Danish Artists in the International Mail Art Network
Charlotte Greve

According to one definition of mail art, it is with the simple means of one or more elements of the postal language that artists communicate an idea in a concise form to other members of the mail art network.[1] The network constitutes an alternative gallery space outside the official art institution; it claims to be an anti-bureaucratic, anti-hierarchic, anti-historicist, trans-national, global counter-culture. Accordingly, transcendence of boundaries and a destructive relationship to stable forms and structures are important elements of its Fluxus-inspired idealistic self-understanding.[2] The mail art artist and art historian Géza Perneczky describes the network as "an imaginary community which has created a second publicity through its international membership and ever expanding dimensions".[3] It is a utopian artistic community with a striving towards decentralized expansion built on sharing, giving and exchanging art through the postal system.

A culture of circulation is built up around a notion of what I will call *sendable art.* According to this notion, distance, delay and anticipation add signification to the work of art. Since the artists rarely meet in *flesh and blood* and the only means of communication is through posted mail, distance and a temporal gap between sending and receiving are important constitutive conditions for the network communication. In addition, very simple elements of the mail art language gain the status of signs of subjectivity, which, in turn, become constitutive marks of belonging. These are the features which will be the focus of this investigation of the participation of the Danish artists Mogens Otto Nielsen, Niels Lomholt and Carsten Schmidt-Olsen in the network during the period from 1974–1985.

[1] Only few books have been written on mail art. Among these is *Networked Art* by Craig Saper. Books have also been written by John Held Jr., Vittore Baroni, Géza Perneczky, and Chuck Welch, who are active members of the network community. In Danish, the book *Post* by Knud Pedersen has recently appeared.

[2] See Géza Perneczky. *The Magazine Network. The Trends of Alternative Art in the Light of Their Periodicals, 1968-1988,* Köln: (Géza Perneczky), 1993, p. 8. It is striking how this network resembles the Internet, and it ought to be interesting to examine how the network has adapted to the new technological situation in the late 1980s. However, this is beyond the scope of the present article (see Craig J. Saper. *Networked Art.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

[3] Géza Perneczky. The Magazine Network. The Trends of Alternative Art in the Light of Their Periodicals, 1968-1988, Köln: (Géza Perneczky), 1993, p. 8.

On a concrete level, in examining the mail art network, one encounters the practical difficulty that the network projects are only rarely exhibited at recognized galleries or museums. In turn, assembled magazines are rarely collected by archives, museums, libraries, or other official institutions. Therefore, archives have been established by active participants of the mail art community themselves. Here one is confronted, though, by the specific problem of the way mail art is saved in archives: since mail art is about sending art through the postal system to other members of the mail art community, studying the archive of one particular artist provides little insight into his or her own production, but rather into the production of those artists with whom the artist has been corresponding. Generally, only when a work of mail art was included in, e.g., an assembled magazine or a box project, which was sent to the producer of the work of art, could such a work be found in the archive of the artist him- or herself. The following investigation is based on material studied in the private archives of a number of Danish and East European mail artists.

Apart from Mogens Otto Nielsen, Niels Lomholt and Carsten Schmidt-Olsen, a few other Danish artists produced mail art.[4] However, for a period of several years, Mogens Otto Nielsen, Niels Lomholt and Carsten Schmidt-Olsen were the only regular participants. In addition, they integrated the mail art concept into the overall concept of their artistic production. One reason for their involvement might be found in the circumstance that these three artists belonged both artistically and geographically to the periphery of mainstream Danish art. Thus, apart from producing highly experimental art, they also lived in small provincial towns. However, in the mail art network, they managed to contribute on a considerable scale and even organized events, became editors of magazines, and were in touch with long-time contributors to the network.

Sendable art

In 1981 Carsten Schmidt-Olsen edited a project called *Bodies of Artists*, which had contributions from 86 artists from 18 different countries. Contributors were asked to send in traces, residues, images etc. of their own bodies. The invitation bore a blood stain of Carsten Schmidt-Olsen, and his contribution was an image of a glass and a bottle of blood tapped from his own body. Mogens Otto Nielsen contributed with a hair sample and a stamped portrait, while Niels Lomholt sent in a photo of three bottles of bathing water, which supposedly contained bodily residues left in the water after taking a bath. A similar project

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[4] Among others Knud Pedersen, William Louis Sørensen, Marianne Rønnow, Poul Esting, Peter Doose, and Steen Møller Rasmussen have participated in mail art projects.

was edited by Mogens Otto Nielsen. Artists were invited to send in a piece of their land. These projects are examples of *sendable* art. This notion is invoked here as a critique of the concept of *receivable* art, developed by Craig Saper in his book *Networked Art* (2001).

The focus of Craig Saper is on what he calls *intimate bureaucracies*: "An intimate bureaucracy makes poetic use of the trappings of large bureaucratic systems and procedures (e.g., logos, stamps) to create intimate aesthetic situations, including the pleasures of sharing a special knowledge or a new language among a small network of participants".[5] Saper maintains that mail art (or, in other words, networked art) invents an "intimate gift-exchange community"[6] in order to avoid the market economy of the art world. This means accepting any contribution received and "shares a connection to this sense of potlatch".[7] According to Saper, the artists seek "a democratic form of art".[8] Accordingly, Saper claims, the artists (contrary to the bureaucracy of the art institutions and surrounding society) attempt to "construct non-hierarchical systems (…) [according to which] all contributions have the same space".[9] At the same time, Saper claims, "all contributions have the same space, but the result is secret codes, idiosyncratic works and hermetic poetry".[10]

A number of problems arise from such a theoretical standpoint; firstly, Saper does not develop the concept of gift-economy, but simply refers to a rather idealistic conception of this phenomenon based on sharing between equals in a harmonious relationship of co-existence. Secondly, he claims that the practice of everyone's access to and acceptance into the exhibition space, which is constituted by the assembled magazines, is a sign of *democracy.* Apart from the fact that democracy can hardly simply be equalled with access and participation, Saper is blind to the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, the value-system built up in the network, and the way the mail art language functions as *signs of belonging*. Moreover, he develops a concept of *receivable art* from Roland Barthes' scattered notes on the term. Barthes distinguishes this category of texts from both the *readerly* text and the *writerly* text, as texts which he gladly receives, but he does not know what to make of. He speaks of that, which contests the mercantile

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[5] Craig Saper. *Networked Art,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, p. xii.

[6] *Op.cit.*, p. x.

[7] *Op.cit.*, p. 99.

[8] *Op.cit.*, p. xii.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

constraint of what is written, and that, which is unpublishable.[11] This art, Saper claims, creates "intense, intimate situations (…) They are produced for, and by, usually small circles of artists, writers, and friends, and the results often arrive in the mail, as mail art".[12] Citing a member of the mail art community and long time archivist Guy Bleus, Saper claims that mail art suspends traditional norms of judgment. Again, a notion of exchange is invoked which involves equals, friends, and intimate associates. In addition, the category of the *receivable* art inserts the identity of the receiver as a precondition for the exchange. However, mail art is about distance,[13] about not knowing the identity of the other members of the network, and not knowing if the work of art will be received.

Thus, mail art is about sending art by the postal system. Mail art adds a spatial-temporal framework to the postal system.[14] It is not just about sending art from one place to another; it is about circulation, networking, and transcendence (national borders, aesthetic limitations, bureaucratic rules, political censorship, and so on). Since mail art is rarely collected by museums or libraries or included in official archives, its magazines, correspondence, objects, residues and traces are kept within an archival community of the network itself. In addition, all parts of the postal system have been appropriated and reinvented: stamps, rubber stamps, postcards, envelopes, and stickers. However, elements of the postal system permeate the mail art network on more profound levels as well. Mail art gains signification because of distance (not intimacy) and the risk that a work of art may never be returned; never reach its addressee. The *sendable* art may be lost and forgotten. This is a built in element of indeterminacy and randomness of the postal system, which Jacques Derrida identifies in *Carte Postale:* "there is differance […] and there is postal manoeuvring, relays, delay, anticipation, destination, telecommunicating network, the possibility, and therefore the fatal necessity of going astray, etc.".[15]

This ambivalence of presence, on the one hand, and of absence and delay, on the other hand, which is invoked by Derrida in his own "correspondence"-

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[11] *Op.cit.*, p. 3.

[12] *Op.cit.*, p. 4.

[13] In fact, perhaps the concept of networked art should be replaced by that of *art at a distance*, a concept used in the anthology *Art at a Distance. Precursers to Art and Activism on the Internet* (eds. Chandler, Annmarie & Norie Neumark), Cambridge, Mass. & London, England: The MIT Press, 2006.

[14] Ina Blom. "Boredom and Oblivion". *The Fluxus Reader,* (Ed. Ken Friedman), New York et al.: Academy Editions, 1998, p. 77.

[15] Jacques Derrida. "Signature Event Context", *Limited Inc,* (Trans. Samuel Weber and Jefrey Mehlman), Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988, pp. 66.

novel *Carte Postale*, makes obvious the distance of communication, which is the characteristic of writing as such. The letter, a written medium, which is sent at a distance, is a symptom of the experience of non-presence, which is the principle of writing, as Derrida sees it. The postal system is a temporal frame, which is associated with emotionally charged memory systems: "the 'when' of waiting and frustration, of lost and found, of detours and delays. If anything, it invests indeterminacy with significance and emotion, trace and memory all modified by possibilities of oblivion, failure, and actual displacement".[16] This is what is contained in the "postal principle" of Jacques Derrida.

Ina Blom makes use of this framework in her analysis of the postal music of the Fluxus artist Nam June Paik. Blom names two aspects of the postal system which are of significance to the character of the mail art network. First, the postal system and administration are structures of distribution; it is an empty framework waiting to be filled "precluding any actual relation between structure and the 'filling material'".[17] In Paik's case, the "filling material" included objects laden with the memory of recent political atrocities, illness, sex and the body, it even included "traces" and "residues" of the body of John Cage.[18] Second, she argues, the postal system is not entirely empty after all; it "can hardly be separated from the social reality of the goods it distributes, the rules and the concerns governing this distribution, and, not least, the shifting and insecure temporal frameworks associated with this institution".[19]

A culture of exchange

Bodies of artists by Carsten Schmidt-Olsen and *Send a Piece of Your Land* by Mogens Otto Nielsen both included an invitation to a large number of artists, asking them to contribute, while Carsten Schmidt-Olsen and Mogens Otto Nielsen took the position of editors. Thereby, the possibility of an exchange is created. Only in the case of the acceptance of the invitation by the artists and the sending of their art to the editors, is the exchange set to work. In this way, the nature of the exchange is that of regulated actions of giving, receiving, and returning, which both Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu have pointed out as inherent elements of the gift-exchange economy. According to Bourdieu, it is the time interval between the act of giving and the act of returning that makes it

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[16] Ina Blom. "Boredom and Oblivion". *The Fluxus Reader,* (Ed. Ken Friedman), New York et al.: Academy Editions, 1998, p. 77.

[17] *Op.cit.*, p. 76.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*

possible to present the two symmetrical actions as unique and unconnected. Thus, the power-relations inherent in the gift-exchange economy (the debt of the receiver and his or her obligation to pay back upon receiving a gift) are concealed. This economy, then, makes sharing possible, and it makes an alternative gallery space work. At the same time, it involves a risk: the invitation may not be accepted and the circulation has then never started, the responding artist may never receive an invitation again, should he or she choose not to respond, and, what is more important, the pieces of art may be destroyed or get lost in the postal system. The art work loses its status of uniqueness and, as a consequence, its commodity value; instead it becomes ephemeral and *worthless*. Sending bodily residues through the mail art system, thus, entails an element of risk: the risk of failure, delay, loss, and forgetting of one's *self*. What is important is not the possibility of receiving (the *receivable*), but the possibility of *not* receiving, *not* accepting, and *not* returning, and, at the same time, the risk of sending, but never being received. Therefore, it is in the time interval between sending, receiving and returning, signification is added to art in the mail art network.

It is clear from the analysis above that *Bodies of Artists* and *Send a Piece of your Land* are a kind of repeated gestures pointing to similar and previous gestures by other artists (*Bodies of Artists* probably points to the postal music of Nam June Paik). Thus, the sending of *unique* bodily samples is already a repetition. It is, in other words, not so much the work of art itself (residues, samples, images of the artists) as the gesture and the confirmation of recognition by the contributing artists, which is important. Mail art becomes an emotionally laden memory system, containing, remembering, and reproducing images, texts, signs, and even bodily remains of its own participants and founders. At the same time, one fundamental precondition of the posting of art to distant and often unknown fellow artists is that the piece of art may never be received, or returned, for that matter; it may be lost and forgotten. This precondition undermines the self-referential signs of authenticity of mail art.

The New York Correspondence School
Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School of Art (which was founded in the late 1950s and received its name in 1962) is one of the precursors of the mail art network. The School developed as a relatively closed circle of artists. At the 1970 exhibition *Ray Johnson: New York Correspondence School* initiated by Johnson himself and curated by Marcia Tucker at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, contributions from one hundred and six participants

of the Correspondence School were included.[20] The exhibition relied on the creative response of the invited artists. In turn, all submitted works were exhibited. Thereby, the exhibition marked a radical departure from traditional standards of quality and taste associated with the curatorial process. The exhibition was an attempt to create a dynamically open-ended forum for artistic collaboration.[21] Characteristic for the NYCS community was its attempt to build up a counter-culture as an alternative and open exhibition space based on collaborative work and exchange. Contributions to the NYCS were always in circulation and therefore indicative of a kind of self-effacement.

Thus, for the Whitney exhibition Johnson sent out announcements requesting contributions from various artists, friends, and strangers. In the contribution of May Wilson, this initial announcement was included with Wilson's red spray paint across its surface. The same announcement was used by Johnson in a letter to Wilson placed above a found photograph of five women quilting. Johnson names the women on the photograph "Colette", "Eleanor (Antin)", "May (Wilson)", "Drag queen", and "Louise (Bourgeois)" thereby creating a virtual community of artists around May Wilson.[22] Similarly, in the announcement inviting John Willenbecher to contribute to the exhibition, Johnson wrote: "Dear John, This is an important document, You are the first on the Whitney list… You are the first to get the ball rolling… all you have to do is sock it to Marcia. Do your thing… You might work on this important document since it's the first to go out. [signed] Babar".[23] Such communication created a culture of sharing, dynamic mobility and exchange, in which references flowed through the correspondence letters to the members of the community. Art history, prior exchanges, and communication of the mass media were the main points of reference. In April 1973, in a letter to the New York Times, Ray Johnson announced the death of the NYCS, but the practice of building up exchange communities that made use of the postal system continued and proliferated. Since the late 1970s, mail art has become a widespread global decentralized network community. Taking its influence from various counter-art cultural groupings and movements, it developed its techniques of

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[20] Sharla Sarva. "Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School: The Fine Art of Communication", *Ray Johnson. Correspondences* (eds. De Salvo, Donna and Cathrine Gudis), Columbus, Ohio et al.: Wexner Center for the Arts., 1999, p. 122.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Op.cit.*, p. 128.

[23] *Ibid.*

correspondence adding features from Les Nouveaux Réalistes, Dada, Fluxus, lettrism and the Situationist International.

Appropriation and détournement
Accordingly, appropriation and détournement are important devices in the mail art network exchange culture. Appropriation was developed by Dada and is often associated with Marcel Duchamp's adding of a moustache to *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci or his appropriation of a urinal by signing it.[24] In turn, détournement was developed by the Situationist International and theorized by Guy Debord in the 1960s.[25] The situationists criticized the early avant-garde Dadaism and Surrealism for having become contained and contaminated by the market industry. Different from the technique of appropriation, the intention of the détournement technique was to use an already existing representation to criticize the original and propagate the situationist theory of the Society of the Spectacle. When used by the mail art community, the difference between the concepts can be difficult to see. However, when an artist adds a signature to a work of art or a text by someone else from the mail art community, or by other artists outside the community, it is a question of appropriation, while the technique of détournement can be recognized in the widespread use and re-use of popular media images: comics, popular magazine images, film clips, and commercials.

   Both techniques function as widely used montage techniques making use of various kinds of identity markers. Thus, a superimposition of a personal mark on the body of the *other* text is a sign of appropriation, or over-writing of the *original* text with a new one. Appropriation is constituted by a series of returns and projections: returns to *previous* texts/images and the projection of these texts and images into the artist's *new* work. One of Mogens Otto Nielsen's most commonly used rubberstamps reads "All reproduction, modification, derivation, and transformation of this object is permitted". This principle is used in a

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[24] In *Postproduction*, Nicolas Bourriaud (Nicolas Bourriaud. *Postproduction* (Ed. Caroline Schneider, trans. Jeanine Herman), New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002, p. 36) characterizes the art of the twentieth century as "an art of montage (the succession of images) and détourage (the superimposition of images)".

[25] One of the groups, which influenced the Danish mail artists, was the Danish offshoot from the Situationist International grouped around the Danish artist Jørgen Nash, who founded Drakabygget (The Draka Settlement). This was an artists community situated at the south of Sweden and built up at the beginning of the 1960s. Danish artists such as Jens Jørgen Thorsen, William Louis Sørensen and Hans-Jørgen Nielsen were associated with the community.

project in which a Xerox-copied page showing an office environment bears the inscription "Atmosphere Controlled". On the back side, artists are asked to "act" on the page. On such a page, Jacques Massa, a French artist, has inserted a rubber stamp used and developed by Mogens Otto Nielsen. It consists of the typed words "heart" and "earth". In the appropriated version of the French artist, the heart is reversed. On another page, John Held Jr. a British artist and mail art historian has appropriated the office environment by cutting open a 'window' in the middle. On the reverse side of the cut out piece now functioning as a window shutter, he has stamped an image of a telegraph officer and the words "aporation by John Held Jr [*sic*]". In his version, Guillermo Deisler plays on the notion of originality by stamping "Original" in the office space as well as inserting images from what seems to be popular magazines of a piece of cake and a naked woman's arm. As a counter-culture operating within an alternative gallery space, the point of sale, i.e. the commodification of art, is constantly questioned and subverted.

Signatures

From the previous examples, it is obvious that the mail art network is constituted by artists, who make their identity visible with the means of a number of simple techniques. They include slogans, stamps, rubberstamps, stickers, logos, or marks of kisses. Some of the devices (the thumbprints, marks of kisses, signatures, burnt holes, or hair samples) directly point to the *author in flesh and blood*; they function as signatures. They mimic the devices used to reify the artists' touch as a sign of authenticity and originality, which, again, has been a point from which the value of a work of art was set. The mail art is not for sale, it is exchanged, and the hand of the author is an identity mark, which mocks the official art system. At the same time, the signature is an important means of identification.

Therefore, in mail art language stamps, slogans and other textual-visual elements acquire the status of a signature. These textual-visual elements are often used as a means of communicating an idea within a group of mail artists. Thus, the overall concept of the various art projects of Mogens Otto Nielsen is headed by "Atmosphere controlled". Important for the mail art contributions of the artist are several rubber stamps. Among these is a thumbprint with a cut. When stamped on a page, the thumbprint presents itself as a kind of statement of identity, as a signature. The page frames the signature / thumbprint as the archetype ideal of a signature. The action consists in visualizing the archetype ideal ("original") of a signature when looking at the empty frame.

However, the *self* inscribed in the signature is a sign, which Roman Jacobson has identified as a shifter:

> "I" means the person uttering "I". Thus on one hand, the sign "I" cannot represent its object without being associated with the latter "by a conventional rule," and in different codes the same meaning is assigned to different sequences such as "I", "ego", "Ich", "ja" etc.: consequently "I" is a symbol. On the other hand, the sign "I" cannot represent its object without being in existential relation" with this object: the word "I" designating the utterer is existentially related to his utterance, and hence functions as an index.[26]

In fact, the signature embraces several types of signs. It is a trace with an existential link to the *hand of the maker*; an image with some likeness to the *real* signature, and it is a text, a social communicative system relying on a conventional link between signifier and signified (and the *absence* of the referent). In writing, Derrida has claimed, a fundamental feature is absence, not only absence of the signified (sound and meaning) but also of the writer and the circumstances (the context) in which the text was written. This is a fundamental departure from Saussure's theory of (spoken) language, which is marked by singularity and unity (between signifier and signified, the utterance and the speaker, and between the act of uttering and the circumstances surrounding it). Writing disrupts this singularity and unity by the distance between the written mark and the writer. Accordingly, the thumbprint – as a signature – is staged in a complex play of confirmation and denial.

A performativity of belonging

In the case of the page with a thumbprint by Mogens Otto Nielsen, the thumbprint functions as a signature, a legal identity marker. It points to the artist "Mogens Otto Nielsen", who, with this gesture of marking a page with a fingerprint, states his identity. Thus, the thumbprint as a signature points indexically to Mogens Otto Nielsen. However, the reader cannot be sure of the identity of Mogens Otto Nielsen. The artist *in flesh and blood* is absent and the thumbprint acts as a stand-in; it signifies the artist Mogens Otto Nielsen, but this sign of "Mogens Otto Nielsen", might be different from the artist Mogens Otto Nielsen, who is absent.

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[26] Roman Jacobson. *Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb,* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1957, p. 2.

In Derrida's critique of J. L. Austin's speech act theory, focus has been put on the social conventions which guarantee the possibility of performing a speech act. Writing, Derrida claims, relies most fundamentally on a notion of iterability that renders the unity between utterance and speaker, signifier and signifier impossible. Not even a receiver of the text is necessary for it to function as writing.[27] In order to read a written text, the reader must (despite empirical variations) be able to recognize the identity of a signifying form. These iterative marks can be decoded independent of the producer, and the reader (however distant in time and space) must be able to read the text. Therefore, however individual a handwriting and signature might be, it is always repeatable, it is also just a quotation.[28]

The thumbprint by Mogens Otto Nielsen signifies the presence of the artist, but, at the same time, the absence of Mogens Otto Nielsen (and the difference of "Mogens Otto Nielsen" from Mogens Otto Nielsen) is further emphasized by the implicit repeatability of the thumbprint gesture. The thumbprint is not only a sign of "Mogens Otto Nielsen", but also a sign of "Piero Manzoni", an Italian artist from the Arte Povera tradition, who frequently used thumbprints to mark his pages. One such page, named *Thumbprint* (1960), bears a thumbprint in the middle of a white page and a signature (of Manzoni) with a date beneath it. This sign of "Manzoni" is recognizable and readable within the Fluxus or mail art community. Thus, the sign of identity becomes a sign of "Mogens Otto Nielsen quoting Piero Manzoni".

Derrida insists that citation and iterability is a precondition for every speech act. Therefore, however individual a signature might be, it is always repeatable, it is also just a quotation. In other words, subjectivity is not something we are given, but something we perform.[29] In Mogens Otto Nielsen's quoting Manzoni, the artist also quotes mail art visual language. Thus, the thumbprint can be seen on numerous pages in the mail art assembled magazines. On one such page of the ten-year anniversary edition of the assembled magazine *Bambu* (No. 13, 1992), Bill Whorrall, Cracker Jack Kid (Chuck Welch), Creative Thing, Ruggero Maggi, Minoy, Peggy Calvett, and Guy Bleus wish *Bambu* Happy Birthday with each of their thumbprints inside a square of the checkered page.

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[27] Jacques Derrida. "Signature Event Context", *Limited Inc.* (Trans. Samuel Weber and Jefrey Mehlman), Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1987, p. 7.

[28] *Op.cit.*, p. 20.

[29] I owe this theoretical outline to Mieke Bal (see Mieke Bal. *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities. A Rough Guide,* Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press. 2002, pp. 174–182).

Beneath the thumbprint, the name and date of birth of each of the artists are typewritten.

It is obvious that the rubber stamped thumbprint of Mogens Otto Nielsen is a personal variant of Manzoni's thumbprint. In this personal mark, Mogens Otto Nielsen quotes Manzoni, but at the same time, he quotes a simple gesture from the mail art vocabulary. Thus, the thumbprint is a simple device used as a means of communication on several levels: firstly, Mogens Otto presents his own variant of a thumbprint as a signature; secondly, the print signals knowledge of art history (Manzoni); thirdly, it signals a belonging to the mail art community. In this thumbprint, Mogens Otto Nielsen quotes a simple gesture from the mail art vocabulary. This gesture is a sign of subjectivity, which signals a belonging to a mail art community in which quoting Manzoni is part of the system of repetition and quotation, which constitutes its mechanism of inclusion. Vicky Bell names such a system a "performativity of belonging":

> The performativity of belonging 'cites' the norms that constitute or make present the 'community' or group as such. The repetition, sometimes ritualistic repetition, of these normalized codes makes material the belongings they purport to simply describe.[30]

On other levels too, Mogens Otto Nielsen makes a double statement of pointing to himself and to his belonging to the mail art community. The Hungarian Éndre Tot was one of the pioneers of Eastern European mail art, his signature was a photo of himself with a big smile and an inscription saying: "I am glad if I can stamp", "I am glad if I can advertise on posters", and so on. In Fluxus, the use of mug shots on stamps, the so-called Fluxpost, was widely used. Mogens Otto Nielsen's variant is a rubber stamp showing a photo of himself. A similar portrait is signifying Carsten Schmidt-Olsen. It is obvious that humor and irony are commonly used devices. This can be seen in Carsten Schmidt-Olsen's use of ready-made images such as old pornographic images, or ready-made stamps such as the National Health Service stamp with which Schmidt-Olsen poses as a Physician Authorized Vaccinator.

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[30] Vicky Bell. "Performativity and belonging: An Introduction", *Performativity and belonging*, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: Sage, 1999, p. 2.

The bureaucratic form

The mail art of Niels Lomholt differs from that of Mogens Otto Nielsen and Carsten Schmidt-Olsen in that he rarely uses rubberstamps and self-referential signature-devices. Except from the stamp "Lomholt Formular Press" used on most of his things, the artist Niels Lomholt is remarkably absent from his mail art projects. In fact, one of these projects consists in providing an identity to a virtual, 'empty' person bearing the name Mr. Klein. Lomholt has conceived of a system, in which he explores the possibilities of bureaucratic forms. For the Mr. Klein project Lomholt invited mail artists from the mail art network to respond to statements or instructions provided on bureaucratic forms and, thereby, to share their opinion on whom Mr. Klein might be. The only thing known is that Mr. Klein throws himself out of a window from a hotel room containing a bed and a shower. The falling Mr. Klein is signified by a rubber stamp of a falling figure made by Mogens Otto Nielsen. The contributing mail artists fill in forms with all kinds of objects, texts, videos, photos or tapes according to the instructions of Lomholt. The "formulas" become Mr. Klein's background, his personality, which can be altered by intervention in the formula-letters, as it is stated in one invitation, or the letters invite artists to build up the physical location of the hotel room, the arrangement of the room, and so on. The hotel room was re-recreated at the Charlottenborg Exhibition and contributions were collected and exhibited at a gallery in Wiesbaden.

Lomholt also made simpler projects such as simple postcard-forms with misspellings or forms concerning measures. Again the contributing artists were invited to fill in a form. Often, such forms contain mail art rubber stamps or images and references to for example Duchamp. No doubt, Duchamp is one of the founding figures in the self-understanding of the mail art network. Accordingly, Lomholt offers the empty form for anyone who might be interested in defining the identity of Mr. Klein or in intervening in one of Lomholt's other Formulas. At the same time, Lomholt Formular Press is a bureaucratic form, a restrictive administrative system, on the one hand, and an expanding uncontrollable explosion of the form, on the other hand. Such meta-reflections on bureaucracy, administration and systems, which are also contained within the postal framework chosen by the mail art network, are a common feature. Thus one widespread rubberstamp identifies the artist as a "meta-networker in spirit".

Conclusion

Mail art is a counter-culture operating within an alternative gallery space and the point of sale, i.e. the commodification of art, is constantly questioned and

subverted. The art is not for sale, it is exchanged, and the hand of the author is an identity mark that mocks the official art system. However, contrary to a notion of equality and *democracy* often associated with the gift economy, I have maintained that the exchange of the gift economy involves an element of risk. The work of art may get lost, delayed or forgotten. This is what I have called *sendable* art, according to which it is the time interval which contains the element of risk, but nevertheless also adds signification to the circulated art. In addition, in the mail art network, the "signature" is an important means of identification. I have shown that the network's language of artistic communication consisted of simple signs of subjectivity, which, in the larger context of the network community, relied on a structure of citation and repetition. This structure of repetition and quotation means that textual-visual elements are woven into a net of semantic and historical significations. This subjectivity takes the form of signs of authenticity and internal memory, which are used and reused by its participants and, thereby, create a certain communicative language within a group. Therefore, knowledge of art history, production of recognizable identity markers, and quoting signs of identity make successful communication among the mail artists possible. These levels of interaction with history and the mail art community give access to the network community and signal a sense of belonging. This structure constitutes the foundation of the mail art network community.

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