

## **RWR CHAPTER 5 MAIL ART - CREATIVE EXCHANGE WORLDWIDE LONG BEFORE EMAIL, ZOOM & CO**

### **Siri-Voice**

You are being connected to a conference call.

### **Female presenter**

Can you remember the last time you got a letter? I'm talking about *real* letters, personal ones? From lovers, friends, casual travel acquaintances, soul mates...? Maybe even perfumed or sealed with a lipstick kiss?

### **Siri-Voice**

This meeting is being recorded.

### **Original interview sound Kornelia Röder**

*Ruth once told me that in the 1980s she got a whole wheelbarrow full of letters every day from all over the world.*

### **Siri-Voice**

This comment on mail art is from call participant Kornelia Röder@State Museum Schwerin.

### **Female presenter**

But you mustn't think of the huge amount of post for Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt as love letters or fan mail. It was more like office mail between particularly open-minded and creative co-artists around the world, a kind of mail correspondence art.

### **Siri-Voice**

You've got mail.

### **Original interview sound Kornelia Röder**

*Mail art is an interesting phenomenon that emerged in the 1960s and led, above all in the 1970s, to the creation of a network that used the international postal system, allowing creative artists to interact and exchange ideas. This was the whole idea, to create an autonomous communication system.*

### **Female presenter**

I hope you don't get the impression there were some kind of artistically-inclined radicals sending letter bombs. No, even if mail art as such was political...

### **Male Commentator**

*"Art is what you create - despite everything!"*

### **Female presenter**

...the most important thing was to have fun doing it, enjoying the exchange of typed, drawn, collaged and stamped art.

### **Male Commentator**

Subversive, playful and funny.

### **Female presenter**

Oh, I'll send you an original voice message from Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt herself.

### **Original archive sound Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt**

*It wasn't commercial and everyone could be part of it, artist or not. And it was a global thing... Yes, you could get to see things that you usually didn't see in East Germany.*

**Male Commentator**

The gate to the world. Please please affix correct postage.

**Female presenter**

If you think that artistic chain letters are a woman's domain because they're handmade, think again! Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt was one of the few female typists on the scene. The mail art pioneer in East Germany was, of course, also a man. Ruth's husband, Robert.

**Original archive sound Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt**

*When I started these typewritings, that's what I usually call them, I didn't have mail art in mind. I didn't even really know about it. But almost at the same time, Robert started creating mail art. And he would sometimes put a little something of mine in it. In some of them.*

**Male Commentator**

*"All artists are welcome!"*

**Original interview sound Kornelia Röder**

*I would like to bring to mind the exhibition that Ruth and Robert Rehfeldt put on in Warsaw. People were invited to send their contributions directly to this palace of culture and science. And the invitations were sent via the network structures, which is also what distinguishes mail art.*

**Female presenter**

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt best-known slogan is: *"I wanted to be like a spider in a web, spinning my threads to reach every corner of the world."*

**Male Commentator**

Dear Ruth, warmest greetings from Poland from your colleague: Pawel Petasz.

**Original interview sound Kornelia Röder**

*In fact, Eastern Europe, that is Eastern European mail artists, were very keen to exchange ideas with the West. Above all, a lot of politically ambitious stuff came from East Germany. It was all about freedom of opinion (which didn't exist), freedom of the press, freedom to travel and so on.*

**Siri-Voice**

Mail was not delivered. The consignment violates the legal provisions of East Germany.

**Female presenter & Male Commentator**

Which reminds me of a joke: A citizen of East Germany complains angrily to the post office: "They want to take my phone away. I want to know why!" Answer:

"Because you criticised the Stasi."

"But how?"

"You claimed in telephone conversations that the Stasi was tapping your phone."

**Original archive sound Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt**

*I tried to view the documents. There were seven people watching us. One was someone I didn't know personally, a colleague of a befriended writer. And I've already forgotten the other ones.*

**Siri-Voice**

Ensure secure email encryption. Today!

**Female presenter**

Not now. Is there anything else that comes to mind, Ms Röder?

**Original interview sound Kornelia Röder**

*I once had the great pleasure of interviewing two mail artists from the Soviet Union. They sent 5 envelopes, or maybe it was 15, in the hope that one of them would arrive. And I have another nice little anecdote: my cherished Polish mail artist, Pawel Petasz, always sewed up his letters, making them more difficult to open, unlike standard letters you could open with steam.*

**Male Commentator**

*"With your art, be like sand in the gears!"*

**Female presenter**

Of course, the A5 format grassroots messages were not only exchanged between the socialist brother states. Almost all national, stylistic, linguistic and cultural borders were overcome by mail art.

**Siri-Voice**

Dear Ruth, we denken aan je in Nederland.

**Original archive sound Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt**

*That way you had connections almost all over the world. And you got to know some of them, a Dutchman, Chess Franke was his name - he even came to visit a couple of times. Clemente Padin from Uruguay and Chuck Staeg from Canada and someone from the US.*

**Siri-Voice**

You have mail.

**Male Voice Over Original Quote**

From Clemente Padin from Uruguay

*"I first heard of Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt in 1980, when an experimental poet and editor sent me a packet of photocopies of appeals for my release addressed to the Uruguayan dictatorship. I got art postcards from Ruth a few times with brilliant visual poems".*

**Siri-Voice**

You have received a poem!

**Male Commentator**

From Ruth

**Female presenter**

*Do*

*Done*

*Much done*

*Done much too much*

*Much too much not done*

*If I had done*

**Siri-Voice**

Permissible number of characters exceeded!

**Female presenter**

Bother!

**Original Sound Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt**

*After the fall of the wall I didn't want to do any more mail art. I think that's also when mail art largely stopped. Because new techniques had come along.*

**Siri-Voice**

Warning: Mails older than 10 days are automatically deleted.

**Female presenter**

And a last question for Kornelia Röder: But just because gmxgoogleoutlookandco have been dominating our daily digital mail life since the 90s doesn't mean that mail art is really dead, does it?

**Original interview sound Kornelia Röder**

*I see some potential for new art forms to develop that are also inspired by mail art. Unfortunately, we're seeing many developments in politics right now that are restricting the ability of the opposition to express itself. And mail art was also about creating an autonomous communication system, wasn't it? Every postcard that was sent expanded the network. And I think that's something we'll be looking at more closely in the future.*

**Male Commentator**

Yes - net art, webcomics, webart, hacktivism or just post-internet.

**Female presenter**

And Ruth?

**Male Commentator**

Naturally, she can't resist it completely either.

**Siri-Voice**

Listen to the attached audio file from David Horvitz's email.

**Original Sound David Horvitz**

*I think it was around 2014 when my wife sent me to Ruth's house in Pankow to look up mail art work in her archive. And met Ruth, put on the sandals of Robert as I walked around the house and it all started from there.*

**Female presenter**

So you see, a few years ago Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt couldn't resist and exchanged ideas with this Californian artist who is only half her age. She paid homage to mail art again. Not digital, but analogue.

**Male Commentator**

*"For Ruth - the sky in LA.*

*I sent you the sea and it travels through other peoples hands".*

**Female presenter**

And Ruth is making new post stamps again: Now is always. And always over.