

MAIL ART ACTIVITIES AS ARTISTIC TACTICS: EWA PARTUM'S AND RUTH WOLF-REHFELDT'S INFRASTRUCTURES WITHIN THE MAIL ART NETWORK

ABSTRACT — The article examines how Ewa Partum in Poland and Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt in the GDR used the Mail Art network from the 1970s onward as an artistic tactic in the sense of Michel de Certeau. Focusing on Partum's Galeria Adres as well as on both artists' correspondence practices and Wolf-Rehfeldt's typewriter graphics, the essay analyzes how they employed existing postal infrastructures to create alternative spaces of communication, exchange, and visibility beyond official art institutions. Their activities circumvented institutional and geopolitical restrictions while enabling transnational artistic connections across the Iron Curtain. The article argues that Mail Art functioned not only as a communication system but also as an experimental infrastructure through which both artists negotiated gendered roles, authorship, mobility, and participation within predominantly male neo-avant-garde networks.

— Through international networks existing since the 1960s, such as Fluxus and Mail Art, Eastern European artists were not cut off from the artistic production of Western Europe and the United States, despite the Iron Curtain. Both the Fluxus network and the Mail Art network functioned primarily via the postal service. The exchange of letters enabled artists in Eastern Europe (as well as in Latin America and the Caribbean), who were isolated by the Cold War and its restrictions, to establish and maintain international contacts, especially with the so-called West, and to connect with artistic theories and concepts there. For some artists like the Hungarian Endre Tót, the connections allowed them to break out of their self-imposed 'inner emigration,' in Tót's case in Budapest, and exchange ideas with the international avant-garde by mail (Kühn 2020: 19).

— While male artists were numerous and well-connected within the Mail Art communication system, this was less true for the female artists who were active in these neo-avant-garde circles. The situation was different in the performance art scene, where women joined together to form collectives and groups of female artists, creating networks and communities. There are also examples of such associations in Eastern Central Europe, like the group of female artists around Gabriele Stötzer in Erfurt in the GDR (German Democratic

Republic), which later called itself Exterra XX (Wagner/Altmann 2019: 154–155). However, even though there were no such purely female collectives in the field of artist publications (and Mail Art) at that time, there were a number of women who practiced Mail Art and dealt with feminist issues, among other things, and who have not yet been given the same consideration by researchers as their male counterparts. Zanna Gilbert wrote in an essay on Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt in 2016: “Mail art was an artistic and social sphere largely dominated by male artists. [. . .] I have often pondered the lack of women artists. There are a few notable exceptions such as Anna Banana, Irene Dogmatic, Pauline Smith and GG Marx.” (Gilbert 2016: 28)¹⁾ But as was noted in a series of workshops entitled “Women and Mail Art. Gendered Perspectives on Marginal Artistic Practices” in 2024, women and Mail Art were/are not separate entities. Women were indeed important, active participants in the network.²⁾ However, these workshops did not further pursue the interpretation of Mail Art as an articulation of artistic tactics. Here, the term “artistic tactics” is used in the sense of Michel de Certeau, who distinguishes tactics—actions performed by those without institutional power—from strategies, which are organized by power (De Certeau 1984: xix; 34–39). Nevertheless, feminist themes, such as reproductive and invisible labor, family and care work, intimacy and body politics, were identified as valuable areas for future research.

— This article will focus on the activities of two artists, Ewa Partum from Poland and Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt from the former GDR, who, as I argue, are exemplary of implicit feminist work within the Mail Art infrastructures and who touched on precisely these topics in their work and disseminated them. Following Michel de Certeau, their activities can be seen as artistic tactics. Unlike strategy, which is “organized by the postulation of power” (De Certeau 1984: 38), tactics are “determined by the *absence of power*” (ibid.). A tactic “takes advantage on ‘opportunities’ and depends on them [. . .]. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. [. . .] It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse.” (ibid.: 37) Partum and Wolf-Rehfeldt began to distribute their visual poetry in the form of letters or postcards via Mail Art. Ewa Partum even founded a platform and built up a network of her own. I will focus on their roles as multipliers and examine the significance of the different networks and what they offered that was missing elsewhere. To what extent were conventional infrastructures like exhibitions, museums, galleries, art fairs, art magazines, or the established art discourse criticized, questioned, or circumvented? And which new,

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Benjamin Rux also notes that remarkably few women participated in the Mail Art network (Rux 2021: 16).

2)

See Marie Egger: [Conference report on:] Women and Mail Art. Gendered Perspectives on Marginal Artistic Practices (online (Bern/Warsaw), October 11–25, 2024). In: [Arthist.net](https://arthist.net), December 20, 2024. Online: <https://arthist.net/reviews/43612> (accessed November 10, 2025).

alternative spaces were established or opened up through their own newly created networks? Of course, the different geopolitical contexts must be taken into account: each state in the Soviet zone of influence experienced so-called thaw phases, i.e., phases of liberalization and opening towards Western Europe and the United States, in which art and culture were able to develop relatively freely. The alternating phases of either liberalization or tighter restrictions on freedom varied from country to country (Piotrowski 2009: 9). In 1970s Poland, there was a political ‘thaw’ and the cultural climate was relatively open. This meant greater freedom, including international contacts, the possibility of travelling abroad, and the opportunity to experiment artistically and perform in public spaces. It also meant that people could express their opinions to a certain degree. In the GDR, the situation was far more restrictive, and experimental artistic work was only possible on a small and mostly private scale. Artistic activities must therefore be evaluated and categorized differently against the respective political background (Majewska-Güde 2019; Kühn 2020: 24–29).

— Ewa Partum is primarily known for her feminist performances. Here, however, I focus on her visual poetry and the authors’ gallery³⁾ Galeria Adres (Address Gallery), which she founded in Łódź in 1972 and which became a field of experimentation for testing the boundaries of an institution. The first time she performatively pushed institutional limitations was a year earlier, in 1971, in the studio apartment of her first husband, the neo-Dadaist poet Andrzej Partum, who had set up a *Bureau of Poetry* in his tiny Warsaw apartment on the sixth floor of a residential building. This is where Ewa Partum realized her first performative installation, *Poezia Aktywna* (Active Poetry). At the vernissage, she scattered the 24 letters of the alphabet made of white cardboard on the parquet floor, “signs of language and yet without words, signs of an international script that requires no translations” (Stepken 2001: 17). [Fig. 1] As Nabakowski describes it, “the threshold of the space was covered with glue” (Nabakowski 2001: 130). The visitors carried the letters sticking to the soles of their shoes with them. What remained was the literary “poetry of an empty space and the awareness of the linguistic impulses fueling a ‘collective game’” (ibid.) that unfolded according to the rules of uncontrolled exchange—and not according to the prescribed laws of socialism (ibid.).⁴⁾

3)

For the term ‘author’s gallery,’ see Dziamski 1992.

4)

Exchange—especially international exchange—was viewed with suspicion in the socialist state and, if not completely prohibited, it was heavily controlled.



// Figure 1 a/b

Ewa Partum, *Poezia Aktywna* (Active Poetry), performance, Warsaw, 1971, photographic documentation of the performance, black-and-white photograph on paper, 18 × 16,5 cm

Between 1972 and 1977, Ewa Partum then ran Galeria Adres—initially in a cramped four-square-meter space under the stairs of the Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków, short: ZPAP (Association of Visual Artists' Club), in Łódź (Ronduda 2009: 140; Jankowska 2001: 168; Jarecka 2006: 10). Nabakowski writes that the founding of the gallery “was based on a mix of personal and political goals” (Nabakowski 2001: 130). Turning to the international art scene was intended to offer neo-avant-garde art in Poland an experimental stage and overcome the artists' own sense of isolation (ibid.). Partum initiated the gallery's activities by sending out a manifesto, double-sided on a large invitation card, which explained the philosophy and aims of this alternative platform and was mailed in French and Polish to 150 people at home and abroad [Fig. 2]:

[I]t exists as a place / a situation / an opportunity / a range of / information / proposition / documentation / speculation / provocation / and exposition / of every form present in art / and the motifs of its nondisclosure (Ronduda 2009: 142)

The manifesto also invited artists to submit artistic proposals, and in response Partum received letters, projects, photographs, documentations, and books (Jarecka 2006: 8). The gallery primarily presented Conceptual Art (Toniak 2011: 60).⁵⁾ In order to establish contact with Conceptual Artists from all over the world, Partum became intensively involved in Mail Art exchange and collaborated with artists including Krzysztof Wodiczko, Endre Tót, Włodzimir Borowski, Andrzej Kostołowski, Richard Kostelanetz, John Cage, Dick Higgins, Daniel Spoerri, and Wolf Vostell (Ronduda 2009: 142).⁶⁾ As can be seen, there were above all male contacts here. Mail Art, which made up a large part of the gallery's activities, enabled expanding the concept of art and facilitating the selfless exchange of ideas between artists. Over time, the gallery thus gradually developed “its own information system, which included a network of around 3,000 addresses of artists from around the world” (Jankowska 2001: 167). Partum showed documentations of Fluxus events as well as her own Conceptual artworks realized at various locations, but female artists or even feminist positions were not very visible or well represented in her gallery.

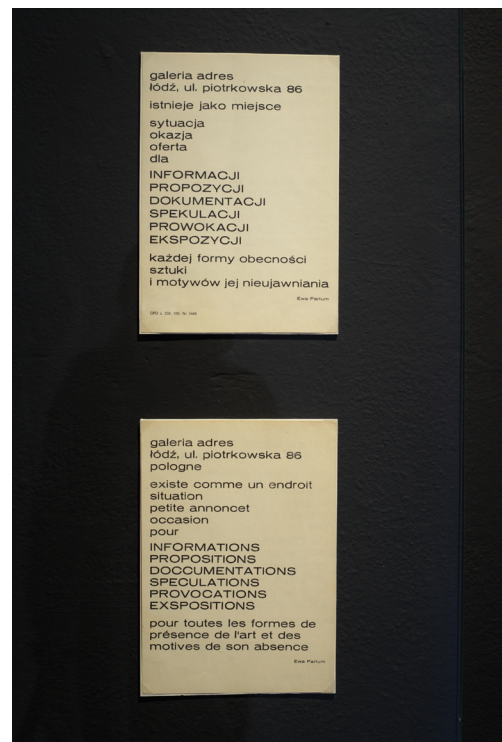
Through the establishment and management of Galeria Adres, Partum proved to be one of the first artists in Poland to practice

5)

When Ewa Partum founded Galeria Adres, she wanted to be first of all a Conceptual artist (Toniak 2011: 6). Toniak refers here to Jakubowska. The website of the Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej in Warsaw features a short film in Polish that presents and documents the activities of Galeria Adres: Ewa Partum, *Adres Gallery Documentation* (1972, 3:24, Polish, 8 mm). Online: <https://archiwum.artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/partum-ewa-dokumentacja-galerii-adres> (accessed June 19, 2026).

6)

Jankowska also mentions Klaus Groh and Jochen Gerz as well as numerous Fluxus artists as contacts of the gallery (Jankowska 2001: 168). Dziamski also mentions Timm Ulrichs (Dziamski 2001: 156).



// Figure 2

Ewa Partum, *Manifest Galeria Adres* (Manifest of Gallery Adres), 1971, offset print on paper, 21 × 14.8 cm

institutional critique (Tatar 2011: 343).⁷⁾ The alternative platform that the gallery offered questioned the way conventional institutions in the field of art operated and explored the exhibitability of alternative (ephemeral) art forms. To explain this in more detail, I would like to refer to one of her performances that Partum staged in her gallery in 1972. The performance was also an exhibition entitled *Obecność* (Presence): the gallery was only open during the presence of the artist, who sat passively on a chair in the empty gallery (Ronduda 2009: 142). This meant that not only the exhibition, but also the gallery itself existed solely in the form of artistic presence, in the form of physical presence. In this way, the show and the institution themselves became concepts and were simultaneously activated only through performativity. The performance was both presentation and gallery, thereby questioning their function and *raison d'être* outside of artistic presence. The exhibition and the institution can also be understood here as heterotopias in the sense of Foucault, who described them as “real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (Foucault 1967/Noble 2009: 62–62). At the moment of Partum’s performance, a non-place emerged, a different place where the usual rules of conventional exhibitions and galleries did not apply. As Foucault noted, heterotopias “always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (ibid.: 66). Access to this place in the work of Partum was gained through the presence of the artist. Dorota Monkiewicz mentions that Partum was interested in overcoming an object’s physical, spatial, and material limitations (Monkiewicz 2015: 57).

— Galeria Adres became increasingly mobile over time. After less than a year, Partum left the Association of Visual Artists’ Club on Piotrkowska Street⁸⁾ and organized the gallery’s subsequent exhibitions at changing locations within the city. In this way, the gallery materialized suddenly and for a short time in different urban and private spaces that were not primarily associated with contemporary art, only to disappear again afterwards (Ronduda 2009: 140ff). From 1973, Partum moved the gallery to her mother’s apartment, where she lived with her daughter Berenika (from 1974, the year her daughter was born). According to Nabakowski, Ewa Partum “sent all the gallery mail from her mother’s place” (Nabakowski 2011:

7)

Jankowska writes that in the 1970s, Galeria Adres, the PERMAFO and Galeria Sztuki Najnowszej in Wrocław and the Remont gallery in Warsaw were among the most important venues for ephemeral, conceptual and other “alternative” art positions (Jankowska 2001: 167).

8)

Ewa Partum says that the ZPAP showed an increasingly intolerant attitude, because she exhibited works that were neither paintings nor sculptures. In 1973, the ZPAP banned her from the exhibition space, forcing her to move the gallery to her own apartment (Jarecka 2006: 8).

130). The card index containing 3,000 addresses was also located here. A map of the world hung on the wall, on which the artist used a felt-tip pen to mark all the places and information points to which she made contact. She drew lines to connect them with the gallery in Łódź, a place in Eastern Central Europe that, from a Eurocentric perspective, was located on the periphery and now suddenly attracted attention. From here, the lines spread globally, creating “a conceptual network, a topography of interconnected lines and paths of communication” (ibid.).⁹⁾ In Foucault’s sense, this map can be read as an “other place” and, at the same time, as a utopia. Foucault describes utopias as “sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces” (Foucault 1967/Noble 2009: 62). By linking artistic positions on the map, Partum created an international exchange that was in flux. Contacts gradually appeared on the map and then existed simultaneously, simulating a connection between all points, even if there never was or will never be direct contact between every single point. Similar maps were created by Fluxus artist Mieko Shiomi. She also used Mail Art to maintain contact with other artists after returning to Japan from the United States in 1965, when she was unable to travel due to care commitments¹⁰⁾ (Friebe 2024: 129). Perhaps the use of the Mail Art infrastructure could even be described as a particularly suitable opportunity for female artists in isolated situations with limited financial resources and time to connect with an artistic community and develop professionally until new opportunities for face-to-face contact arise.

— Nabakowski notes, however, that female artists were in the minority in the exhibitions that Partum curated from 1972 to 1977 (Nabakowski 2011: 130). This is interesting, as she later turned increasingly to feminism and is now considered one of the most important representatives of feminist art in Poland in the 1970s. Questions addressing the role of women (and female artists) in society and their limited scope for action already appeared in her early work. **[Fig. 3]** An action recorded as a film in 1973 shows her individually inserting the letters “L.o.v.e.” into an envelope, then writing in English on it: “I am happy when I make love to the envelope,” and finally stamping the back of the envelope with her red lips. A multilayered response to the artist and father of her soon-to-be-born daughter Berenika, the Hungarian

9)

Unfortunately, two-thirds of the gallery archive were lost during a move from Łódź to Warsaw, while about one-third has been preserved (Tieze 2024: 17).

10)

An example of this group of works is *Spatial Poem No. 1* (1965).



// Figure 3

Ewa Partum, *Poem by Ewa LOVE*, 1972, ink and lipstick print on paper, 15.5 × 12.5 cm

Conceptual artist Endre Tót, who had asked “when she would speak of love.”¹¹⁾ The artist explained that she and Tót hardly had any common linguistic ground: “His command of English was pretty poor—and mine was just as limited.” (Nabakowski 2011: 117) In her performances, Partum was particularly interested in symbols that were considered distinctly feminine, such as high heels and red lipstick. In an interview with Dorota Jarecka in 2006, Partum talks about the omnipresence of red lipstick in the 1970s: “In the 1970s, red lipstick became fashionable. And it left traces everywhere: on the coffee cup, on the spoon, on the napkin after wiping the lips. I noticed that I was leaving these traces myself.”¹²⁾ (Jarecka 2006: 11) The artist thus embarked on a search for traces of (a presumed feminine or female) identity, which later culminated in expressive feminist performances, for example, *Zmiana. Mój problem jest problemem kobiety* (*Change. My Problem Is a Problem of a Woman*) (1979), *Samoidentyfikacja* (*Self-Identification*) (1980)¹³⁾, *Kobiety, małżeństwo jest przeciwko wam!* (*Women, marriage is against you!*) (1980), or *Pirouette* (1984).

—As mentioned above, Partum realized her first performative installation at her husband’s *Bureau of Poetry* and later made use of the ZPAP’s infrastructure. Yet she remained mobile while establishing Galeria Adres. Like many artists in Central Eastern Europe, she used private places to create her art, thereby circumventing or challenging the conventions of the (state-funded) established art world in the process. Similarly, in the GDR, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt began working more intensively with Mail Art. Initially introduced by her husband Robert Rehfeldt, she used the Mail Art network for her own artistic purposes.

—Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt was born in Wurzen in Saxony in 1932. After training as an industrial clerk, she moved to East Berlin in 1950, where she met the artist Robert Rehfeldt in 1954 and married him the following year. Wolf-Rehfeldt worked for the exhibitions department at the Akademie der Künste (Academy of the Arts), made drawings in her spare time, and was interested in semiotics and concrete poetry (Reinhardt 2019: 121). [Fig. 4] A few years later, she began making her typewriter graphics and actively participated in the Mail Art network from 1974 onward (Rux 2021: 16). Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt and Robert Rehfeldt founded a studio-archive on Mendelstraße in the East Berlin district of Pankow, which became a hub for the local and international art scene from the 1970s to the 1990s. The couple’s apart-

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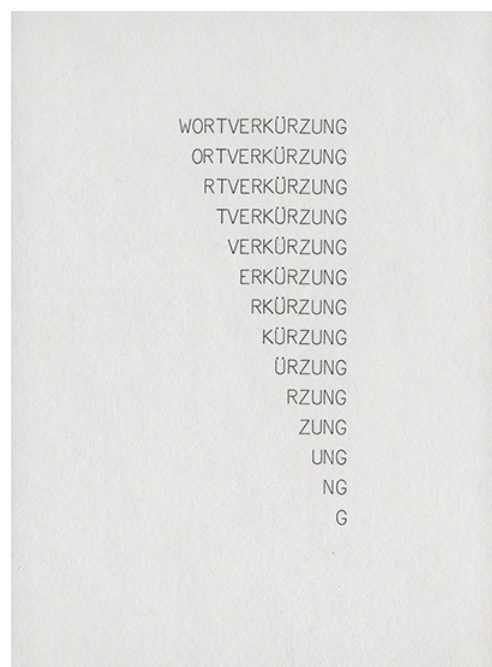
Nabakowski quotes Endre Tót here, but does not give a precise source. This statement probably comes from a conversation with Ewa Partum. The quotation only appears in the German version of the text. Translation by the author (Nabakowski 2011: 117).

12)

Quote by Ewa Partum. Translation by the author.

13)

A description of “Samoidentyfikacja” can be found here, for example: Maria Engelskirchen / Corinna Kühn (2021), *Flexen in der Stadt*, in: Lillian Haberer / Karina Nimmerfall (eds.), *Movement/Mouvement. Festschrift für Prof. Dr. Ursula Frohne*, Munich, 2021, pp. 165–171.



// Figure 4

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, *Wortverkürzung* (Wörter series), mid 1970s, original typewriting, 10.5 × 15 cm

ment and the studio both served as meeting points for a small, lively scene of East German artists, moving back and forth between the official and unofficial art world of the GDR, as well as the first stop for many international artists who traveled to East Berlin (Reinhardt 2019: 121). When Wolf-Rehfeldt began participating in the Mail Art network, she realized that her small-format works were easy to send. Gradually, she became an active part of the network, and her works traveled the world as postcards. Mail Art offered scope for the display of art, for exchange and personal correspondence. [Fig. 5] In the work *To / From* (1974), she found a telling image. [Fig. 6 a/b] Form and message merge on the front and back of the envelope. Who is the sender, who is the recipient? Like many other Mail Artists, she used the English language to be internationally understood. In 1978, she was accepted as a full member of the Verband Bildender Künstler der DDR (Association of Visual Artists of the GDR), which allowed her to accept public commissions and to print or reproduce a limited number of “miniature graphic” (Reinhardt 2021: 120) works (*Kleingrafik*). Her so-called *Typewritings* were created in the 1970s and 1980s until the fall of communism in 1989 and belong to her best-known works. [Fig. 7] In the context of Mail Art, she concentrated on maintaining contact with the world outside the GDR. After reunification, she no longer saw the need to make art herself¹⁴⁾ (Chert 2016: 10).

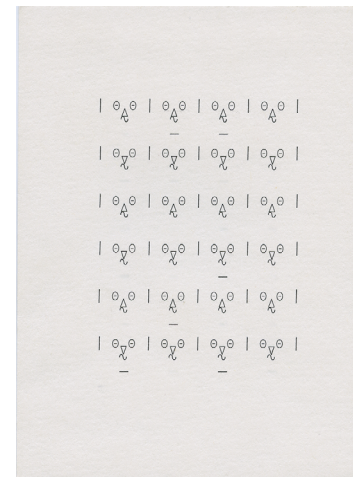
— In her works, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt explores “the limits of a closed system of predefined signs and meanings. The miniscule constructs of typed letters concretize space on a paper page. Indeed, they bring this space into being in the first place” (Reinhardt 2021: 25), as Kathleen Reinhardt describes it. [Fig. 8] In addition to individual sheets, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt usually worked in series in which an idea once found was varied and further pursued, for example, *Figurationen* or *Zeichenräume* (Rux 2021: 12). [Fig. 9] Jennifer Chert, the co-owner of the gallery ChertLüdde in Berlin who represents Wolf-Rehfeldt, recounts that Wolf-Rehfeldt often used “carbon copy paper in order to produce more copies of the original sample. She then made zincographic copies (zinc lithographs) of the motifs (never more than 50 copies of each, the maximum she was allowed to produce in the GDR)” (Chert 2016: 9),¹⁵⁾ mostly A4 to A6 (Spieker 2021: 32). However, the formats were always small enough to be sent by mail and distributed in the Mail Art network. She also began to produce her own printing stamps, worked with collages, screen prints, photocopies, and participated in Mail Art collaborations. For example, she sent sheets of paper “to other artists which, upon her request, would be ‘interfered’ with and sent

14)

Wolf-Rehfeldt recounts this very impressively in the short film produced in 2015 by the publishing house Lutz Wohlrab and Jennifer Chert: “Zeichen aus Zeichen. Ein Filmportrait über Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt” (2015, directed by Jennifer Chert, 13 min.); online: <https://vimeo.com/764516478> (accessed June 19, 2026).

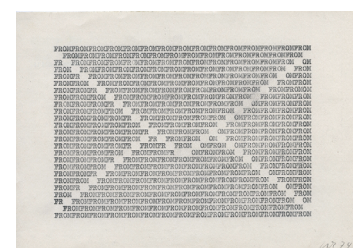
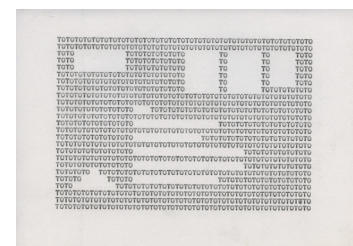
15)

Spieker writes that 100 copies were allowed—Rux and James also state 50 copies (Spieker 2021: 33; Rux 2021: 16; James 2022: 223).



// Figure 5

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, *Faces*, mid 1970s, original typewriting, 15 × 10.5 cm



// Figure 6 a/b

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, *To / From*, 1974, carbon copies of typewriting, two parts, 14 × 21 cm

back to her” (Chert 2016: 9–10).¹⁶⁾ Wolf-Rehfeldt’s *Zeichenräume* (Sign rooms) can also be viewed here as utopian spaces. The rooms, made up of typewritten signs, open up spaces for thought and are meeting places for the exchange of ideas that travel around the world, almost like a futuristic time capsule. Sarah E. James writes: “If the internationalism of concrete poetry was well matched with the borderless nature of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s and Rehfeldt’s Contart, the other distinctive characteristics of concrete poetry so central to Wolf-Rehfeldt’s practice were not shared by her husband’s work, or by the majority of the mail artists with whom they corresponded. As her notes make abundantly clear, Wolf-Rehfeldt was unique in the GDR in self-consciously aligning her practice with mail art, concrete art and poetry, and also conceptual art.” (James 2022: 251)

As Zanna Gilbert notes, typists were almost invariably young women at the time and becoming one was a way of earning an independent income. She refers to the media theorist Friedrich Kittler, who emphasizes the gendered nature of the typewriter: “He remarks that before its invention, tissue was woven by women and pens were the intellectual instruments of men, touching on the relationship between textile and text.” (Gilbert 2016: 20) Rux also notes that there is a certain irony in the fact that Wolf-Rehfeldt achieved her artistic and emancipatory breakthrough employing this medium, which was disproportionately used by women in their role as “typists” (Rux 2021: 12). As James reports, “by the 1970s, 99.8 per cent of all typist-stenographers were women” (James 2022: 289). According to Gilbert, a typewriter also stands “between the manual age and the age of mass reproduction. [...] [It] is an autonomous technology that needs no outside intervention to complete a project.” (Gilbert 2016: 29)

Wolf-Rehfeldt’s inspiration to develop her own understanding of visual poetry came by post or from Poland and the former Czechoslovakia, where she was able to travel. In the 1970s, she sent works to an art symposium in Wrocław,¹⁷⁾ which dealt with language and the linguistic (Rux 2021: 12) and which, in retrospect, is regarded as the center and starting point of Conceptual Art in Poland. In 1975, she took part in a Mail Art exhibition in Warsaw with Robert Rehfeldt. Several years earlier, in Prague in 1967, she had met Jiří Kolář and Jiří Valoch, among others, had seen their works and kept in touch (Gilbert 2016: 22–3). Wolf-Rehfeldt said: “I was as ambitious as a spider in a web, trying to spin my threads to every place on earth.”¹⁸⁾ (Gilbert 2016: 28; Röder 1996: 133) In this way, despite the Iron Curtain, she reached Poland, Canada, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the United States, Mexico, Czechoslovakia,

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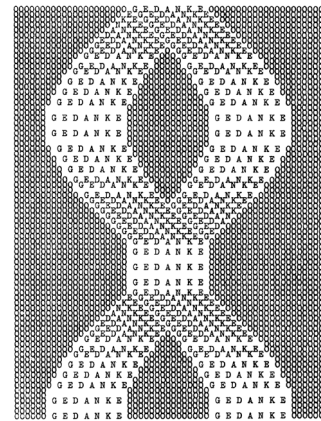
This practice was very common in the Mail Art scene. See, for example, the questionnaires by Endre Tót (Kühn 2020: 126).

17)

Symposium Plastyczne Wrocław '70 / Wrocław Art Symposium '70

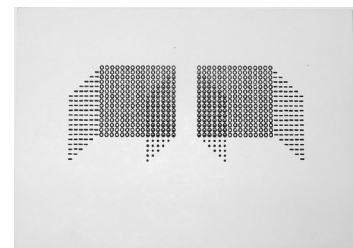
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Gilbert after Röder 1996, p. 133.



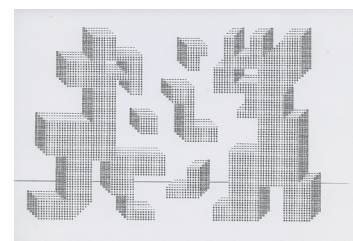
// Figure 7

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, *Gedankenverbindung* (Connection of thoughts), 1976, zincography, 10 x 15 cm



// Figure 8

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, *Zeichenräume* (cases and cages), 1970s, zincography, 10.5 x 14.5 cm



// Figure 9

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, *Concrete Men in Concrete Talk*, late 1980s, photocopy on paper, 15 x 20 cm

Bulgaria, Denmark, Sweden, El Salvador, Yugoslavia, Venezuela, Belgium, and Brazil, and had contact with Horacio Zabala, Paweł Petasz, César Espinosa, Manuel Marín, David Zack, Edgardo Antonio Vigo, Guillermo Deisler, Anna Banana, Dick Higgins, Jiří Valoch, among others (Gilbert 2016: 29).

— Gilbert sees Mail Art in Eastern Europe as an antidote to cultural isolation. Piotr Piotrowski notes that “[t]he awareness that the police was intercepting and reading letters and postcards, and copying, archiving them, and using them for further infiltration, sometimes caused self-censorship” (Piotrowski 2009: 269). Robert Rehfeldt, for example, inspected the files after reunification and his “suspicions that his mail was monitored were [. . .] confirmed: photographs of his intercepted mail were found in the State Security (*Stasi*) files” (Gilbert 2016: 30). Kornelia Röder and Sarah E. James also report that the *Stasi* had a big Mail Art “collection” (Röder 2023: 96; James 2022: 279). “Many postcards were retained and never reached their recipients,” Röder explained in an interview (Röder 2023: 96). And James points out that the *Stasi* not only confiscated works, but also copied the originals before resealing the envelopes and delivering them to their intended recipients. In some cases, they even “interfered in works, so as to sabotage friendships and relationships” (James 2022: 279). As Röder specifies, “Mail Artists developed creative strategies and played a game of hide-and-seek with the secret services” (Röder 2023: 97). Wolf-Rehfeldt remembers: “At the beginning I was very cautious, I sometimes distributed my works in part in several mailboxes, because I thought that it would be conspicuous if a lot of objects were found in one mailbox. But it turned out somebody at the post office was employed to reunite the posted Mail Art and control it.” (Gilbert 2016: 30)¹⁹⁾ According to Gilbert, the state can be seen as an unwitting carrier of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s freedom of expression. Thus, the “usual role of controlling the fluxes and flows of information” (ibid.) was reversed. In an interview, Wolf-Rehfeldt explains that Mail Art enabled her to “travel” the world in her imagination: “[Mail Art] was a kind of safety valve, and, too, a certain satisfaction. I was never able to travel, but I was glad that I had contacts throughout the world that all the others who were allowed to travel sometimes didn’t have.” (ibid)²⁰⁾ In another interview, she states that she never really expected an answer. Some would say that she did not create Mail Art, as Mail Art always requires a response from the recipient. However, this was not always the case with Wolf-Rehfeldt, and in this instance, her postcards with visual poetry could also be described as “Mail Outs.” However, the artist simply had a broader understanding of

19)

Gilbert after Röder 1996, p. 86.

20)

Gilbert after Röder 1996, p. 90.

it: “For me, mail art can be anything. [. . .] I wanted to travel when I was young, but we couldn’t do that in the GDR, so mail art was a substitute. When I started, I didn’t distinguish between originals and copies. I also sent out originals. [. . .] If I sent a piece of mail art, I didn’t really want an answer.” (Gilbert/Reinhardt 2021: 101) Wolf-Rehfeldt continues: “At first I sent the originals of the typewritings. Then I started making a carbon copy so that I knew what I had sent away. And then printing became very important.” (ibid.: 113) Her relationship with the original therefore changed over time. Despite the adverse circumstances, Wolf-Rehfeldt was a convinced socialist who had made a conscious decision to remain in the East—even if she sometimes criticized the socialism that currently existed and mourned the utopian project of socialism and its early potential (James 2022: 279–80).

— Wolf-Rehfeldt subscribed to the democratic understanding of art that was widespread in the network. She said that “potentially everyone is capable of producing something that could be called art.” (Chert 2016: 30) In her text *Signs Fiction* from around 1972 she writes: “The most positive peculiarity of this type of art may be the chance to take up any problem of interest by any person in question immediately (as far as a typewriter is at hand).” (ibid.: 14) And she goes even further by issuing a call to action: “‘Type your own art’ is my special invitation to people wanting to express themselves in an artistic mode for the purpose of becoming, living and altering facts more consciously.” (ibid.)²¹ [Fig. 10]

The idea that everyone is an artist circulated in the Mail Art network and several artists referred directly to Joseph Beuys. Robert Rehfeldt, for example, produced an artist’s stamp with the inscription: *Jeder Mensch ist ein Künstler. „Mach mit!“* (Everyone is an artist. “Join in!”).²²

Wolf-Rehfeldt also made a reference to Beuys: one of her best-known sheets, *Homage to Joseph Beuys* (n.d.), which was often sent as a postcard, shows Beuys’ famous hat. [Fig. 11]

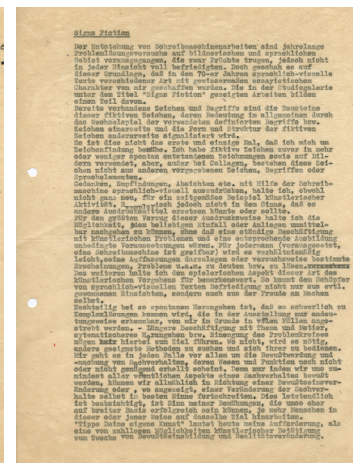
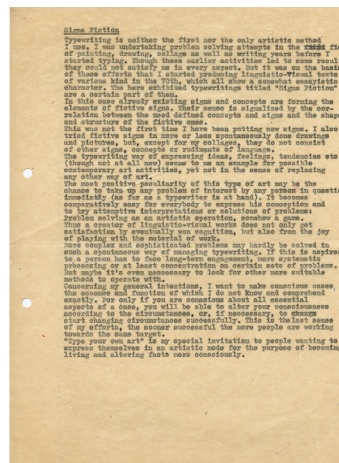
— Although I was only able to discuss the activities of two female artists in the Mail Art network briefly, I demonstrated the following: Partum and Wolf-Rehfeldt did more than just use the network to communicate and expand their contacts. Their early activities in and with the network can be understood as attempts to make the best possible use of existing infrastructures, to strengthen their role

21)

Wolf-Rehfeldt’s German version differs slightly from the English version. It seems as if she did not translate the two versions 1:1, but made two versions. The German version reads as follows: “For anyone (provided a typewriter is at hand) it becomes relatively easy to express one’s views or to try to interpret or solve certain phenomena, problems, etc.” And continues: “‘Type your own art’ is my invitation today, as one of countless possibilities of artistic activity for the purpose of raising awareness and changing reality.” See the text *Signs Fiction* by Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, English and German version (Chert 2016: 14–15).

22)

Exhibition catalog. Joseph Beuys und die Mail Art in der DDR. Stiftung Museum Schloss Moyland Bedburg-Hau, 2019/20. Stiftung Museum Schloss Moyland, Sammlung van der Grinten, Joseph-Beuys-Archiv des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (eds.), Bedburg-Hau, Berlin, Wohlrab.



// Figure 10 a/b

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, *Signs Fiction* (Artist’s Text English and German), around 1972, carbon copy of typewriting text, German and English translation, 30 x 20 cm

as female artists within otherwise predominantly male-oriented surroundings, to change, circumvent, and subvert structures imposed by socialist cultural policies from within, and to question the institution as such. Partum built her own structure within a structure, in which action and communication were central and in which she sent out her first feminist signals. Karolina Majewska-Güde refers to these as “infrastructures-in-the-making” (Majewska-Güde 2021: 82), a term coined by Irit Rogoff.²³⁾ Majewska-Güde states that Partum’s and Rehfeldt’s infrastructures were “constituted through conversations and exchanges of ideas and materials that became more important for the process of art production than the actual physical parameters, such as venues or technical support” (ibid.). As well as the real spaces that the two artists explored and activated, they also claimed new (utopian) spaces within visual and concrete poetry. However, neither Partum nor Wolf-Rehfeldt formed communication systems exclusively with other female artists or founded female artists’ groups, but they did reflect on and accentuate the gendered role of the artist to varying degrees in their work. As mentioned above, within the Mail Art network, networking between women only took place on the fringes. The reasons for this are still to be investigated; perhaps we simply do not yet know enough about what actually took place. However, the network did disseminate the ideas of women, making them accessible worldwide. The Mail Art network can perhaps be seen as a catalyst that multiplied and thus reinforced these statements. The typewritten sheets or L.o.v.e. letters may be small and inconspicuous, but today they can be found in artists’ archives all over the world. It is interesting to observe the current reception of the two artists. While their husbands were more successful at the beginning of their careers and opened up opportunities for their partners, today the focus is on the works of Ewa Partum and Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt. Partum won the Lovis Corinth Prize in 2024, and Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt won the Hannah Höch Prize in 2022. Both awards were accompanied by major solo exhibitions.²⁴⁾ Fortunately there is a general growing interest in female artists within the Mail Art network—which has to be closely and critically watched.

23)

Majewska-Güde applies Irit Rogoff’s theories on “infrastructure” very convincingly to the work of Ewa Partum (Majewska-Güde 2021).

24)

Links: <https://www.kunstforum.net/ausstellungen/rueckblick/ewa-partum-lovis-corinth-preis-2024>; <https://www.smb.museum/ausstellungen/detail/hannah-hoech-preis-2022> (accessed May 19, 2025).



// Figure 11

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, *Homage to Joseph Beuys*, original typewriting, 15 x 10.5 cm

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