⁶⁾ Crucial to achieving this goal, or to “keep in touch,” as Schulz suggests again on a business card with a lip impression, were contact lists. They were commonly attached to the *NET* and *IAC* newsletters, printed in the documentary brochures of mail art projects, or displayed in exhibitions (Winnes/Wohlrab 1994: 51; Egger 2024a). In the *COOP-Book*, contributors successively added their details to the first and last pages, making it possible to trace the book's journey from Poland to the GDR, the UK, Ohio, and California.

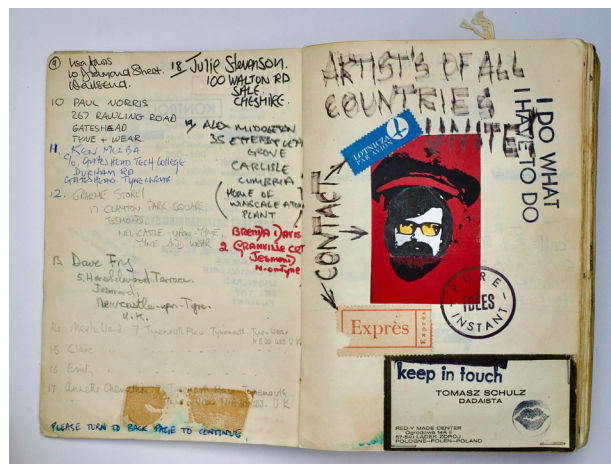
— Thus, *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* circulated in the network along with every contribution it accumulated. Each entry, along with the contact list, was added directly to the book, which now contains over 50 contributions. This process materializes a continuous process of collaborative artistic work, where the transition from one artist to the next—when the book is mobile—can be experienced by turning its pages. Unlike the conglomerates of loose postcards typically produced by mail art projects, the entries were made directly on the pages. This resulted in a linear collection of works that only encountered the small audience of Schulz and its contributors. Contrary to mail art projects designed to reach a wider audience through exhibitions and the distribution of documentary material among participants, the *COOP-Book* was seen only by those who encountered it in the homes or studios of its contributors. Even among this limited group, only readers near the end of the book's journey could view most of the works it contained. In this sense,

5)

Schulz did not add this image himself and does not know its author (email from Tomasz Schulz to Marie Egger, June 27, 2024).

6)

For now, I do not link this attempt to the *Solidarność* movement, as Schulz initiated the book in 1979, a year before the strikes of summer 1980. Aside from its reference to national artists' unions in Soviet bloc states, however, the *COOP-Books* could also be connected to the Workers' Defense Committee (*Komitet Obrony Robotników, KOR*). Founded by 14 intellectuals after the June 1976 protests in Poland, KOR sparked the circulation of *Samizdat* publications and bulletins during the late 1970s, enabling the Polish political opposition to rapidly grow (Sontag 2004: 6–7).



// Figure 1

Tomasz Schulz, *COOP-Book "Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters"* (p. 10–11), 1979–ca. 1986, ca. 30 × 21 cm

Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters is a particularly intimate object. This intimacy and the fact that mail art—executed as a shared epistolary practice of postal correspondence—was primarily created in the privacy of one's home or studio (James 2021: 33–41; Lemmrich 2002; Saber 2001) prompt the question of what “important matters” the contributors addressed here.

IMPORTANT MATTERS I: POLITICAL ACTIVISM (OR: ROBERT REHFELDT'S AND RUTH WOLF-REHFELDT'S *CONTART*) — In *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters*, personal and politically engaged entries mix. The book's first stop in East Berlin in 1979 reveals how these concerns typically blend in mail art, precisely because the practice often extended into the domestic sphere. Winnes's entry (Schulz 1979: 12–13) features nine colorful solidarity stamps, with the bottom right one devalued by a circular “Mail Art” stamp. The stamps were initially intended to promote the GDR's solidarity with its so-called brother states. Here, they also highlight the parallels between socialist solidarity and the ideal of mail art as a global artist community.⁷⁾ Robert Rehfeldt, who likely received the book personally from Winnes in East Berlin, then displays a broad spectrum of his artistic practice over 21 pages. His entries include his signature slogans—“ART TIME IN EUROPA,” “MAKE A CREATIVE WORLD NOW,” and “pour COLLECTIF D'ART CRÉATIF”—as well as the neologism *CONTART*, which he and Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt coined to describe their vision of mail art as a potentially counteractive practice of international artists in contact (Rehfeldt 1977; Kemp-Welch 2018: 300; James 2022: 221–318). Rehfeldt also includes a note from El Salvadorian artist Jesus Romeo Galdámez Escobar (Schulz 1979: 30–31), who consolidates their mutual artistic contact with the phrase “keep in touch.” Next to it, Rehfeldt, like Schulz, calls for the world's “popular artists” to unite. His next spread ([Fig. 2]; Schulz 1979: 32–33) contains an illegible black-and-white photo with a felt tip sketch of a human head that resembles George Washington's, a comic featuring the U.S. superhero *The Flash* being hit in the face, and ten appeals to free Indigenous people.⁸⁾ Two signatures on the page attribute this work to Rehfeldt and MP Anker. Anker, in turn, adopts the slogan “Nature is Life” from his East German mail art colleague Joseph W. Huber, overlaying it on a photo collage of a crowd and a trash bin (Schulz 1979: 34–35), calling attention to environmental issues (see Barentsen 2023: 165–177).

7)

The page next to it was added later when the book was almost full, and people began using empty pages at the front. On global socialist solidarity and its practice by the GDR regime, see three recent exhibitions in Germany: *Re-Connect. Art and Conflict in Brotherland* (18/05/2023–10/09/2023, Museum der bildenden Künste Leipzig), *Revolutionary Romances* (11/04/2023–06/02/2024, Albertinum, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden), and *Echoes of the Brother Countries* (03/01/2024–05/20/2024, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin).

8)

This spread can be read as a critical take on the outdated and inaccurate English term “Indians” used to refer to Indigenous Americans, since to the left of this drawing someone added a clipping from a Portuguese article on the yogi Maharishi, born in India, who gained popularity in the U.S. through his association with the hippie movement.



// Figure 2

Tomasz Schulz, COOP-Book “Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters” (p. 32–33), 1979–ca. 1986, ca. 30 × 21 cm

— These entries underscore a typical characteristic of mail art, where working together—often across national borders—was central.⁹⁾ Anker's series of chain letters titled *Mail Art New's*, for example, saw contributions from Rehfeldt and Wolf-Rehfeldt from the GDR, Robin Crozier from the UK, and Robin Cohen from El Salvador in 1979 (Anker 1979), as well as Guillermo Deisler, Huber, Karla Sachse, and Winnes, all based in the GDR, in 1980 ([Fig. 3], Anker 1980). These politically engaged entries—along with motifs such as caged birds (Crozier), appeals to “save the birds” (Sachse), and concerns about the “artmosphere” (Wolf-Rehfeldt)—show that mail art was deeply concerned with how to coexist in a shared public sphere. They reflect Rehfeldt's and Wolf-Rehfeldt's belief that mail art could help cultivate personal connections worldwide and “intensify the influences of arts on [the] environment and to overcome the barriers between artists and society” (Rehfeldt 1977). This philosophy aligned with their artistic idea(l) of *CONTACT*, in which mail art was meant to foster a global union of art workers who could actively promote socialist innovation and improve society.¹⁰⁾ In other words, it was about artistically engaging with the important political matters of the time. This artistic utopia was rooted in both Leninist and avant-garde ideas of art to rebel against present social conditions and abolish the distinction between art and life (Egger 2022: 41, 44–45). Schulz's and Rehfeldt's call for the artists of all countries to unite, Winnes's reflection on the GDR's solidarity politics, Anker's politically engaged entries, and Jesch's pacifist anti-war campaign can all be interpreted as contributions to this ideal of changing the sociopolitical and environmental circumstances of their time through mail art.

IMPORTANT MATTERS II: PERSONAL CORRESPONDENCE (OR: GRACIELA GUTIÉRREZ MARX'S *ARTE ÍNTIMO*) — Like several entries in *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters*, the GDR network also reflects a facet of mail art that has been only poorly investigated: its involvement of friends, lovers, or family members. Schulz did not specifically intend for this, and such topics were not addressed in Winnes's, Rehfeldt's, and Anker's entries, but private or intimate contributions, as well as those made by family members, were a recurring *important matter* in the *COOP-Book*. Robin Crozier and Rosie G. Thompson's entry ([Fig. 4–5]; Schulz 38–39), the first one following those of the East Berlin artists, features a per-

9)

These contributions may have been made in Rehfeldt's studio, where artists from the mail art network often visited and met in person (Mrotzek/Röder 1996: 126).

10)

This refers to the conclusion that both were “committed socialists” (Kemp-Welch 2018: 300). I have elsewhere elaborated on why this should be read carefully, considering the seemingly contradictory assertion that they were both “dissidents” (Thurmann-Jajes 2013; see Egger 2022: 11–18).



// Figure 3

MP Anker with Guillermo Deisler, Wolfgang Huber, Karla Sachse and Friedrich Winnes, *Mail Art New's* Nr. 131, 1980, collaborative collage, ca. 21 × 27.9 cm

sonal calendar sheet and an imprint of Thompson's lips. Soon after, the book gained even more diary-like contributions, such as self-proclaimed "poor groty [sic] art-student" Paul Norris's opinion that "this book is stupid" (Schulz 1979: 64–64) or children's drawings like Mark and Clare Ward's family tree and cat by the fireplace (Schulz 72–73). A brief digression to the GDR network demonstrates that family members were an integral part of their mail art, too: In the 1980s, as their children were born, friendly correspondences began to include images of them: Anker's *Mail Art New's* (Fig. 3, Anker 1980) contains a photo of Winnes's newborn daughter Linda, labeled "On February 12, 1980, a new MAIL ARTIST was born." Two years later, Winnes sent a silhouette of Linda's hand to Wolf-Rehfeldt, who was recovering in a Berlin hospital (Winnes 1981); and Jesch sent a photo of his son Moritz doing "action painting" (Jesch 1981c), after having shared drawings by Moritz with the Rehfeldts earlier that year (Jesch 1981a; Jesch 1981b). The fact that, for some, mail art was a family practice, is crowned by Martina and Steffen Giersch who, since the birth of their son Ludwig, signed with "MLS" (Giersch 1982) and announced their son's "art breakthrough" on a photo postcard to the Rehfeldts in 1983 (Giersch 1983). In 1984, the Gierschs even called for a mail art project to celebrate Ludwig's second birthday, noting that they now knew all GDR mail artists "personally and face to face," but that postal mail was "clearly not working properly anymore" (Giersch 1984), which potentially implied they were under state surveillance.

At around the same time, this approach to mail art surfaces in an Argentine project: Schulz submitted a portrait of him and his wife Anna, drawn by his daughter Paulina, and the note "May, 25; 1978 was born in Poland the new great Dadaist PAWEL OLAF SCHULZ," as well as a collage of three portraits of Paulina, labeled "KEEP BABY" (Fig. 6]; Gutiérrez Marx 1980b), to mail artist Graciela Gutiérrez Marx's mail art project *Grupo de familia* (1980). Gutiérrez Marx approached the topic of family much more conceptually as she attempted to artistically engage with the domestic sphere through her idea of *arte íntimo* (Rivière 2021). She initiated *Grupo de familia* for her mother's birthday to "seek shelter in the 'intimacy' of a commu-



// Figure 4 & 5

Robin Crozier and Rosie Thompson, contribution to: Tomasz Schulz, COOP-Book "Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters" (p. 38–39), 1979–ca. 1986, ca. 30 × 21 cm

nication almost clandestine” (Gutiérrez Marx 1980a) and proposed retreating home to “rescue the myth of family,” which, according to her, had gotten lost between the ideologies of “‘proletariat’ and ‘high developed culture’” (ibid.). Gutiérrez Marx found mail art to be a suitable channel to realize this endeavor intimately and in marginality, with “a noiseless attitude” in the “silence of communication” from “mouth to mouth [or] hand to hand” (Gutiérrez Marx 1978). *Grupo de familia* gathered 138 postcards, many of which show family photos or children’s drawings. Among them is a found family portrait from Huber,¹¹⁾ a shooting target from Jesch, and—alongside the family portraits—a depiction of a socialist fraternal kiss from Schulz, who resonated strongly with the project (Gutiérrez Marx 1980b).

— *Grupo de familia* is somewhat paradoxical: its proposal to return to the sphere of one’s family contradicts its request to openly share a visual result of this and distribute it among the participants, who had mostly never met in person. As Henar Rivière pointed out, this needs to be understood in the context of the Argentine military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983 (Rivière 2021; see also Kozal 2023). Gutiérrez Marx conceived *Grupo de familia* as a poetic resistance to the state’s concept of family. With a “domestic show” (Gutiérrez Marx 1980b) among family members and friends at her mother’s birthday party in her mother’s house, she replicated the safe space her mother provided her with, a place where she (and others) could creatively express themselves during a time when Argentina suffered from the violent oppression of intellectuals, creatives, journalists, and anyone who did not conform to state ideology.¹²⁾ Gutiérrez Marx assumed that, at a glance, the children’s drawings and family photos would appear innocent to potential censors, as they seemed to address solely domestic issues (instead of political ones) and hardly differed visually from common personal correspondence. Considering this, *Grupo de familia* is a meaningful example of how—especially, but not exclusively, in authoritarian regimes—mail art productively entangled the private and the political with an idealist agenda. Or, as Gutiérrez Marx would say, how it made use of the “(dis)-order of the International Postal Systems” to create “con-fusion” (Gutiérrez Marx 1980b).

— It would be overstated to suggest that *Artist’s Contact Book About Important Matters* conceptually intertwines the domestic and the public realm in the same way as *Grupo de familia* does.

11)

I thank Karla Sachse for clarifying that this image does not show Huber’s or her family. It is most likely a found private photograph from albums Sachse collected from trash containers during the 1980s (email from Karla Sachse to Marie Egger, November 30, 2024).

12)

On the antimodern and anti-Semitic Argentine state ideology during the military dictatorship of Jorge Rafael Videla, see the report of ex-prisoner Jacobo Timerman, a Soviet-born, Jewish-Argentine journalist, who stated: “Argentina has three main enemies: Karl Marx, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of society; Sigmund Freud, because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of the family; and Albert Einstein because he tried to destroy the Christian concept of time and space” (Lewis 1981).



// Figure 6

Graciela Gutiérrez Marx, Los códigos marginales de Mama Blanca (The Marginal Codices of Mamablanca), Buenos Aires: 1980, n.p

However, the fact that certain contributors used the book—or mail art in general—for private, family-related, or children’s artistic expressions, as well as the point that mail art typically embraced these seemingly conventional types of postal correspondences from an angle of institutional critique, demonstrate how seamlessly the private and the public, the political and the personal, art and everyday life, as well as professional and amateur expression, merged in this genre. The artistic program of cooperation of *Artist’s Contact Book About Important Matters* resonates with this *modus operandi* of the network by providing a semi-public and/or semi-private platform for artistic exchange, where, for example, both *CONTART* and *arte íntimo* could be expressed. In this way, with the contributions discussed here, much like in today’s social media, the book served as a pre-digital platform through which personal utterings were shared with an initially unknown international group of individuals in the era of analog globalization.

IMPORTANT MATTERS III: TACTILITY AND THE PRESENCE OF THE BODY (OR: EVA PARTUM’S TAUTOLOGICAL ART)

— One reason why mail art objects from the Cold War period effectively sustained decentralized, transnational artist networks lies in their materiality—specifically, in their tactility and the traces authors left on them. Cristina Freire described the mail art network as producing a “fondly tactile collective memory” of physical objects that captured “intermediary moment[s] between manual force and machinery.” (Freire 2017: 54–55) This is evident in works like Thompson’s typewritten texts (**Fig. 5**, Schulz 1979: 39) or Wolf-Rehfeldt’s *Typewritings* (Anker 1979), and the countless stamps used in mail art. The connection between mail art and the human body was further explored by Katalin Cseh-Varga, who proposed viewing mail art as a performative practice, exemplified by the 1982 performance *TRANS-IDEA* by Iosif Király and Calin Dan, where the artists attempted to mail themselves in an oversized envelope (Cseh-Varga 2021). Similarly, media and communication scholar Esther Milne examined the transfer of physical presence in analog and digital epistolary practices as a socio-technical phenomenon (Milne 2012). These discussions resonate with the dual meaning of *contact*, which refers to both interpersonal communication (as in written correspondence) and physical connection (as in touch). For many artists during the Cold War, the latter was difficult to achieve. As a result, transferring their physical presence via the postal system—leaving tangible traces of their bodies in written correspondence—became a compelling method of producing mail art.

— The joint entry by British artist Robin Crozier and U.S. artist

Rosie G. Thompson (Schulz 1979: 38–41) delves into this duality of immaterial and physical contact in mail art. Thompson inserted a green paper pocket into the COOP-Book to which she added a round yellow sticker, three pink intersecting lines resembling rays of light, three scattered ‘stamps’ (one featuring her portrait), and a typewritten note. The collage also included a page from her 1979 calendar and a postcard from Yugoslav mail artist Balinth Szombathy. At the top, an imprint of Thompson’s lips is partially concealed by the green pocket. Crozier added a postcard by MP Anker and an introductory label to the calendar sheet, obscuring Thompson’s note on how sunlight touching her skin grounded her—a nod to the relationship between time and space in the analog, globalized world of 1979. More conspicuous is Crozier’s outline of Thompson’s lip imprint on the back of the page, beneath which he wrote: “thinking about Rosie’s lips / inking out Rosie’s lips → but—the most important thing at the moment is to give the book to Jan Ostrowski.” Crozier’s logbook-style entry then details his transfer of the COOP-Book to Ostrowski at Sunderland University, where Crozier taught at the art department. Thompson and Crozier’s entry illuminates the interplay between the immaterial networks of this era and their underpinning artistic concepts that considered the whole earth, yet were tied to the physical sensations and/or perceptions of one’s own body.

Following this, Irene Reddish, another Sunderland University affiliate, added five black-and-white photos of a female singer to the book ([Fig. 7]; Schulz 1979: 51–58). Each of them includes a strand of vibrantly colored hair—possibly hers or the singer’s—affixed with transparent tape and Reddish’s address stamp. Like Thompson’s and Crozier’s entry, Reddish’s contribution underscores the COOP-Book’s dual role as a *Contact Book*. First, its add-and-pass method echoes early modern poetry albums or friendship books, where owners collected visual or written contributions from friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. The COOP-Book’s journey from the GDR to art schools in Sunderland and Cleveland reflects its integration into subcultures like the UK punk scene of the 1980s, beyond Schulz’s immediate reach. Although Schulz never met many contributors personally, the book connected him to like-minded peers, facilitating potential collaborations. Much like an *album amicorum* (a collection book of friends), *Artist’s Contact Book About Important Matters* features a variety of artistic autographs from Schulz’s network, documenting his activ-



// Figure 7

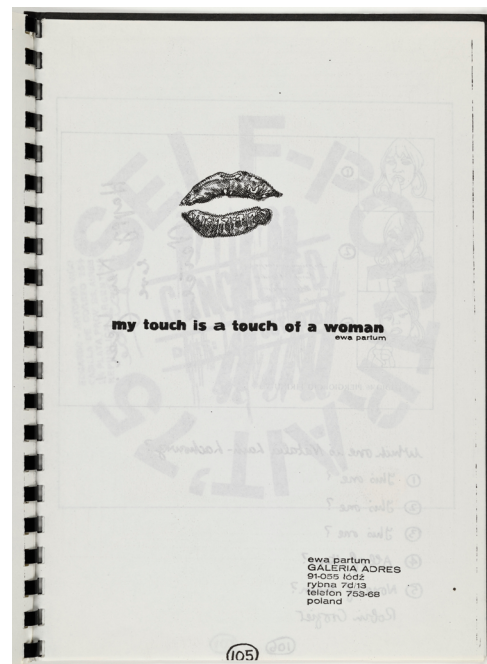
Irene Reddish, contribution to: Tomasz Schulz, COOP-Book “Artist’s Contact Book About Important Matters” (p. 52–53), 1979–ca. 1986, ca. 30 × 21 cm

ities in the cultural field. Schulz later leveraged this network in his career as a research assistant at the German Cultural Forum for Eastern Europe in Potsdam. Second, Reddish's (and Thompson's) entry draws on the epistolary tradition of including bodily parts or imprints in letters or poetry albums—such as locks of hair, fingerprints, or other physical traces—to express affection and devotion, often examined from a feminist perspective (Weaver 2023). In doing so, Thompson's lip imprint and Reddish's hair simulate a physical touch or an in-person encounter. Thompson's imprint leaves a literal trace of her skin's touch on the page, while Reddish affixes a part of her body to the book.

— Ewa Partum, a fellow Polish mail artist, likely inspired these contributions. Partum's *poems by ewa*, distributed through the network, included a pink lip imprint labeled "my touch is a touch of a woman" (1971, [Fig. 8]; Crozier 1976), a collage of dispersed hairs on paper (1981, Partum 1981), or an *alphabet* (1975; Partum 1975) depicting her lip shapes while enunciating letters. These intimate works serve as "indexical marks of the subject," registering "sheer physical presence" and reducing the "sign to a trace" (Majewska-Güde 2021: 151–152), through which Partum introduced the notion of touch to the registers of text and performance, creating a tactile language that balances the senses of sight and touch (Majewska-Güde 2021: 155). Crozier referenced Partum's work by outlining Thompson's lip imprint in the COOP-Book. He knew Partum's work well, having reproduced her contribution of five lip imprints spelling his name to his mail art project *Portrait of Robin Crozier* in 1975 ([Fig. 9]; Crozier 1975; Crozier 1979). His longing note regarding Thompson's lips amplifies the sexual implications that her and Partum's imprints introduced to the network and overshadows the way in which these imprints may be read as visual references to both the communicative and the physical aspects of *contact* in the era of analog globalization. In 1979, due to such patriarchal gestures, Partum acknowledged the impossibility of a non-gendered reading of her work and deliberately embraced feminist critique (Gajowy 2021: 468; Majewska-Güde 2021: 174). She later described herself as a "tautological feminist sign" (Majewska 2014), meaning that her works inherently expressed the marginalized perspective of a female artist in Cold War Central Eastern Europe. This also raises questions about how mail artists included female colleagues, partners, or family members in the network and whether they perpetuated or challenged gender inequalities.¹³⁾

13)

This paper can only touch on these issues. Since October 2025, Marie van Bömmel and I are co-leading the research group *Is Mail Art a "Male Art"? Gender as a Condition and Product of International Mail Art in the 1980s*, funded by the Berlin University Alliance, to further explore these topics. The results of our research will be published in a special issue of [kunsttexte.de](https://www.kunsttexte.de), edited by both of us, in December 2026.

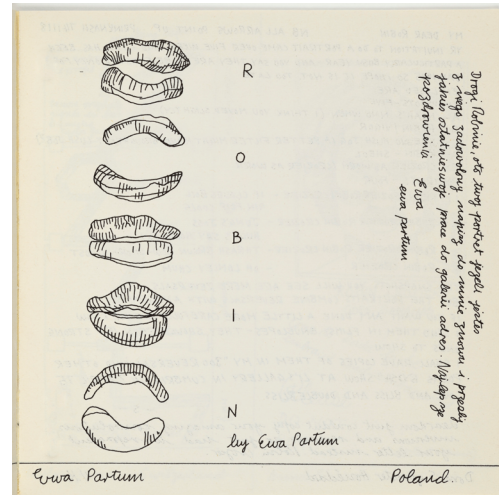


// Figure 8

Ewa Partum, contribution to: Robin Crozier, *Portrait of...* (xerox reproduction of Ewa Partum, poem by ewa – "my touch is a touch of a woman"), ca. 1976, p. 105

Beyond its feminist implications, Partum's notion of artistic tautology also resonates with the COOP-Book and mail art practices more broadly, particularly in how artists managed to overcome spatial distances between each other on a global scale through conceptual works that emphasized their own materiality. This is grounded in the tautological concept that an artwork is a mere "presentation of the artist's intention" (Kosuth 1969: 20; see Majewska-Güde 2021: 136), as well as in Dick Higgins's notion of *intermedia*, which describes the liminal state of an artwork existing *between* different media or material and immaterial forms (Neumark 2005: 13; see Majewska-Güde 2021: 137). In this context, mail art—be it as *CONTART* or *arte íntimo*—viewed *contact* as such as art. Majewska-Güde contrasts Partum's approach with these "anti-visual" traditions in Conceptual art, arguing that her tautology decidedly operates within "the regime of visibility" (Majewska-Güde 2021: 141), a principle that also becomes evident in the COOP-Book: its entries and the spaces between them capture 'intermediary moments' of spatial and temporal in-betweenness, evoking what—regarding Partum's early work—Majewska-Güde describes as an "uncertainty concerning the presence and absence of the subject" (Majewska-Güde 2021: 149). Minding this, the contributors to *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* are virtually connected in absence through the physical presence of their entries on the notebook's bound pages, while turning the pages reproduces the liminality between them.

CONCLUSION — In the context of mail art, *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* exemplifies the idea of a true *Contact Book*: it combines subjective glimpses into personal lives with conceptual and political reflections on the role of mail art in the globalized world of the 1970s and 1980s, while, at the same time, materializing how these networked practices revolved around the concept of contact as an art form. The book's motto, "keep in touch," functions as both an artistic and a political program, realized through person-to-person correspondence during a period when, spurred by feminist movements in the West, the private was increasingly viewed as political. Since, metaphorically, everyone who held the COOP-Book in their hands shared a form of physical contact, *Artist's Contact Book About Important Matters* facilitated a sensually enhanced exchange of contacts as social relationships forming a network of like-minded peers. In this way, the book serves as a prime example of mail art as an "imaginary community of artists"



// Figure 9

Robin Crozier after Ewa Partum, contribution to: Robin Crozier, *Portrait of Robin Crozier* (xerox copy of manual reproduction of Ewa Partum, poem by ewa – "Robin"), ca. 1975

who never met in person, but who collaborated in projects that fostered “transnational, professional and affective networks [. . .] based on solidarity and trust” to constitute a “shared utopia [. . .] that enabled a free-flowing society [. . .] in spite of the Cold War political climate” (Freire 2017: 50–51). Schulz initiated the COOP-Books to contribute to these utopian visions of a global artists’ union where everyone—at least potentially—was connected, authorship was freely shared, and national borders were transcended. For this ideal, he, too, was usually willing to give his last hair ([Fig. 10], Schulz 1978).



// Figure 10

Tomasz Schulz, COOP-Book “Contact Non Stop. Make Art Daily” (p. 10–11), 1984–1988, ca. 30 × 21 cm

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