

# caiana

Zanna Gilbert

## Genealogical Diversions: Experimental Poetry Networks, Mail Art and Conceptualisms

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*You can trace all the artistic currents of the time in the exhibited postcards, from those that exploit the verbal-visual expression that characterizes Concretism and visual poetry through to those that record events and facts in a language of action; from the postcard as a work in itself through to those that use (the most orthodox manifestations of) Conceptualism; those concerned with awakening processes in line with the spectator's own repertoire to those that bear witness to the human body's potential to activate aesthetic processes (body art); from those that seek the spectator's participation through ideas and projects to those that recover aspects of daily life which, due to familiarity and alienation, we ignore; from those that are a mere record of vanguardist artistic activity to those that manipulate commercial postcards, changing their original information; from those that convey attitudes of POP ART, Minimal Art, Arte Povera, etc., to those that exploit all of these tendencies, grounding their formal innovation in the social, seeking to relocate signs and texts in non-artistic discourses.*

Clemente Padín, flyer for the *Creative Postcard Festival*, Gallery U, Montevideo, 1974.

Mail art was an international network of artists that exchanged art, information and ideas throughout the postal system. Its internationalisation occurred in the early 1970s when unorthodox Fluxus artists beyond the immediate circle of George Maciunas began sharing address lists more and more widely.<sup>1</sup> The main characteristic of mail art is not only that it travels in the mail but that this journey is conceived as an elemental part of the work, and

contributes to its meaning. However, this loose definition still leaves wide margins for interpretation, and the desire to create distributable, uncommodifiable and participatory works emerging from debates around art's efficacy in Latin America easily came to embody many of the principles espoused in the mail art network. If histories of mail art unfailingly ascribe the role of founder of the movement to Ray Johnson, the absolutism of this history leaves little room for alternative genealogies and topologies of the rise of this complex network with hundreds of participants that spanned continents.

This article offers a reading of the emergence of mail art in South America and Mexico that depends upon revisiting the visual poetry networks active from the 1950s in the region and internationally. I examine how, throughout the 1960s, artists and poets in Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay and Brazil developed concerns with the notion of systems of all kinds –postal, linguistic, epistemological, bureaucratic, political– and that this concern stemmed more from an engagement with experimental poetry and theories of language than with any knowledge of Ray Johnson's or the Fluxus movement's love of the mail. Furthermore, I argue that these artists' interest in semiotic systems led them to concerns that overlap with the language experiments of conceptual art, which then merged easily with the internationalizing mail art networks that developed related aesthetic investigations.

Although he is known mostly as the 'sugar dada' of mail art and a sometime collaborator with Fluxus, in 1969, Ray Johnson took part in a concrete poetry exhibition held at the University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery in Vancouver. Among the other participants were visual poets Álvaro De Sá (Brazil) and Mathias Goeritz (Mexico) as well as conceptual artists Carlos Ginzburg (Argentina), Bruce Nauman (USA) and Joseph Kosuth (USA).<sup>2</sup> This unlikely selection of artists and poets not only demonstrates that concrete poetry is perhaps the most overlooked international art movement of the 1960s, but also that mail art and conceptual art overlapped and converged in experimental poetry. Nevertheless, in the Anglo-Saxon circuit it is still widely held that conceptual art was a teleological response to minimalism, focused as it was on

dematerialisation and industrial fabrication methods that questioned notions of artistic genius and reflected the nature of administered modern society.<sup>3</sup> This understanding derives from a misguided reading of New York conceptual art's international relevance and the uncritical reception of its diffusion, while also neglecting the fact that at the margins of conceptual experimentation (in mail art and visual poetry), information was rapidly travelling backwards and forwards across borders in networks of unorthodox experimental art. The little-explored alternative history of what might unsatisfactorily be called experimental practices provides a very different picture to the usual accounts of artistic developments in the codified oppositions of centre and periphery, which must be explored if we are to understand mail art and conceptual practices in Latin America.

According to Clemente Padín, mail art definitively entered the Latin American art scene with the 1969 collective exhibition *Experiencias 69*, when Liliana Porter and Luis Camnitzer used mail strategies in their works for the exhibition.<sup>4</sup> The New York Graphic Workshop planned eight mail exhibitions for the exhibition at the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires. As Silvia Dolinko comments: "Between August 18 and September 1 –before *Experiencias 69* opened to the public– approximately one thousand people in Buenos Aires received eight envelopes, each numbered in sequence."<sup>5</sup> Vigo also acknowledges the group in his text "First Argentine Antecedent" and describes the works by Camnitzer and Porter as "an experience of communication at a distance: by the post".<sup>6</sup> Vigo further states:

In the successive mailings they distributed envelopes containing unfinished cards –a quantity of four to each– to the people who were part of the directory of the institute. Porter's cards had a visual quality and Camnitzer's cards had a literary one. Received in advance, the replies from their addressees were disclosed the day of the inauguration of the experiences, along with the complement of what was missing. Obviously, and beyond the intention of the authors, the insertion in the channel of communications is evidently clear. **(Figs. 1-4)**

While these "Argentine antecedents" clearly inspired Vigo for one, it should not be forgotten

that there was already a highly connected network of experimental poets in the region, who circulated their work regionally and internationally in the mail through publications. Conceptual art, with the exception of artists in Brazil, has been characterized Mari Carmen Ramírez as "without foundation" in South America:

"... unlike Brazil, where the early work of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark had anticipated many experimental trends, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay had little artistic experience to support the emergence of the radical practice of Conceptual art".<sup>7</sup>

In fact, however, in Latin America experimental poetic networks contributed greatly to the aesthetic of conceptualism because of the artists' shared interest in investigating established linguistic and social structures, experimenting with participation, and pursuing an expanded understanding of poetry.

The "new poetry" was an open aesthetic that rejected conventional linguistic communication and engaged in making objects, resulting in a practice that is difficult to distinguish from art proper; it was, in Edgardo Antonio Vigo's words, a "total art" that did not recognise boundaries between the literary and the visual aesthetic.<sup>8</sup> From the 1950s onwards, the *Grupo Noigandres* concrete poets –Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari– corresponded internationally with other concrete poets and artists, often exchanging their works through the mail. In the 1960s and 1970s, experimental poets who would become linked to the formation of mail art continued this practice of distributing their work through magazines. These included Uruguayan Clemente Padín's *Los Huevos del Plata* (1966-67), *OVUM 10* (1969-72) and *OVUM* (1973-74); Argentine Edgardo Antonio Vigo's *Diagonal Cero* (1962-69) and *Hexágono* (1971-75); as well as the Brazilian *Poema-Processo* movement's publication *Ponto* (1967-1972). These principal agents in the mail art movement in the 1970s were already involved in an international and networked experimental poetry movement even up to a decade earlier. **(Figs. 5 y 6)**

The first group of experimental poets to impact upon the international poetry scene was the São Paulo *Noigandres* poets, who were interested in the instability of aesthetic languages, the



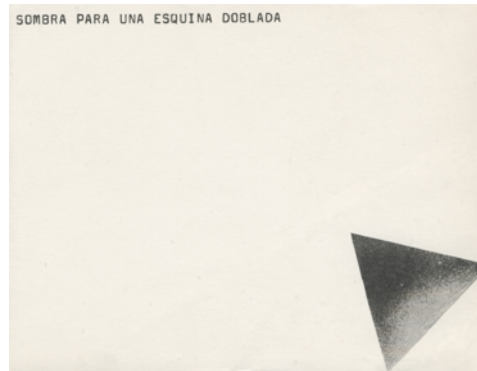
1- Liliana Porter, *Mail Exhibitions: Sombra para dos aceitunas (Shadows for Two Olives)*, 1 of 4 offset prints and envelopes, sent from Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Florida 936, Buenos Aires, Argentina in June 1969. Courtesy Liliana Porter.



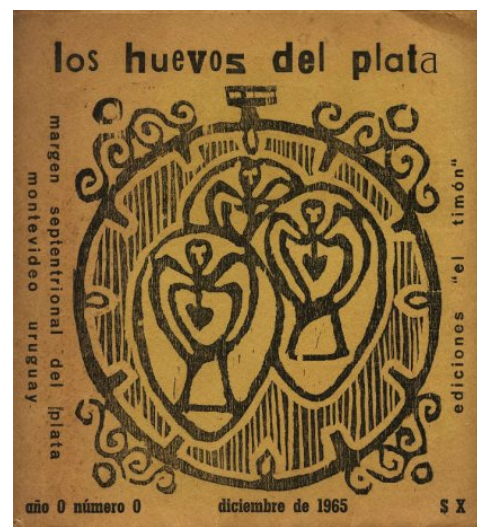
2- Liliana Porter, *Mail Exhibitions: Sombra para boleto de colectivo (Shadow for a Bus Ticket)*, 1 of 4 offset prints and envelopes, sent from Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Florida 936, Buenos Aires, Argentina in June 1969. Courtesy Liliana Porter.



3- Liliana Porter, *Mail Exhibitions: Sombra para un vaso (3) (Shadow for a Glass)*, 1 of 4 offset prints and envelopes, sent from Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Florida 936, Buenos Aires, Argentina in June 1969. Courtesy Liliana Porter.



4- Liliana Porter, *Mail Exhibitions: Sombra para una esquina doblada (Shadow for a Folded Corner)* 1 of 4 offset prints and envelopes, sent from Instituto Torcuato Di Tella, Florida 936, Buenos Aires, Argentina in June 1969. Courtesy Liliana Porter.



5- Cover of *Los Huevos del Plata*, December 1965. Courtesy Clemente Padín Archive.



6- Cover of *OVUM 10*, nº 1, December 1969. Courtesy Clemente Padín Archive.

relativity of order and the fragmentation of discourse.<sup>9</sup> The chaos of the crisis of traditional narrative, verse and meaning was addressed by a ‘gestalt operation’, which ordered that chaos.<sup>10</sup> A relationship between the verbal, visual and vocal is employed, while the word becomes “a minimal unity of meaning to be ordered in the graphic space”.<sup>11</sup> The extra-linguistic aspects of poetry are offered as a structural guide in place of meaning created by verbal language. Furthermore, according to Rogério Camara, “concrete poetry reveals, through word/image relation, the possibility of control and the organisation of the system’s totality”.<sup>12</sup> Important here is the attempt to completely reorganise language, being that it was considered to be a system of societal and psychic control; in Camara’s estimation this strategy functioned as a mechanism to reveal the constructed nature of our perception of the ‘real’ through language.<sup>13</sup> Researcher Fernanda Nogueira explores an alternative genealogy of concrete poetry that is not only based in formal analysis, but moreover seeks to understand how the *Noigandres* poets’ radical aesthetic “penetrates the social body, the street, and the everyday means of communication and reverberates in alternative artistic networks”.<sup>14</sup> She argues that the works of the concrete poets can be considered “tiny literary utopias” and identifies several characteristics that would also align them with mail and conceptual artists’ openness to the direct intervention of the spectator: the liberation of meaning beyond the verbal; poetry that can only occur through the active participation of the spectator/creator; poetry as a privileged space for anonymous action; the rupture of the idea of poetic genius; and the projection of an alternative order.<sup>15</sup> Nogueira argues that these strategies aimed to contest and critique what Suely Rolnik calls “cognitive capitalism”.<sup>16</sup> (Figs. 7 y 8)

The poets concern with participation is taken as a key indicator of the desire to intervene in the social order. Participation is a key trait of concrete poetry: in 1955 Haroldo de Campos proposed that poetry should be an open structure inviting creative adventure.<sup>17</sup> For the poets, this openness –somewhat akin to Umberto Eco’s idea of the ‘open work’ proposed some years later– transferred the importance and significance of the meaning of a poem from author to reader. The *Noigandres* group also had far-reaching networks, some of which would

evolve into mail art networks, although they themselves never took part. Indeed, in June 1967, number 22 of Edgardo Antonio Vigo’s experimental poetry magazine *Diagonal Cero* (1962– 1968) was dedicated to “Brazilian Concrete and Kinetic Poetry”.<sup>18</sup>



7- Augusto de Campos, Lygia Fingers, 1953. Courtesy Augusto de Campos.



8- Augusto de Campos, Eye for Eye, 1964. Courtesy Augusto de Campos.

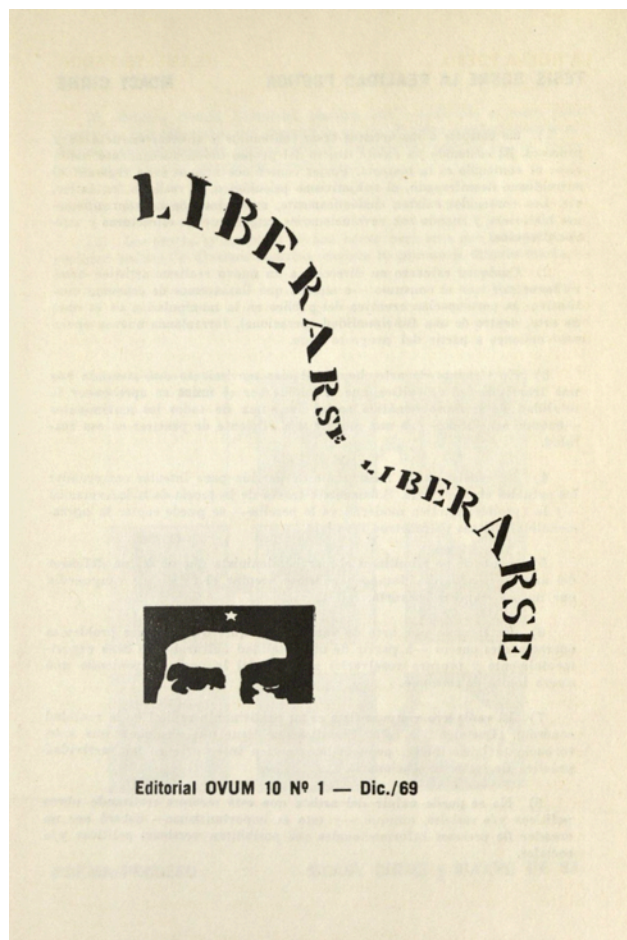
A detailed look at Clemente Padín’s *OVUM 10* magazine, which was circulated from Montevideo through experimental poetry networks, shows how the poets involved were already concerned with issues that would later become central to mail art. Separated only by the Rio de la Plata estuary, the Uruguayan poet and Edgardo Antonio Vigo collaborated closely by sharing contacts and publishing each other’s works and essays. *OVUM 10* followed Clemente Padín’s more conventional publication *Los Huevos del Plata* (1966-68).<sup>19</sup> In 1967, *Los*

*Huevos del Plata* had already published Vigo's article, "New Poetic Vanguard in Argentina", in which Vigo advocated "a poetry to see and another to hear"; critiqued free verse and "high-poetry"; outlined participation as a key possibility of the new poetry; and reviewed ideas about visual poetry in Paris.<sup>20</sup> Vigo also noted a "natural integration" between dance, theatre and cinema in new artistic movements, adding that terms such as 'happening' and 'environment' were an attempt to pigeonhole the new 'total art'.<sup>21</sup> This criticism was perhaps directed at the happenings 'boom' at the Instituto Di Tella that embraced the work of Marta Minujín, for example.<sup>22</sup>

The first issue of *OVUM 10*, published in December 1969, aimed to disseminate "poetic research".<sup>23</sup> It featured experimental poetry from Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil along with articles by Parisian poet Julian Blaine and Italians Michele Perfetti and Vincenzo Accame.<sup>24</sup> In his introductory article "The New Poetry", Padín makes the link between visual poetry and language as a system:

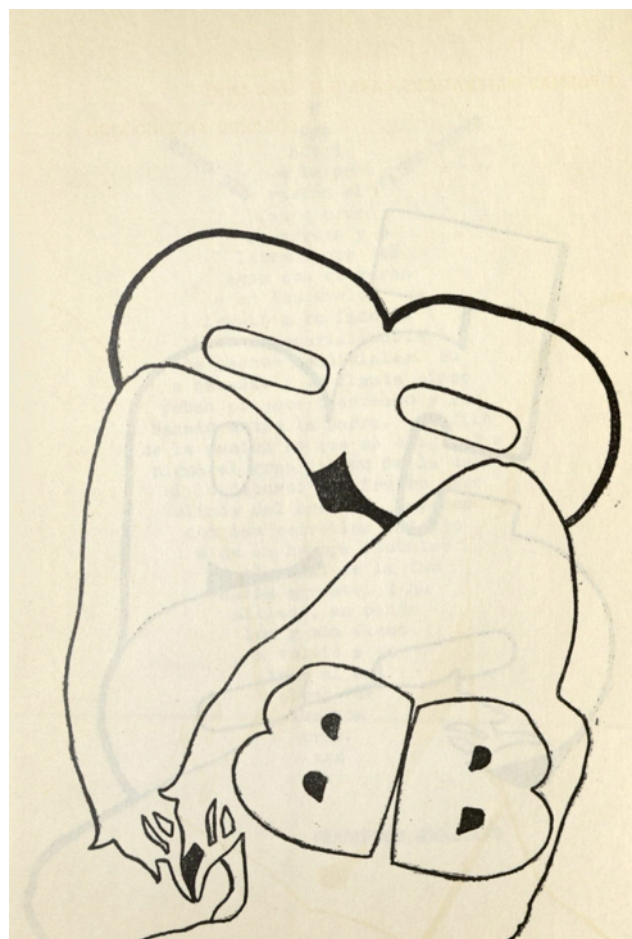
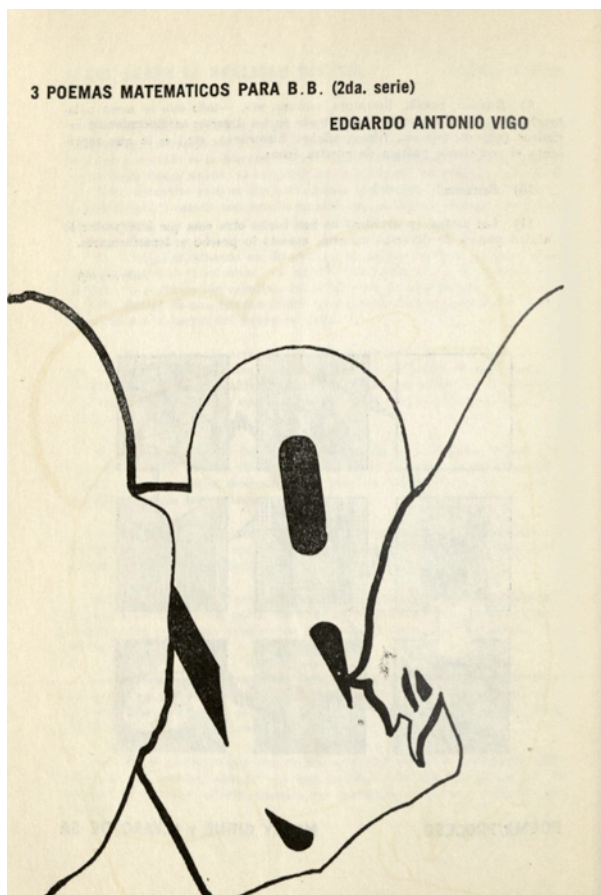
... the signifier, traditionally evoking images by psychic association, has established itself as the true protagonist of poetry. The signifier no longer evokes images, nor does it identify feelings, nor transmit states of mind. The elements of language transmit themselves. Not feelings, not concepts, not hyperboles. If the signified/signifier relationship has always been a conventional system of signs created for communication between men, why use it, with what authority is a tool incapable of revealing the poetic imposed upon us, when it has already widely demonstrated that it is not fit for purpose?<sup>25</sup> (Fig. 9)

This concern with linguistic systems links mail art activity with other conceptual experimental practices. Padín's article also notes that "both the producer and the consumer are the creators", clarifying the link between the new poetry and participation.<sup>26</sup> It is clear, then, that before their integration into mail art, some of the key ideas expounded by the movement were already present in these poetic networks, from interdialogic exchange and communication to participation and intermedia. Some of these ideas owed more to the diffusion and translation of theory associated with the linguistic turn than to artistic 'influence'.<sup>27</sup> (Figs. 10-12)



9- *Liberarse Liberarse*, *OVUM 10*, nº 1, December 1969. Courtesy Clemente Padín Archive.

The first issue of *OVUM 10* also explicitly embarked upon the project of liberating poetry from the merely literary, seeking new ways of understanding through the visual and promoting revolutionary politics. Inside the front cover, the first image to greet the reader is a sliver of the famous portrait of Che Guevara, detailing only his eyes –his *visual* apparatus– alongside the words "Liberarse Liberarse". The repetition of 'liberarse' is perhaps accounted for by the double strategy proposed: freedom from the confines of language (visual sensibility) could eventually lead to greater emancipation. Vigo's *3 Poemas Matemáticos para B.B* [3 Mathematical Poems for B.B] published in this first issue of *OVUM 10* in 1969 suggest another system which he hoped to call into question; the artist states that he wished to "convert the geometric element I use into an a-geometry".<sup>28</sup> This strategy of calling ordering systems into question would be developed into much more complex propositions in Vigo's later mail art works.



10-12- Edgardo Antonio Vigo, *3 Poemas Matemáticos Para B.B.*, published in OVUM 10, nº 1, December 1969. Courtesy Centro Experimental Vigo.

The eight issues of *OVUM 10* included articles on technological poetry (Julien Blaine); art in the street (Vigo); Public Poetry (Alain Arias-Misson); Visual Poetry (Michele Perfetti); Process Poetry (Waldemir Dias-Pino); documents relating to *Tucumán Arde*; and works by Ian Breakwell, Dana Atchley and Jiří Valoch. These magazines testify to the extraordinary range of ideas around the theme of experimental poetry long before mail art officially ‘landed’ in the region, making the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of mail art in Latin America a somewhat arbitrary semantic exercise. They also make clear the two-way dialogue between countries including France, Belgium, Brazil, Italy, Argentina, Uruguay, the United Kingdom, Czechoslovakia, Scotland, the United States and Venezuela.

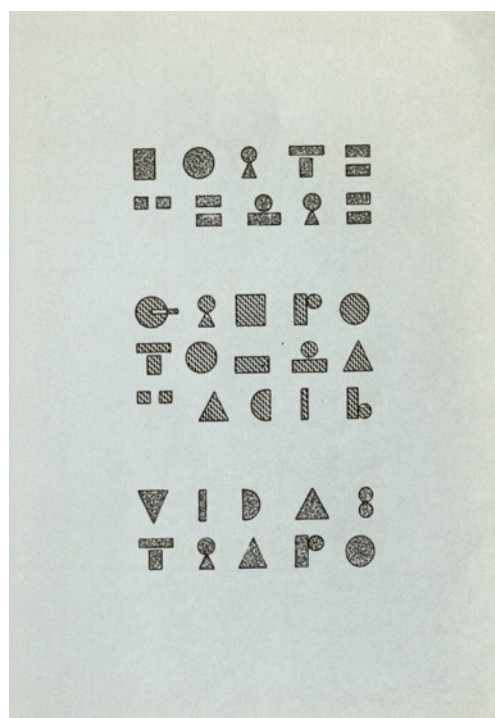
*OVUM 10* ceased its activity at the end of 1971, but was re-launched by Padín in 1973 as *OVUM* in response to the military coup of June 1973. In a text outlining the scope of the reinstated publication, Padín wrote:

It is obvious the necessity of a magazine to spread the results of our experiences and to forbid the communicative barrier...it doesn't matter the artistic field chosen: poems, painting, music, theatre, audio-visual techniques, propositions, theoretical texts ...will have a place in *OVUM* [sic].

For this “second era” of *OVUM*, Padín also translated the magazine’s description into English, indicating an expectation to reach a broader international audience. By December the following year *OVUM* was redefined again, this time with no mention of poetry but as a magazine of “artistic research” disseminating the “contemporary currents of art” and as “an instrument of communication”.<sup>29</sup> Surprisingly, however, despite these notable changes in discourse, there was not a marked shift in the kind of material Padín published. This indicates that experimental poets were open to conceptual methods and ideas about intermedia because they had already been acquainted with them through earlier poetry networks.

The subtle change from “new poetry” to “new art” provides a fascinating trace of the relationship between experimental poetry and mail art and affirms that poetry networks in South America were crucial to the experimental practices that blossomed in the early 1970s.

Moreover, this material demonstrates that ‘conceptual’ experiments were not ‘belated’ in Latin America; in fact, they show that conceptualisms’ genealogies vary according to the specificities of modernity in any given place and the particularities of the artists involved. In his discussion of conceptual art, Peter Osborne notes that language-based art was connected to structuralist and post-structuralist philosophy.<sup>30</sup> The idea stemming from these schools of thought is of the detachment from the ‘real’ through language, which removes us from a proper understanding of our reality. Art works communicate using a different kind of language that can unveil the world, recovering it from the process of distortion through language, which is considered to be ideologically inflected and controlling. From this perspective, we can understand that the translation and reinterpretation of structuralist and post-structuralist theory for Spanish and Portuguese readers impacted upon the art scenes in Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil in a similar way as in New York or Paris, affecting the way in which artists understood their contemporary condition. **(Fig. 13)**



13- Alvaro de Sá, one page of a visual poem published in *OVUM* 1, n° 7, June 1971. Courtesy Clemente Padín Archive.

The magazine *Ponto* was published in Natal, north-east Brazil, and introduced ‘process poetry’ in 1967. Wlademir Dias-Pino’s “Limit Situation: Distinctions and Consequences” was

printed in the fifth issue of *OVUM 10* in December 1970, and later, in 1971, *Ponto* and *OVUM* were published as a collaborative edition. Dias-Pino was interested in Norbert Wiener's cybernetic theory,<sup>31</sup> Process Poetry focused on the "critical unleashing of always new structures," and, according to Dias-Pino, the process equalled the "discovery of reality".<sup>32</sup> Most crucially, he defines process poetry in relation to the idea of a coded system:

Process poetry builds on the advances of concrete poetry and moves towards that tendency toward visual conceptual games, scores and activities. Although these poems are not yet scores, they do suggest a secret code system waiting for a reader to interpret or play.<sup>33</sup>

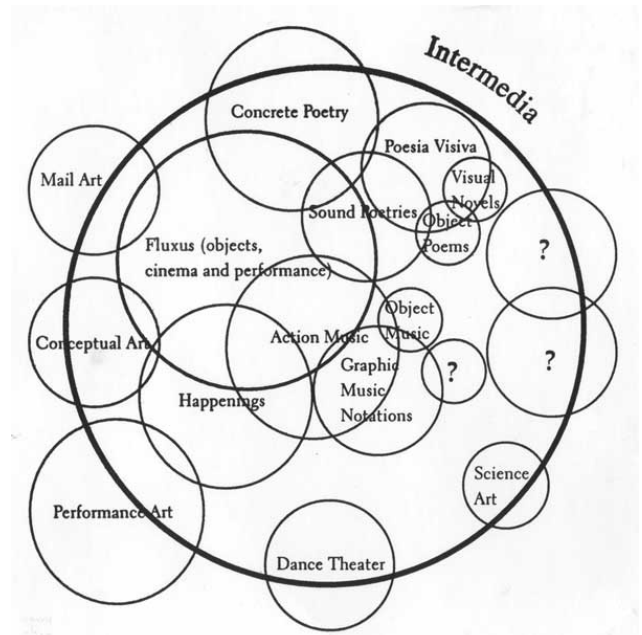
The idea of 'coded' poetry to be interacted with or 'played' suggests an art form in which, through participation, codified subjectivity can be rethought and even dismantled. Breaking up systems of control, whether applied to linguistic structure or art world institutions, was directly accompanied by the collapse of genre boundaries, the concept of fine art and indeed 'high' literature. Process Poetry rejected "discursive poetry" –concrete poetry that used words and linear writing– and avoided the structure of linguistics and the aura of the author.<sup>34</sup> Dias-Pino's ideas clearly make a link between conceptual processes and poetic practice, which meet in the middle of their radical rethinking of media hierarchy in the 1960s.

Nedie Sá notes the link between experimental poetry and mail art. The movement was networked – it arose in various cities at the same time:

Process Poetry was founded as a movement in 1967, it happened simultaneously in various 'points' throughout Brazil: here in Rio, in the North-East in Natal and Recife, and in Minas [Gerais]. From 1967-1972, the Process Poetry movement came to have about 250 participating artists and poets. It was open to new participants so that mail was intensively employed – art by post. Many of those who now do mail art participated in Process Poetry.<sup>35</sup>

Mail art's connection with concrete, visual and process poetry is apparent in the aesthetic tools employed by the artists: the use of images rather

than text, or the redefinition of text as image and the expansion of the verbal into the visual. (Fig. 14)



14- Intermedia Chart by Dick Higgins, 1981,

However, poetry and mail art share more than formal qualities: the insistence on participation as a key strategy is carried into mail art practices. Vigo's concept of a "Poetry to be Realised" both built upon and aimed to surpass both Process Poetry and Julien Blaine's "Poetry to Arm". In his 1969 article, Vigo argues for a newly open aesthetic code, proposing that the ludic should be the starting point for "an active participation in order to arrive at the MOST PROFOUND ACTIVATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL: REALIZATION by him of the poem [...] puts before us a "creator" and not a "consumer".<sup>36</sup> Despite its seemingly intimate character, the prosaic nature of mail art itself invites participation, and those artists who cross over both movements, such as Vigo, Padín, Paulo Bruscky and Guillermo Deisler maintained this concern for participation at the heart of their practice. Cristina Friere points out that as well as dada, Surrealism, Futurism, the Situationists and Fluxus, Paulo Bruscky's work owes much to the Russian avant-garde. El Lissitzky, Mayakovsky and Rodchenko's attempts to "unveil the unconsciousness of our routine actions", their investigation of the relationship between art and daily life, and an emphasis on collective work and commitment to multi-media art can be seen as key ideas not only

for Bruscky but also for other artists in Latin America.<sup>37</sup>

At its core, visual poetry investigates language as a constructed system, exploring its overlooked characteristics that reveal this even more clearly, drawing attention to its position in the world as a socially-defined process. In doing so, it also attempts to present opportunities for that system to be rethought and reconfigured. It is precisely this proposition that we see in the radical reconstruction of the poetic space of a poem in the work of the De Campos brothers and Décio Pignatari. If, as Frederico Morais suggests, “art is the founding gesture of the world”, the poets aimed for their works to constitute that gesture: a concrete project that aimed to imagine the world anew and disturb established perceptive matrixes.<sup>38</sup>

### **Mail Art: The “Borderland of the Concept”<sup>39</sup>**

The close connection between experimental poetry and mail art in South America discussed above also lends further clarification of what mail art’s relationship to conceptual art might be. Whereas conceptual art has been defined as “the mapping of the linguistic model on to the perceptual,” the visual poets explored the inverse strategy: a perceptual model was ‘mapped’ on to the linguistic.<sup>40</sup> Experimental poets wished to question narrative language and explore the visual properties of a poem in space as well as its participatory and interactive qualities.<sup>41</sup> This suggests that the ‘linguistic turn’ in art was inverted in visual poetry. In mail art, both conceptual propositions and visual poets were unable to completely relinquish their respective aesthetic and linguistic projects, and they formed linguistic-aesthetic hybrids that began to have much in common. These hybrids can be seen throughout the mail art network. If we conceive of conceptual art as having emerged partly as a response to structuralist and post-structuralist theories, this conception allows us to think in terms of the responses of artists from different localities to the history of ideas and to the conditions of modernity, rather than to locate the emergence of conceptual art in a given place (i.e. New York).

While Dick Higgins’ partisan *Intermedia Chart* separates mail and conceptual art, conceiving of them both as offshoots of Fluxus, artist-

historian Ken Friedman links Fluxus and mail art with the development of concept art through the figure of Henry Flynt, the author of the 1963 text ‘Concept Art’.<sup>42</sup> Friedman states that “Concept art is not so much an art movement or vein as it is a position or world-view, a focus for activity”.<sup>43</sup> This idea of conceptual art as undisciplined and heterogeneous is supported by Peter Osborne’s argument that conceptual art should not be seen as an art movement or style but as a period: “the standpoint from which to totalize the wide array of other anti-‘modernist’ movements”.<sup>44</sup> The standard canonical historicisation is already extremely problematic, as Benjamin Buchloch acknowledges: “to historicize Conceptual Art requires, first of all, a clarification of the wide range of often conflicting positions and the mutually exclusive types of investigation that were generated during this period”.<sup>45</sup> Buchloch’s acknowledgement points to a key problem in defining conceptual art: an art in which the primary conceit is the concept –in which the work can take myriad forms that are not formally restricted, and which challenges art’s commodity and institutionalised status– is hardly fixable.

First, it must be established that there has been much critical work to undo some of the assumptions of canonical art history in relation to conceptual art. By displacing notions of centre, periphery and belatedness, recent revisions of the art historical canon have repositioned the debate in the international arena.<sup>46</sup> The curatorial strategy of the 1999 exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* made a distinction between ‘conceptual art’ and ‘conceptualism’, shifting the definition from one limited by local Western Europe and North American manifestations to one that held that global social and political transformations were a major factor in the development of visual languages.<sup>47</sup> The exhibition’s organisers proposed that conceptual art denoted “an essentially formalist practice that developed in the wake of minimalism,” whereas conceptualism “broke decisively from the historical dependence of art on physical form and its visual apperception” and denoted “a critical return to an ordering of priorities”.<sup>48</sup> In this way what might have previously been referred to as ‘post-conceptual’ (perhaps not without an implicit suggestion of belatedness in

regard to so-called peripheral art scenes) became understood as conceptualism.

As some critics have pointed out, however, the reclassification of 1960s and 1970s artistic practices as conceptualism acts as a homogenising force; a process which perhaps negates their critical potential.<sup>49</sup> Miguel López has pointed to a variety of practices that have recently been subsumed in this way and questioned whether the term conceptualism helps us to understand their varied aesthetic proposals. He offers the following examples of practices now subsumed by the term conceptualism: Juan Acha's 'no-objetualismo' (non-object-based art); Ricardo Carreira's 'deshabitación' (dishabituation); Alejandro Jodorowsky's 'efimeros' (ephemerals); and Vigo's 'revulsivo' art:

Such subterranean theoretical constructs pose a latent conflict, a multitude of not-yet articulated and potential genealogies. Beyond mere naming, these words appear as proof of the fact that there is something irreducible – a discordant crossing of stories that point to divergent ways of living and constructing the contemporary – its capacity to unfold other times.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, *conceptualism* is a category constructed for the purposes of redrawing histories of conceptual practices. We should pay particular attention to the suffix; supplementing 'conceptual' with the traditional art historical 'ism' has the effect of locating the practices described by the term within the Western canon. Although the designation aimed to counter the dominant discourse of the centre, the term conceptualism could be seen to subject the extremely heterogeneous production of artists in Latin America to assimilation into a canonical history of art instead of acknowledging its specific contextual character and potential.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, to reject completely the understanding of these works in relation to conceptual art is to deny artists' complex interactions with the international scene, their sophisticated negotiation or translation of the specificity of their work in relation to a broader sphere, and their intense communications across borders. It is noticeable that mail artists such as Edgardo Antonio Vigo and Felipe Ehrenberg did conceive of their work in terms of conceptual art. Felipe Ehrenberg, for example,

talks of a 'sub-equipped' conceptual art for Latin America, qualifying the statement by pointing out that conceptual art is apposite in the region:

...this type of production achieves an almost total escape from the mercantile structures that condition artistic production in Latin America, precisely through the nature of the object itself, namely, the modesty of its materials, its extreme mobility (nearly always through the postal medium) and its intimate relation with the means of mass production.<sup>52</sup>

Vigo also described some elements of his work as conceptual: "My work (visual poetry, conceptual art, useless objects, hermetic comics) is testimony to my unwavering position of absolute freedom for the artist."<sup>53</sup>

Where does mail art fit into the recent historiographic approach to conceptual art? On the one hand mail art is vehemently anti-categorisation, its openness being defined by its medium rather than any programmatic style or principle. Nevertheless, for some artists mail art was a vehicle for sharing their conceptual propositions: performances, photographs and texts. For others, the mail art network could be interpreted as a conceptual work in itself; an on-going performance and proposition to redefine aesthetic parameters. Indeed, Craig Saper defines networked art as "sociopoetic", describing an art which is characterised by the fact that individual works "mean less than the distribution and compilation machinery or social apparatus".<sup>54</sup> It could also be thought of as a culture in the biological sense, from which conceptual art thrived, grew and spread, since artists sometimes tested out and researched their ideas first in their mail works before later making a non-postal version. Equally a postal version of a work could animate and distribute an idea that would usually be confined to a gallery. For example, for a mail exhibition based on Ray Johnson's network, organised by curator Marcia Tucker, Luis Camnitzer sent an envelope wrapped in fake bloody gauze. The envelope was based on a more substantial 1970 work, *Leftovers*, which was then on show in the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York.<sup>55</sup>

It is clear that conceptual methods were used in the mail art network: in Latin America the medium was particularly useful because of the challenges artists faced when operating in the

public sphere. By the 1970s, many artists were compelled to use the mail system – a direct result of censorship and self-censorship, artists who had been working with broadly conceptual intent gravitated to the relatively safe sphere of the mail art network. Conversely, mail artists in the United States or Western Europe had already elected not to take part in formal conceptual practices, perhaps because by the early to mid-1970s they were already considered part of the mainstream art world. Geza Pernekzsky notes this, mentioning an exhibition organised by Clemente Padín: “It appears that the Latin American artists considered the network a key which gave access not to the door of alternative art but instead to the gate of the whole contemporary art.”<sup>56</sup> There are, of course, notable exceptions to this broad schema, such as the English artist Robin Crozier, whose language-based but informal works might fit into an ‘expanded’ conceptual art. A broader understanding of these kinds of practices would allow the full range of response to the linguistic turn to materialise.

The difficulty in classification boils down to conceptualism’s extreme heterogeneity coupled with mail art’s ‘anything goes’ approach, which is the nature of intermedia works. Mail art should be seen as an anarchic, non-conformist relation of conceptual art; perhaps a ‘minor’ conceptualism, in the sense that it is used by Deleuze and Guattari. The authors explain that minor literature is deterritorialised, marginal, political, and collectively enunciated.<sup>57</sup> The closest definition in terms of mail art comes from the artist Allan Kaprow, who championed conceptual art as an interactive form of communication that was distinct from mass mediated visual communication.<sup>58</sup> Kaprow explained that the most important message was the idea of “oneself in connection with someone else.”<sup>59</sup> It may perhaps be fitting to consider it part of a broader, more flexible ‘conceptualism’, with an attendant awareness of the limitations of this approach and with Kaprow’s definition of dialogical communication in mind. Indeed, Vigo outlines a similar strategy in his 1976 text “Mail Art: A New Stage in the Revolutionary Process of Creation”: “In MARGINAL COMMUNICATION there is a tendency to reject technology, inclining toward the manual and above all toward A NEED TO COMMUNICATE BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS”.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, he states: “A POETIC LANGUAGE IS A SYSTEM

OF MEANING FOR THE COMMUNICATION OF IDEAS,” summing up his understand of the relation between the concept and the vehicle for its communication. Ultimately, however, mail art can be confined neither to conceptual art nor to conceptualism, as it operates across borders, bringing together artistic singularities into an ongoing ‘eternal network’. The recognition of mail art’s roots in experimental poetry rather than a response to mail art in the USA leads us some way to understanding how ideas travel through translation and publication, and the way artists respond to modernity. The merging of these networks with mail art created a complex, unorthodox and uncategorizable movement, not least because the singularity of each artist that participated in it.

## Notas

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller exploration of the internationalization of the mail art network see Zanna Gilbert, “Something Unnameable in Common: Translocal Collaborations at the Beau Geste Press”, *ArtMargins 2-3*, Spring 2012, pp. 45-72.

<sup>2</sup> *Concrete Poetry: An Exhibition in Four Parts*, ex-cat, Vancouver, Fine Arts Gallery-University of British Columbia, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> The Tate website’s *Glossary* for example, denotes the two as “strongly connected”. “Minimalism”, *Tate Glossary*, Tate website:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120203094030/http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=169>, accessed July 3, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Clemente Padín, *Mail Art in Latin America*, Concentric.net, Part 1 and 2, 1997, available at: <http://www.concentric.net/~lndb/Padín/lcpma1.htm> <http://www.concentric.net/~lndb/Padín/lcpma2.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Silvia Dolinko, “To Develop Images from Thoughts: The South American Travels of the New York Graphic Workshop” in Gabriel Pérez-Barreiro, *et. al.*, *The New York Graphic Workshop (1964- 1970)*, Austin, Blanton Museum of Art, The University of Texas at Austin, 2009, p. 35. See also Silvia Dolinko, *Arte Plural*, Buenos Aires, Edhasa, 2012, pp. 346-348.

<sup>6</sup> Edgardo Antonio Vigo, “First Argentine Antecedent,” Unpublished text in Vigo’s archive. Fundación Centro de Arte Experimental Vigo. [“En sucesivos envíos repartieron a las personas que conformaban el directorio del Instituto sobres conteniendo tarjetas – un número de cuatro cada una – inconclusas. De factura visual en Porter y literaria en Camnitzer. Recibidas con antelación, la respuesta a sus receptores se dió desde el día de la

inauguración de las experiencias con el complemento de lo faltante. Obviamente, y al margen de la intencionalidad de los autores es manifiestamente clara la inserción en el canal de las comunicaciones.”]

<sup>7</sup> Mari Carmen Ramírez, “Blueprint Circuits: Conceptual Art and Politics in Latin America,” in Rasmussem, Aldo (ed.), *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century*, exh-cat, New York, MoMA, 1993, p. 158. See also Jacqueline Barnitz, “Conceptual Art and Latin America: A Natural Alliance,” in Mari Carmen Ramírez, *Encounters/displacements: Luis Camnitzer, Alfredo Jaar, Cildo Meireles*, exh-cat, Austin, Archer Huntington Gallery, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Edgardo Antonio Vigo, “De la poesía processo a la poesía para y/o realizar”, *Diagonal Cero*, La Plata, 1969, unpaginated.

<sup>9</sup> Rogério Camara, *Grafo-Sintaxe Concreta: O Projeto Noigandres*, Rio de Janeiro, Rios Ambiciosas, 2000, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>14</sup> Fernanda Nogueira, “Políticas estéticas e ocupações poéticas: uma genealogia (im)possível a partir do concretismo brasileiro”, MA Thesis, São Paulo, USP, 2009, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> Suely Rolnik, “The Geopolitics of Pimping,” trans. Brian Holmes, December 2006, EIPCP website, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/rolnik/en>, accessed May 12, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Haroldo de Campos, “The Open Work of Art,” 1955, in Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (eds.), *Novas: Selected Writings, Haroldo de Campos*, Evanston, Northwestern University, 2007, pp. 220-248.

<sup>18</sup> Silvia Dolinko notes that Vigo’s initial exchanges were initiated through contact with the Brazilian Da Nirham Eros and his “bookpoem” Caisnaviomar (Dockboatsea): “Eros –the pseudonym of Antonio Miranda– found himself in Buenos Aires in 1962, and in June had delivered the course “verbal vanguard art”. This must have been when his connection with the Platense artists came about, who he exhibited with in September the same year under the name Grupo Integración....” Dolinko, p. 271.

<sup>19</sup> 11 issues of *Los Huevos del Plata* were published. The contributors to number seven are listed as: Bob Dylan, Blaise Cendrars, Jacques Rigaut, André Breton, René Char, Miguel Grinberg, Francisco Copelli, Manifiesto del Grupo Brasileño “Maldoror,” Padín, Buratosi, Curbelo, Linares, Iturriberry and Octavio Paz.

<sup>20</sup> Even at this time Vigo was aware of the pitfalls of his participatory aspirations, he called his participatory works “creative-conditioned-acts,” showing a concern with the possibility of attaining a truly ‘free’ experience between producer and consumer. Edgardo Antonio Vigo, “Nueva Vanguarda Poética en Argentina,” in *Los Huevos del Plata*, Montevideo, n° 7, April 1967.

<sup>21</sup> Vigo, *ibid*. “Señalizamos el cambio que se ha operado en todo el campo del arte, para lo cual a las citadas expresiones agregamos el cine, el teatro y la danza, nos encontraremos como existe “orgánicamente” una interrelación de esas tendencias. El “happening,” “acontecimiento,” “suceso,” “congregación,” “espectáculo,” “ambientación,” “hacer arte,” son membretes que pretenden definir justamente esa INTEGRACIÓN NATURAL que ha producido y vienen a solucionar el aparente caos, no atribuible al arte, sino al hombre que rebusca “casilleros” para ordenarse.” “la diagramación, la propaganda, los elementos legados por las revistas dadaístas, futuristas, de los vanguardistas rusos y de los neo-plasticistas (DE STIJL) también ayudan a esta poesía visual. La hoja en blanco ya no es únicamente utilizada para testimoniar nuestras lágrimas, alegrías o lamentos sino que ha pasado a ser respetable cuna de creación pura.” [“We note the change that has happened in the entire field of art, for which the cited expressions we aggregate the cinema, the theatre and dance, we find how there is an “organic” interrelation of these tendencies. The “happening,” “event,” “congregation,” “show,” “environment,” “to make art,” are labels that hope to define precisely this NATURAL INTEGRATION that has been produced and they come to resolve this apparent chaos, not attributable to art but to the man who searched for “pigeonholes” to order himself? [...] design/layout, advertising, elements inherited from dada magazines, futurists, from the Russian vanguards and from the neo-plasticists (DE STIJL) also contribute to this visual poetry. The blank sheet is no longer only used to testify to our tears, our happiness or our sorrows but what has become a respected birthplace of pure creation.”]

<sup>22</sup> See Inés Katzenstein and Andrea Giunta, (eds.), *Listen! Here! Now! Argentine Art in the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-garde*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Clemente Padín, *OVUM 10*, Montevideo, n° 1, December, 1969, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Blaine was likely to have been introduced to Padín through Vigo, who published his work in *Diagonal Cero*.

<sup>25</sup> Padín, *ibid*, p. 4. [El significante, tradicional evocador de imágenes por asociación psíquica, se ha erigido en el verdadero protagonista de la poesía...El significante ya no evoca imágenes, ni identifica sentimientos, ni trasmite estados de ánimos. Los elementos del lenguaje se transmiten a sí mismos. Nada de sentidos, nada de conceptos, nada de hipérbolos. Si la relación significante/significado siempre ha sido un sistema convencional de signos creado para la comunicación entre los hombres, ¿por qué utilizarlo, con qué autoridad se nos impone una herramienta ineficaz para develar lo poético cuando ya ha demostrado largamente su incapacidad?]

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the linguistic turn see Françoise Dosse, *History of Structuralism: The rising sign, 1945-1966*, Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Vigo, “Nueva Vanguarda”: “torna los elementos geométricos utilizados en una a-geometrización.”

<sup>29</sup> Clemente Padín, *OVUM*, Montevideo, n° 4, December 1974, unpaginated.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Osborne, *Conceptual Art: Themes and movements*, London, Phaidon, 2002, p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> In a chronology of *Poema/Processo* Dias-Pino states: "Before the new technological, cosmic, experimental and social reality, the thought of Norbert Wiener is evident." ["Diante da nova realidade técnica, cósmica, experimental and social, evidencia-se o pensamento cibernético de Norbert Wiener"]. Wladimir Dias-Pino, "O Poema Processo e as Linguagens Experimentais," *Revista de Cultura Vozes* 1, 1978, electronic document: [http://www.nac.ufrn.br/museu\\_virtual/poeticas-visuais/poema-processo/texto-poema-processo.htm](http://www.nac.ufrn.br/museu_virtual/poeticas-visuais/poema-processo/texto-poema-processo.htm), accessed May 25, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Wladimir Dias-Pino "Process: Project Reading", *Rio/Montevidéo: Ponto/OVUM*, October, 1969.

<sup>33</sup> Cited by Craig Saper, *Networked art*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> Craig Saper, *op. cit.*, p. 18. The *Noigandres Group* interpreted *Poema Processo*'s innovations as a development and further radicalisation of their achievements, rather than a criticism of their efforts. Cited by Dias-Pino, *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Nedie Sá, Interview with Regina Célia Pinto, undated, Museu do Essencial e do Além Disso, electronic document: <http://www.artonline.arq.br/museu/interviews/neide.htm>, accessed July 4, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Edgardo Antonio Vigo, "De la poesía processo a la poesía para y/o realizar", *Diagonal Cero*, La Plata, 1969. The capital letters from Vigo's original text are maintained. The following year it would be re-published in Vigo's own editorial endeavour *Hexágono '71*.

<sup>37</sup> Cristina Freire, *Paulo Bruscky: Arte, Arquivo e Utopia*, Recife, Companhia Editora de Pernambuco, 2006, p. 219. Argentine theorist Oscar Masotta, for example, referred to El Lissitzky's concept of dematerialisation in his lecture "After Pop, we Dematerialise" in the Instituto Di Tella in 1967.

<sup>38</sup> Nogueira, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>39</sup> Geza Perneckzky, *The Magazine Network*, trans. Tibor Szendrei, Koln, Soft Geometry, 1991, p. 27.

<sup>40</sup> See Benjamin Buchloch, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", *October*, vol. 55, Winter, 1990, p. 106.

<sup>41</sup> Clemente Padín, "La Poesía Experimental Latinoamericana (1950-2000)", electronic document: <http://www.boek861.com/Padín/indice.htm>, accessed March 2, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Henry Flynt's essay was published in La Monte Young and George Maciunas's *An Anthology* in 1963.

<sup>43</sup> Ken Friedman, "Notes on Concept Art," *Schmuck*, Cullompton, Devon, Beau Geste Press, 1972, unpaginated.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Osborne, "Art Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art", *Art History* 27, issue 4, September 2004, p. 663.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> The exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin* at the Queens Museum of Art in 1999 was paradigmatic in shifting the definition of conceptualism. See Farver, (ed.), *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, New York, Queens Museum of Art, 1999. Art historian Luke Skrebowski connects an expansive model of conceptual art to a broader geographical span: "Recent scholarship has sought to argue for an enlarged canon of conceptual art as well as for its ongoing relevance to contemporary art. Here, three broad argumentative strategies can be discerned: (i) Inclusion: an insistence on the "conceptual" status of artists not formerly considered within the rubric; (ii) Expansion: a geographical extension of the boundaries where a legitimately "conceptual" art is deemed to have appeared; (iii) Differentiation: a finer differentiation of "canonical" Anglo- American conceptual art, such that the category itself is rendered more nuanced". Skrebowski here points to a reassessment of what constitutes conceptual art since the early 1990s, broadening the definition beyond that of one local manifestation – that of New York. Luke Skrebowski, "Systems, contexts, relations: an alternative genealogy of conceptual art", PhD diss, Middlesex University, 2009, p. 44.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> See Miguel López, "How do we know what Latin American Conceptualism looks like?" *Afterall*, n° 23 Spring 2010, electronic document: <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.23/how.do.we.know.what.latin.american.conceptualism.looks.likemiguel.a.lopez>, accessed May 28, 2011 and Iris Dressler, "Subversive Practices: Art under the conditions of political repression/60s-80s/South America-Europe", in Iris Dressler and Hans D. Christ, *Subversive Practices: Art under the conditions of political repression/60s-80s/South America-Europe*, Stuttgart, Hatje Cantz, 2011, pp. 42-3.

<sup>50</sup> Miguel López, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>52</sup> Felipe Ehrenberg, *Testimonios de Latioamérica*, ex-cat, Mexico City, National Institute of Fine Arts, September 20 1978, p. 2.

<sup>53</sup> ["Minha obra (poesia visual, arte conceitual, objetos inúteis, historietas herméticas) testemunha minha indeclinável posição de absoluta liberdade quanto ao trabalho do artista".] Walter Zanini, *Prospectiva*, ex-cat, São Paulo, MAC-USP, 1974, unpaginated.

<sup>54</sup> Craig Saper, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Author's email correspondence with Luis Camnitzer, August 2012: "Ray was a neighbor of us in Locust Valley and we mailed stuff to each other (we shared the mailman, who would announce "here is a good one" and I appointed him critic in residence). But there was no influence. He used correspondence as a medium. We started using it as a substitute exhibition space to make up for our lack of galleries. At the time we didn't know about him and his project. He invited me to participate in the Whitney project, but I think my piece was not shown because Marcia Tucker

didn't like it (an envelope wrapped in fake bloody gauze, like the *Leftover* piece).

<sup>56</sup> Pernecky, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

<sup>57</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, trans. Dana Polan, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

<sup>58</sup> Kristine Stiles and Edward A. Shanken, "Missing in Action: Agency and Meaning in Interactive Art," in Margot Lovejoy *et al.*, *Context Providers: Context and Meaning in Digital Art*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, p. 39.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>60</sup> Edgardo Antonio Vigo, "A New Stage in the Revolutionary Process of Creation", 1976, available at: [http://post.at.moma.org/content\\_items/456-comunicacion-a-distancia-los-escritos-de-edgardo-antonio-vigo-acerca-del-arte-correo](http://post.at.moma.org/content_items/456-comunicacion-a-distancia-los-escritos-de-edgardo-antonio-vigo-acerca-del-arte-correo).

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