



Art in Our Last Days
the Essential Questions of Life

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Indelible Defiance

Rubberstamp Artists in Brazil and Latino America

1965-1990

By Chuck Welch

FIAT MONEY

HOJE A ARTE É ESTE COMUNICADO
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TODAY ART IS THIS COMMUNICATED
paulo bruscky

"It is always the same,

those who pretend to

own culture will always try to impose

their own method."

Paulo Bruscky

SENT VIA

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Indelible Defiance

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- Paulo Bruscky

Rubberstamps are marks of defiance - indelible impressions made permanent, imperishable, and memorable against those who rule by tyranny and deceit. Appearing on countless administrative forms, rubberstamps in Latin America were the common, everyday work of bureaucrats and postal workers. But in the hands of Latino American artists, these same stamps became uncommon weapons with an impact that splintered and shattered expectations. Rubberstamp activities by Latino Americans were defiantly aimed against cultural and political targets. The dire consequences were either imprisonment, execution, or exile.

Brazilian rubberstamp artists were very often first generation mail art pioneers. Many of these artists used rubberstamps in visual poetry that was distributed in early mail art assembling zines¹ such as Pawel Petasz' *Commonpress*, a series of over 50 thematic editions organized by Petasz from his home in Elblag, Poland. Another notable assembling zine, *UniVERSE* was published by the exiled Chilean mail artist, Guillermo Deisler. Both publications were organized and circulated by mail artists living within Eastern Bloc countries during the 70s and 80s. Brazilian mail artist, Paulo Bruscky travelled to meet Deisler and also the influential designer and mail artist, Robert Rehfeldt who was mailing art from East Berlin where the Stassi police, unbeknownst to Rehfeldt, kept an extensive ongoing file of his international art activities.

Curiously, Robert Rehfeldt, Pawel Petasz and Paulo Bruscky were all suspected of activities considered dangerous to the state and each had visitations by agents.² But the symbolic nature of mail art exchanges were far beyond the ability of state censors to understand or control. Certainly mail art - rubberstamp coding was indecipherable to censors, but to mail artists nothing is seen on the surface for what it IS because everything stands for something else. This visual "coding," somewhat akin to samizdat art, is the artist's arsenal; a creative underground cache constantly in movement around the world.

¹Assembling zines were gathered collections of printed matter submitted by artists to a central editor who determined specific or general themes to act upon. Contributions by artists were assembled and issued in different forms; stapled, loose leaf, bound, folio, or boxed. Edition numbers varied but were often determined by the number of participating artists. Copies were usually issued free in return for submitted artwork, an "understanding" that became a form of "unwritten open contract" or "code of ethics" among mail artists. The origin of assembling zines can be traced in 1920 to the Dadaists and Tristan Tzara's *Dadaglobe*, a project that was only partially "assembled" but never completed or issued. In 1970, New York artist, writer, and composer, Richard Kostelanetz in collaboration with Henry Korn, issued *Assembling* which became a prototype for zine assemblings that followed.

² There are two fascinating accounts of police surveillance of mail artists, one which appears in the essay, "Mail Art in Poland" by Pawel Petasz. It can be found in Chapter 12 of Chuck Welch's *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*, University of Calgary Press, 1995. The other more current research (2016) was part of a doctoral dissertation by Theis Valløe Madsen, *Ants in the Archive: Cataloguing Mogens Otto Nielsen's Mail Art Archive*, page 2.

Rubberstamps could be found, purchased or carved by artists in affordable, multiple editions. Old, collectible “workhorse” stamps were often used and detoured for other purposes. Artists’ messages, logos and slogans were stamped on postcards, copier art, and artists’ books. Conceptual poems were created with rubberstamp alphabet sets, postage stamps were rubberized, as were rubberstamp cancellation marks known as “matasellos” or “stampkillers”,³ of which very little has been written outside of postage stamp collecting.

Collecting matasellos can be a challenging endeavor and South American postal clerks who make them don’t always cooperate with customers, especially mail artists. Official rubber stamped postal cancellation marks include numbered coding enabling identification of envelopes or parcels and how they will be discharged into the mailstream. Interfering with normal postal protocol can be a risky business. When Paulo Bruscky, Fálves Silva, L.F. Duch, Edgardo Antonio Vigo, and Graciela G. Marx collaborated in a conceptual project involving rubberstamp cancellation of the author’s unofficial postage stamps, a series of fascinating events occurred. The project, “Mail Art Ambassadors,” successfully demonstrated how mail art networking blurred the boundaries of established bureaucracy. It also embraced a multi-media initiative combining rubberstamping, artist made postage stamps, book art, hand papermaking, intaglio printing, and correspondence art.⁴ Clearly, this rubberstamp art project was created as a complex networking concept project that dodged any identifiable art style or concept attributed to any specific local, regional or nationalistic influence.

In Brazil and elsewhere, rubberstamp art was the product of a Latino counterculture linked to a global, cross-cultural and multi-cultural network. During the 1960s and 70s, borders between experimental new media were still fluid as unmarked boundaries. Mail art, rubberstamping, artists’ books, visual poetry, and assembling zines remained undefined during those decades and this enabled collaborative distribution and communication. In her essay, “Artists’ Books from Latin America”, Martha Hellion writes, “Interaction between the textual and the visual had no limits”.⁵ Although Brazilian artists were informed by a mail art global counter-culture, curators have distinguished Brazilian art works as differing from that of other cultures. Doing so, however, is like seeing and processing creativity with one eye. The result is a flattened out perspective that simplifies and objectifies mail art communication which is otherwise conceptually complex. Mail art rubberstamping never developed or lived on a flat planet.

³ Wally Darnell in a letter to Chuck Welch. June 11, 1984, File 271. Annotated Letters from the Eternal Network Mail Art Archive and Library of Chuck Welch.

⁴ In 1984, Wally Darnell, in collaboration with the author, visited six Latino American mail artists in a conceptual project that began May 15, 1984 in Recife, Brazil. The trip entailed the cancellation of handmade paper artistamps created for Welch’s Mail Art Ambassadors Stamp Album, now in the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles <<http://www.worldcat.org/title/mail-art-ambassadors-stamp-album/oclc/82594450>>

⁵ Martha Hellion. “Artist’s Books from Latin America”. <<https://www.printedmatter.org/tables/26>> p1.

Claudia Calirman, author of *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship* writes that Brazilian art was not derived or replicated from North American or European counterparts, but “highly individualistic, local responses to the dilemmas imposed by the military dictatorship”.⁶ In this context, Brazilian art is inextricable from its place of origin, but Brazilian and Latino American mail art is also informed by the works of other international mail artists in thematic mail art exhibitions and projects of the 1970s and 80s. Art Historians have yet to search the personal mail art archives of North American, European, or Asian artists for mapping correspondence built upon cross-cultural collaboration. When the act of seeing and creating was articulated between two or more artists on two continents, a network language evolved.

Latino American mail artists were among the first to go public during the 1970s with international cross-cultural exhibitions. Political dissent reached the public eye primarily by way of alternative public spaces. Brazilian art institutions remained indifferent to mail art exhibitions, rubberstamping, visual poetry, mail art project documents, and artists’ book exchanges. Why this attitude prevailed in Brazil and Latino America is fundamental towards understanding that an adversarial relationship existed between mail artists in opposition to the art market, academia, and collectors. Elena Shtromberg writes that museums, galleries, critics, dominant art magazines and art institutions were looked upon as barriers separating art from life. Mail artists were “hostile to the entire status quo that might seem indispensable to the artistic career” and mail artists “began to organize themselves to face an entirely diverse situation, setting up their own associations, their own exchanges, their own publications and selecting the locations for their exhibitions. They became economically independent from the centralizing mechanisms of art”.⁷

Artists’ zines, especially assemblings, attacked the power elite in the 1970s, a time ruled by the “editorial/industrial complex”, a phrase used by NYC avantgarde publisher, Richard Kostelanetz⁸. Mail artists had their own set of attitudes shaped by fear and mistrust of authority. The curatorial work of the late Brazilian mail artist and art activist, Walter Zanini bridged gaps of misunderstanding between the counterculture and art establishment. In doing so, he succeeded in redefining contemporary Brazilian Art.

Walter Zanini and fellow Brazilian mail artist, curator, Julio Plaza, organized three important Sao Paulo exhibitions from 1974-1981 in which rubberstamps surfaced as part of the “art underground - Prospective ’74, Poeticas Visuais (1976), and the 16th Bienal de Sao Paulo (1981). All three exhibitions displayed “postal art” including rubberstamp art. In the first exhibition, Prospective ’74, Zanini placed postal art in a module he titled, “Arte Postal: Comunicación Marginal”. Zanini also “welcomed installation, photography, and postal art projects from different parts of Brazil and the world, and he organized shows and

⁶ An Xiao An in a book review of *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship* by Claudia Calirman. <<https://hyperallergic.com/62893/brazilian-art-under-dictatorship/>>

⁷ Elena Shtromberg. *Art Systems: Brazil & the 1970s*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016. p250.

⁸ Steven Perkins. “Assembling Magazines (a.k.a. Compilations.” <<http://www.zinebook.com/resource/perkins/perkins6.html>>

debates around the acquired material”⁹. Mail artist, Leonhard Frank Duch, a rubberstamp artist from Recife, and Mexican ex-patriot Ulises Carrión were selected by Zanini to be featured speakers at the 16th Bienal de Sao Paulo. In one of the Bienal’s lecture presentations, Duch mailed a xerox photograph of himself with Carrión and Zanini addressing the audience in front of a blackboard.¹⁰ Duch also sent a rubberstamped xerox of his presentation of slides at the Bienal when he was describing “The localization of the mail art exhibition.”¹¹ Duch wrote to the author in a letter dated four days before the Bienal closed:

I haven’t a transcript of my talk at the Bienal, but I can tell you what I said. I spoke about my experiences since 1975 when our military dictatorship was very stupid and I was censored as a subversive element. Ridiculous and dangerous. Mail Art is the most revolutionary art moment in all the history of art. I explained how I had my first contacts, about my emotions making mail art”.¹²

In the introduction to XVI Bienal Arte Postal de Sao Paulo, Walter Zanini’s opening comments described the exhibited mail art as covering “an extremely vast range of content, making use of all and any means of communication available within the consumer society”.¹³ He concluded, “If this anarchic conglomerate of irreverent messages disturbs one, it is because civilization is overturned”.¹⁴

Among the 500 participants of the XVI Bienal Art Postal de Sao Paulo, there appeared a number of rubberstamped postcards and copier art by Brazilian artists. “Coxtail” by Alice Xavier contained a pictorial rubberstamp of male genitalia penetrating two hen eggs. Bene Fonteles mailed a postcard collage with a pasted “matasellos”. Helix Lete included a photo postcard of a seated man appearing nude before a mirror with his back dated and posted with a cancellation mark. A handwritten inscription alludes to solidarity. Identidade Zero sent their personal rubberstamp label, “IDENTIDADE ZERO” marked above two faceless figures of men in business suits. Rosa Maria Santos mailed copier art with rubberstamped letters arranged in a visual poem and Vera Bonnema Sou (Brazil) sent “NU VENS” rubberstamped on overlapping clouds made of tarlatan glued on a black background.¹⁵

⁹ Ana Paula Cohen. Group Show review of “Conceptual Art and Conceptualisms: The 1970’s at MAC-USP.” <https://www.artnexus.com/Notice_View.aspx?DocumentID=5363>

¹⁰ L. F. Duch. Xerox of Walter Zanini speaking to the public about a lecture in mail art at the 16th Sao Paulo Bienal. Letter to Chuck Welch. December 16, 1981. File 319. Copier Art. Eternal Network Mail Art Archive & Library of Chuck Welch.

¹¹ L. F. Duch. Xerox self portrait of Duch lecturing at 16th Sao Paulo Bienal. Letter to Chuck Welch. December 16, 1981. File 319. Copier Art. Eternal Network Mail Art Archive & Library of Chuck Welch.

¹² L. F. Duch in a letter to Chuck Welch. December 16, 1981. File 319. Annotated Letters. Eternal Network Mail Art Archive & Library of Chuck Welch.

¹³ Walter Zanini. XVI Bienal de Sao Paulo: Catalog De Arte Postal. Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1981. p7.

¹⁴ Ibid. p7.

¹⁵ Ibid. p25,32,40,61,62,112,122.

Zanini's exhibitions of political mail art at the Museum of Contemporary Art, University of Sao Paulo (MACUSP) were exceptions rather than the norm in Brazil during the 1970s. Walter Zanini welcomed a worldwide view of conceptual art as a strategy for political action, Martha Hellion, Artists' Book curator, writes that the emergence of new forms, particularly artists' books, served a purpose "as social and political confrontation regardless of aesthetic concept".¹⁶ Fear of military intervention and shutdown may explain why the Brazilian mainstream art establishment failed to recognize the "unknown" new forms of mail art, rubberstamp art, or artists' underground publications. Christina Freire, offers a more plausible explanation in her study of Paulo Bruscky: Art, Archive and Utopia.

"Organizing a mail art exhibition is to recognize the network and reinforce its pertinence in an oppressive context, as witness by the importance of mail art in Latin American countries during the dark years of the dictatorships. However, its importance during the time is directly proportional to the disdain with which it was treated by most institutions".¹⁷

Trouble began when mail artists, who were once "unseen" and ignored, were now visibly suspect. Who were these "troublemakers" - the unknown Latino America mail artists armed with rubberstamps, "matasellos," bull's eyes¹⁸ and killer bars?¹⁹ Many men and women used stamps to mark upon underground zines, marginal texts, manifestos, visual poems, artists' books, postcards, correspondence art, mimeographs, fax transmissions and postage stamps. Brazilian rubberstamp artists were particularly militant in their condemnation of an abusive military regime. Cildo Meireles (b. 1948), a key Brazilian conceptualist, rubberstamped political condemnations on Coca-Cola bottles that he recycled into the public domain.²⁰ Paulo Miranda (b. 1950) stamped his Poem of Value (1978) onto a one-cruzeiro banknote. Thereza Simões (b. 1941, Rio de Janeiro) had a "history of subversive works, several of which were seized by the military in Brazil's State of Bahia at the Second Bienal Nacional de Artes Plasticas (Dec. 1968)".²¹ In 1970, Simões had marked rubberstamp messages in the entire exhibition hall of the Palace of Arts at Belo Horizonte, the sixth largest city of Brazil. To evade possible arrest, Simões

¹⁶ Hellion, Ibid.

¹⁷ Christina Freire. Paulo Bruscky: Art, Archive and Utopia. Recife, Pernambuco: Companhia Editora de Pernambuco. 2007.

¹⁸ **Bull's eye** is a philatelic term referring to the cancellation of postage stamps in which a dated postage mark is centered perfectly within the border confines of a cancelled stamp. Coincidentally, the term also references Brazil's first stamp issue which appeared on August 1, 1843. A 2013 stamp auction of a complete sheet of 60 reis bulls eye stamps fetched \$648,500. Brazilian stamps were the first to be issued in Latin America

¹⁹ **Killer bar** is a philatelic term defining a cancellation handstamp that is so dense and heavy that it obliterates and successfully "kills" a stamp to prevent re-use. These rubberstamps had heavy horizontal bars, spots, or crude cork like impressions used in any way to deface an image.

²⁰ Elena Shtromberg. op. cit. p161.

²¹ Ibid. 173.

chose German and English text for rubberstamping “DIRTY,” “VERBOTTEN,” “FRAGILE,” and “ACT SILENTLY”.²²

While deep pockets of resistance existed in Recife, the cultural capital of Brazil’s northeastern state of Pernambuco, political art was also being created in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, and Venezuela where mail artists were using their own carved rubberstamps, institutional stamps, “found” rubber, or parts of their bodies for expression. Retaliation by right wing terrorist squads increased, but nowhere as brutally than in Argentina where thousands of atrocities were committed against students, journalists, and activists who were either killed or vanished. Edgardo Vigo, one of Argentina’s most famous conceptualists, lost his 16 year old son, Palomo, when hooded militia forcibly entered their home in the middle of the night and carried Palomo away. Vigo’s son “disappeared” as did thousands of others who never returned. Vigo’s message was always of “remembrance” for his son, a celebration too in the way handprinted messages could be mailed to escape the boundaries of institutions and bureaucracies.

Latino American mail artists countered military atrocities with covert tactics. Uruguayan mail artist, Jorge Caraballo contacted clergy in Buenos Aires churches to honor Che Guevara’s death in a celebratory mass. On August 25, 1977, performance artist and street poet, Clemente Padin was arrested for ridiculing the military junta with a sheet of artist postage stamps. Not long afterwards, Uruguayan poet, Jorge Caraballo was arrested for his complicity with Padin. Caraballo served in prison for nine months. Padin disappeared for three months. He was incarcerated without a trial because no law existed to prove any offense. The arrest of Padin and Caraballo were for “anti-North American convictions, moral offense, and offending the army’s reputation.”²³

Padin, over a period of two years was shuffled blindfolded to five different prisons. These incarcerations, including the jailing of Brazilian mail artists, Paulo Bruscky and Daniel Santiago, and the sequestering of artist Jesus Romero Galdamez Escobar by the Salvadorian military in 1981, stand as landmark mail art events in which artists took great personal risks. Chilean visual poet Guillermo Deisler (1940-1995) created art condemning the Pinochet dictatorship. Deisler “had been arrested in Chile in 1973 and was allowed to go into exile in France in 1974, moving again to Bulgaria and later to what was East Germany.”²⁴

Were Latino American “mail artists” a serious risk to the entrenched political regimes in Latin American? Luis Camnitzer, SUNY professor, essayist and critic writes that mail art served as a “parallel, alternative, and marginal” distribution circuit, which didn’t really

²² Ibid. 39.

²³ Luis Camnitzer. *Conceptualism in Latin American Art : Didactics of Liberation*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press. 2007. p77.

²⁴ Ibid. 278n

threaten the dictators, but certainly did attack them.”²⁵ Upon Padin’s release from jail in Uruguay, he was never able to reclaim his confiscated mail art archive from the the police. In Recife, Brazil, Paulo Bruscky and Daniel Santiago organized the Segunda Exposicao Internacional de Arte Postal, an exhibition scheduled at the post office building in Recife. The exhibition was to have run from August 27 to September 11, 1976, but it was forcibly closed within an hour of it’s opening. The police seized and tore up much of the artwork and in a month returned what was remaining. Bruscky wrote to Argentine mail artist, Edgardo Vigo on March 2, 1977, “You probably already know that the Segunda Exposicao Internacional de Arte Correo was prohibited and censored by the police and that we (the organizers) were even held prisoner for three days”²⁶ As prisoners, Santiago and Bruscky were threatened and psychologically tortured. Bruscky described the details of his three day ordeal:

“They (the police) initiated an inquiry. They said they were going to make telephone calls throughout Brazil to find out if mail art had connections with international communists. A thousand insinuations, silliness and nonsense. In the end they said, ‘You don’t have anything. You’re going to be watched. Don’t make any more mail art’. I refused to sign the document saying that I hadn’t suffered any physical or psychological torture. I didn’t suffer any physical abuse, but I certainly suffered psychological torture. In the middle of the night a guy showed up shouting, ‘Let’s get going’. When I got up, he said, ‘No, you can stay.’ They wouldn’t let me get any real sleep. They threatened to do things to my family. They broke into my house when I was in prison and wrecked a lot of things. I still have work attached to my inquiry to this very day. It was the Federal Police that documented the exhibition.”²⁷

The seizure of artworks and the contents of libraries by agents of the police had occurred long before 1975 when Bruscky and Santiago organized Segunda Exposicao Internacional de Arte Postal. After the political coup of 1964 that placed Marshall Humberto Castelo Branco in power, “the contents of libraries were stuffed into canvas mail sacks and taken to police headquarters and scoured for communistic books”.²⁸ Could evidence be found of any recriminations by rubberstamp artists? Few visual artists had experimented with rubberstamps in 1964. Indeed, it was Brazilian politicians who were the guilty party, particularly members of congress who honed the legislative art of rubberstamping Branco’s nomination by the military junta. Quickly, Branco removed over 4,500 government employees and imprisoned hundreds of citizens without habeas

²⁵ Ibid. 77.

²⁶ Edgardo Antonio Vigo, “The State of Mail Art in South America.” In *Correspondence Art: Source Book for the Network of International Postal Art Activity*, edited by Michael Crane and Mary Stofflet (San Francisco: Contemporary Arts Press, 1984), 362.

²⁷ Freire, op. cit. p250.

²⁸ Robert M. Levine. *The History of Brazil*. New York: St. Martin’s Press. 1999. p128

corpus.”²⁹ Historically, Brazil’s history from 1889-1930 included military interventions that “would “overthrow two constitutional governments and intervene in the states on several occasions to oust political adversaries.”³⁰

A dire political, economic, and social climate was prevalent in Brazil and other Latino American countries in the 60s. Decolonization was still in progress at a time when authoritarian dictators ruled most of the Southern Hemisphere. The Cold War was raging in earnest, nuclear proliferation was out of control, and the United States was tied up in an unpopular and costly Vietnam War with anti-war protest and racial riots that left American cities burning. Problems in Brazil mounted in 1968 when the military tightened their dictatorship by closing down the Brazilian Congress with the passing of Institutional Act No. 5. This legislation led some artists to self-censorship, but more often it led to rebellion. In 1969, there were outbreaks of urban and rural guerrilla action against the regime³¹ and social unrest exploded on university campuses in Brazil. Students and faculty demonstrated against the atrocities committed by the military dictatorship and the government declared it would take punitive action against administrative officials, students and teachers who “participated in actions deemed to be against public order”.³² Over a thousand students were expelled throughout Brazil.

Matters turned worse from 1971-1973 when the government issued decrees censoring TV and radio broadcasts. Any public dissent that was critical of the military regime was rebuked. Students joined militant Marxist organizations such as the MR8 - Movimento Revolucionário 8 de Outubro.³³ Claudia Calirman, a Brazilian artist and scholar, wrote how she and her friends from the University of Rio de Janeiro were arrested during street demonstrations against the dictatorship.

Claudia Calirman, in *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship*, documents a thriving artist counterculture that used readily available, everyday materials in unusual or disturbing ways.³⁴ Arturo Barrio’s “Situations” series is indicative of that tendency. Barrio included “garbage, urine, red meat, spit, saliva, tampons, and toilet paper”.³⁵ His famous conceptual artwork “From the Body to the Earth” included twenty kilograms of flesh and bones collected from slaughterhouses, wrapped in bloody fabric and dumped in rivers and sewers. The unsettling, surprising objects presented a spectacle to passers by who might easily mistake the bundles of grisly tissue as the final remains of torture victims.

²⁹ Ibid. 127.

³⁰ Ibid. 78.

³¹ Ibid. xiii.

³² Shtromberg, *op. cit.*, p.33.

³³ An Xiao, *op. cit.*

³⁴ An Xiao, *op. cit.*

³⁵ An Xian, *op. cit.*

Fellow Rio de Janeiro artist, Cildo Meirelles created “Tiradentes: Totem-Monument to the Political Prisoner”, a work that included live chickens lashed to an eight foot stake that was set on fire - a reference to the cruel treatment towards political prisoners. “Tiradentes” was not accidentally titled. Meirelles tagged the work after “the pen name of a colonial-era dentist who was beheaded after being accused of attempting to overthrow the Portuguese government”.³⁶ Unlike Artur Barrio, Meirelles incorporated rubberstamping into his artwork. Neither Barrio or Meirelles, however, were active or prolific participants in the era of collaborative global mail art exchanges during the 1970s and 80s.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s the Brazilian military dictatorships were also using everyday forms of communication propaganda to intimidate the populace. Billboards looming over the streets and central town squares were used in public gathering spaces. One such billboard “showed a hand holding a work permit, and a warning in large letters: “Without proper documents you are nothing!” Military and police censors drove newspapers and book publishers out of business and tightly censored the Brazilian movie industry, theater and popular music. Television networks constantly carried government propaganda. Bumper stickers were distributed with slogans like “Brazil: Love It or Leave It.” The campaign frowned on dissent and preached unconditional loyalty to the country and to its military leaders”.³⁷ while not as savage as those in neighboring Argentina or Chile, it was a deplorable and intimidating time to live.

Economic oppression in the form of overwhelming monetary inflation impoverished the Brazilian people and affected the entire institutional and economic infrastructure. In 1976, Cildo Meirelles rubberstamped “Who Killed Herzog?” on Brazilian banknotes.³⁸ Two years later Paulo Miranda rubberstamped “Poem of Value” on a Brazilian cruzeiro banknote.³⁹ Both Meirelles and Miranda were questioning the meaning of inherent “value” - the value of poetry and the value of currency as worthless, devalued, fiat paper. Fiat, unbacked by gold, is a kind of funny money that’s based entirely on the “people’s trust” of their government and economists. When failing economic policies of a government destroy paper currency, the people’s value and trust in their currency is undermined. When the oil crisis hit in 1974, Brazil’s social and economic infrastructure was already in shambles. By the time Meirelles’ and Miranda’s rubberstamped banknotes appeared in 1976 and 1978, trade deficits had skyrocketed. The poor became poorer, labor rights and unions were repressed, human rights abuses mounted, and unemployment rose.

A thriving global counterculture survived through the 1970s, and sociopolitical changes surged with the Green Revolution, Sexual Revolution, Equal Rights Revolution, and the beginnings of the Digital Revolution. The impact of new technology ushered in a communications revolution in which music and art thrived. Public mail art exhibitions

³⁶ An Xian, op. cit.

³⁷ Robert M. Levine, op. cit.

³⁸ Shtromberg, p34.

³⁹ Ibid. 37.

mushroomed in the later half of the 1970s and much of what was sent by artists reflects the rapidity of change that was occurring. The importance of Brazilian mail art exhibitions have been noted, but rubberstamping contributions by Brazilian mail artists need further comment. Rubberstamp art and mail art travel in tandem so which artists most often mailed art in Brazil with the intention of exchanging mail independently or in collaboration with others?

From 1970 - 1980, three hundred mail art exhibitions occurred in over three dozen countries. Not all of these shows delivered documentation with mailing lists. Furthermore, with the passage of time, only a fraction of these many exhibitions remain with institutions and individuals who hosted or participated in mail art shows. A microcosmic study, however, of an active mail artist's archive will reveal a fascinating record of international network exchanges. The author's own study, "Crackerjack Kid's Journal of Mail Art Exhibitions 1979-1981 documents 200 mail art exhibitions and includes numerous scanned examples of work sent.⁴⁰ In 1980, CrackerJack Kid entered 100 international mail art exhibitions, but fewer than one of every four shows included mailing lists. With patience, an established trend emerges and general conclusions can be made by combing through the archives of mail artists whose works reside at the University of Iowa's Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts Archive, one of the first and largest collections of mail art in North America. A recent study by the Dossiê Post Office Museum is an interesting general survey of active Brazilian mail artists during the 1970s.

Brasilia's Dossiê Post Office Museum Magazine published a listing in 2014 of Brazilian artists who "dedicated themselves to Postal Art, in intermittent moments, or in a more durable and persistent way."⁴¹ Those listed included, Regina Vater, Regina Silveira, Julio Plaza, Bene Fonteles, Alex Valauri, Leticia Parente, Hélio Lete, Artur Matuck, Hudinilson Júnior, Raul Córdula, Artur Barrio, Mário Ramiro, Rafael Franca and Alberto Harrigan."⁴² Paulo Bruscky is listed as "one of the main references of conceptual art in Brazilian Experimentalism."⁴³ No reference, however, is given to Bruscky's importance in Brazilian mail art for furthering the evolution of rubberstamping. In the 1970s, Bruscky with Leonhard Frank Duch, Falves Silva, Unhandeijara Lisboa J. Madeiros and Daniel Santiago were among the most active and creative participants in Brazilian rubberstamp art. These Brazilian mail artists were also involved in international mail art collaborations and exhibitions abroad. In the global mail art network, exhibition opportunities were more commonplace than in Brazil. Alternative art spaces such as Bill Gaglione's Abracadada Rubber Stamp Museum in San Francisco archived rubberstamps for public viewing. Aart van Barneveld's Stampelplaats in Amsterdam, and Ulises Carrión's Other Books & So, also in Amsterdam (1975), held one person shows and group shows in which specific media themes were displayed.

⁴⁰ Chuck Welch. Crackerjack Kid's Journal of Mail Art Exhibitions: 1979-1981. Peterborough: Netshaker Press. 2017.

⁴¹ The Dossiê Post Office Museum Magazine. Brasilia, Brazil: June 30, 2014. p3.

⁴² Dossiê Post Office Museum Magazine, op cit.

⁴³ Ibid, 3.

Stampelplaats, under the direction of Aart van Barneveld may have been the first rubberstamp stamp art exhibition space in the history of western art. From 1978-1981, Aart van Barneveld tirelessly ran Stampelplaats in Amsterdam. He hosted many shows including stamp performances and public stamp auctions. A label and rubberstamp manufacturing company known as Posthumus, owned the gallery and provided funding for the production of “rubber”, a monthly bulletin of rubberstamp works that doubled as a handout during exhibitions. Each issue of “Rubber” featured an artist whose work included techniques used for creating rubberstamp art. The February 1979 issue of “Rubber” highlighted four Brazilian pioneers in the rubberstamp medium; Paulo Bruscky, Leonhard Frank Duch, Unhandeijara Lisboa, and J. Medeiros. The issue appeared in an edition of 400 copies and featured rubberstamped prints.

Ulises Carrión, was a book artist, visual poet and mail artist who worked frequently with rubberstamps. He curated rubberstamp shows like Stamped Bookworks which was held in February 1978 at Egmont Hojskolen in Denmark. That show included Neo Dadaists Anna Banana and Bill Gaglione. Fluxus book artist and text based poster man, Davi Det Hampson was featured with Robert Jacks. Also appearing were Soviet Eastern Bloc rubberstamp artists Pawel Petasz (Poland) and J. H. Kocman, conceptual artist from the former Czechoslovakia. Brazilian mail artists, Bruscky, Duch and Medeiros were also prominently featured in this show.

Ulises Carrión was well known internationally, at least in the underground alternative art networks, and his knowledge of rubberstamping techniques is apparent when reading his introduction to the works of Brazilian artists in the February 1978 issue of “Rubber”. He described work by Bruscky, Duch, Lisboa, and Medeiros as coming from the Northeastern states of Brazil where mail art and rubberstamp art were “consolidated and connected with the world”.⁴⁴ Carrión wouldn’t account as to why Brazilian rubberstamp art was so exceptional, but it can be ascertained that in 1979, Brazilian mail art, like that of other Latino American countries, was untainted from the praxis of theories, lessons and traditional art found in cultural art centers. Carrión wrote that the four artists all shared “intellectual independence” in regard to “big cultural centers” in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro:

“It is because of their intense participation in the world-wide circuit of mail artists, that, when you say Brazil, you don’t think automatically of Sao Paulo or Rio but rather of Recife, Natal or Joao Pessoa. This is a typical example of how Mail-Art has enabled artists to work and spread their works and ideas internationally, totally free from any economical, cultural, or social constraint imposed by local art markets. On the other hand, there exists a contradiction in these four artists being so active in the international network of mail artists and, at the same time, so unknown to the general public. By organizing this show and publishing this catalogue, the Stampelplaats hopes to introduce their rubberstamp works to a wider non-specialized public.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ulises Carrión. “Shows, Projects and other Information,” *Rubber* 2:2 (February 1979): 15.

⁴⁵ Carrión. Ibid. p3-4.

Carrión wrote that Bruscky, Duch, Lisboa, and Medeiros each worked differently with rubberstamps. Duch designed his own stamps and had them fabricated. Medeiros and Bruscky used unusual materials, often found objects. They played with inking plants and pressing them onto paper. Assorted pieces of metal were used. They both carved corks and inked parts of their bodies for impressions on paper. Unhandeijara Lisboa's rubberstamp art was described as "semi-abstract" and "reminiscent of Indian motives and could be either produced by a factory or hand-made from domestic materials".⁴⁶ He edited a rubberstamp zine titled *Karimbada*, a play on "carimbo", Portuguese for "stamp". The magazine appeared first in 1978 and was produced in four issues as a envelope assemblage containing loose leaves of stamp art around the world. Duch's rubber images included pictorial images ranging from a "human figure with a cut-throat" to "piled up skulls". Medeiros' stamps were "body-poems," and "abstract patterns made up from repeated elements" that were linked to the "Brazilian Poema Processo movement, the latest and widest development of the old concrete poetry from the fifties and that has now adopted all intermedia (or multimedia) forma formats"⁴⁷

Paulo Bruscky was among the most experimental of the Brazilian underground art scene. He explored old and new forms to communicate, distribute and broadcast information. Bruscky, besides using the stamp of his foot or tongue, also stamped napkins and photographs. He played with telephones, fax, computers and later in the 90s, created art for the internet. Among all these forms that Bruscky explored, he understood rubberstamping best and used them most effectively with a direct purpose, to confront power and protest.

If Ulises Carrión and Aart Van Barneveld were Europe's greatest advocates for rubberstamp art in the 1970s, North America's most famous stamping advocate is Neo Dadaist, performance artist and mail art pioneer, Bill Gaglione. In 1976 and 1978, Gaglione published two issues of "Dadazine" that were dedicated to rubberstamps. From 1990-1997, Gaglione focused his work on creating and curating Stamp Art Gallery in San Francisco and in 1996, Bill Gaglione presented a solo exhibition of Paulo Bruscky which included a number of compositions made from Brusky's shoes.⁴⁸ In the exhibition catalogue an untitled rubberstamp artwork by Bruscky stands out for its intriguing subject matter. Bruscky's fingerprints are found in a landscape rubberstamped with protruding knife blades and numerous small mechanical gears. Delicate, intricate stampings are densely placed underneath a large area of white space that is interrupted only by a small moon-like sphere. The artwork was created in 1977 and resonates with a nervous pent-up tension as if Brusky's fingertip prints are digging up disturbing objects buried in the earth.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p4.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p5-6.

⁴⁸ Bill Gaglione. *Paulo Bruscky*. Exh. cat., San Francisco: Stamp Art Gallery. June 1996.

As in South America, North American rubberstamp activities were first exhibited in alternative spaces like Martha Wilson's founding of Franklin Furnace (1976) and Carlo Pittore's La Galleria dell'Occhio, the first independent art gallery in NYC's East Village. Rubberstamp art on the west coast followed in 1981 when Bill Gaglione created the first rubberstamp museum in San Francisco, Abracadada. In spite of Gaglione's curatorial efforts to document Latino American rubberstamp art, the medium remained a marginalized form and it would be more than a decade before Paulo Bruscky's art gained notoriety in the United States. 13

Duch was an accomplished creator of postage stamps and carved rubberstamp prints. Géza Perneczky, in his edition *The Magazine Network*, describes artists who contributed to the development of stamp prints and declared, "No other work in the world can match the Brazilian artist Leonhard Frank Duch's stamped *Protest Book*, which was meant to be an appeal against the terror and tortures of those years. Duch 'copied' the graffiti from the walls and fences around him, and translated them into rubberstamp prints."⁴⁹ By capturing street graffiti on rubber, Duch made street art a mobile mark

Duch stamped slogans that defined and declared his identity, sometimes with humor - "I Am Duch, Not Duchamp," or "Be A Duchist". In 1980, however, Duch's "I Am An Artist" project at Stempelplaats in Amsterdam pivoted on a slogan expressing personal anguish. His invitation stated:

"All my mail-art work in the last years has been based on the cultural reality I live. By "I AM AN ARTIST" I mean a state of anguish. Agony. It's dangerous to be an artist in my country. But I am an artist. I have to say it aloud, by shouting. I AM AN ARTIST. In this way, I placed myself behind bars, pressed between bricks, surrendered against a wall and about to be executed, tied up among ropes. In short, in oppressive situations that I feel as an ongoing burden. With this project I request your help - all you mail artists. Help in the sense that I am going to be free through you....How? It's easy. Along with this letter/project each of you is receiving a reprint that imprisons an empty space. Hundreds of identical copies are at STEMPELPLAATS, glued on the walls so that we feel as if they tied up the whole environment. Go and work on the copy that you have just received and send it to STEMPELPLAATS - DUCH ART PROJECT. DEADLINE: SEPT. 30, 1980."⁵⁰

In four words, "I AM AN ARTIST" Duch's rubberstamp slogan drew attention to the danger faced by Latin American artists in the 1970s and 80s. In a larger context, by sending his slogan around the world, Duch recognized a global condition that demanded creative action. Indeed, Duch's call demonstrates an exemplary attitude that includes yet transcends his personal experiences by recognizing the voice and plight of artists everywhere. Duch's project speaks a network language. In 1983, Paulo Bruscky embellished Duch's declaration

⁴⁹ Géza Perneczky. *The Magazine Network*. Köln: Edition Soft Geometry. 1991. p80.

⁵⁰ Leonhard Frank Duch in an invitation to Chuck Welch. Mail Art Projects. File 319, Eternal Network Mail Art Library and Archive.

of liberation by asserting defiance against central authority, “I will never be part of a political party, economic group or religious faction, because being an artist is already a political attitude”.⁵¹ Ruch and Bruscky’s commentary personify and envelop a fierce individualism existing in the Latino American underground between 1960-1983. During this dangerous era of political tyranny, the Brazilian artist’s indelible defiance towards oppressive authority contributed to a network language without borders.

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⁵¹ Freire, op. cit. p250.