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ZAUMLAND. SERGE SEGAY AND REA NIKONOVA
IN THE INTERNATIONAL MAIL ART NETWORK

CHARLOTTE GREVE

Abstract
In the Fluxus-inspired idealistic self-understanding of the mail art network, transgression and a destructive relation to stable forms and structures are important elements. Nevertheless, the mail art community is constituted by certain mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, on one level, economical and political factors are limitations, which make joining the network difficult and sometimes impossible for artists in poor countries or in countries with a totalitarian regime. On another level, an artist’s belonging to the network community relies on how well he or she recognizes and (re-)produces recognizable signs of subjectivity. 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. More than any of the Soviet artists who have been participating in the network, Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay achieved some success in becoming a part of the mail art community. This success relied on how well the artists performed according to the rules by which the network works.

Keywords: Nikonova; Sigej/Segay; Russian Avant-Garde; Mail Art

According to a narrow 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. According to a broad definition, mail art is about communication. The mail art network
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is an alternative gallery space outside the official art institution; it is an anti-
bureaucratic, anti-hierarchic, anti-historicist, trans-national, global counter-
culture. The history of mail art is often traced back to Fluxus and Ray
Johnson’s New York Correspondence School of Art (which was founded in
the late 1950s and gained its name in 1962). The School developed around a
relatively closed circle of artists. However, since the late 1970s, mail art has
become a widespread decentralized network community. Transgression and a
destructive relation to stable forms and structures are still important elements
of its Fluxus-inspired idealistic self-understanding, but the mail art com-
community is, nevertheless, constituted by certain mechanisms of inclusion and
exclusion.²

It is the purpose of this article to investigate the Russian (former So-
viet) mail artists Rea Nikonova (Ry Nikonova/Anna Taršis) and Serge
Segay’s (Sergej Sigov) participation in the network in order to show and
reveal some of the rules by which this network works, rules which stress the
“institutional” and “legislative” aspect of the network community rather than
the “destructive” or “transgressive”.³ The question of this article will be:
How is subjectivity formed and in what way is an artist’s subjectivity consti-
tuted by the network community’s rules of inclusion and exclusion? Through
an investigation of Nikonova and Segay’s participation in the international
network, I will examine this aspect of the mail art network.⁴

Geza Perneczky describes the network as a “second publicity” with a
utopian striving towards decentralized expansion:

The network must be seen as an imaginary community, which has
created a second publicity through its international membership and
ever expanding dimensions (this second or parallel publicity coexists
with the “first” publicity of the artistic institutions and the official
media). [...] Perhaps the only utopia which the members of this com-
community are willing to recognize is their faith in such an all-embracing,
society-wide communication. (Perneczky 1993: 8)

There is no doubt that the intention of the mail art network is to create a
decentralized expansive open gallery.⁵ However, this openness has some
limitations, as Chuck Welch recognizes:

Some critics of mail art find it a homogeneous network of white
middle-class, liberal, educated, Protestant, Jewish, Anglo-Saxed and
sexed artists. Again, mail art shows represent an interesting barometer
for determining the variety of network interactivity. Third-world coun-
tries are nearly non-existent in the mail art network. One look at the
continent of Africa illustrates the point. (Welch 1993)
Economical and political factors are limitations, which make the way into the network difficult and sometimes impossible for artists in poor countries or in countries with a totalitarian regime. The Soviet artists felt this limitation when trying to enter the network. Serge Segay and Rea Nikonova were the first mail artists from the Soviet Union. They were not able to enter the network until 1985 with the advent of glasnost. At this time, however, their mail was still opened by local postal authorities; they were sanctioned for the sending of mail to Western countries, they experienced difficulties in their job and family situation, and extremely bad living conditions. They were deprived of the opportunity to participate in person in exhibitions in the West (for economical, bureaucratic, and political reasons) and so on and so forth. This is a sad fact, which made it difficult and sometimes impossible for the artists to participate in the mail art network.

There are many interesting aspects and facets of the mail art network, but in this article, I have been obliged to concentrate on a few, namely on the textual-visual aspect of the rubber stamps in the mail art of Nikonova and Segay. Already in the 1970s, Segay knew about the existence of mail art as it is mentioned in Transpomans, No. 7 (1980). However, he knew Fluxus through Valerij D’jačenko at least as early as 1974. D’jačenko translated the pamphlet Fluxus Adventures by Daniela Palazzoni. In 1978, Segay read articles about mail art in the Polish magazine Sztuka (Art), but it was not until 1985 that Nikonova and Segay were able to take active part in the mail art network. That year, they participated in the Budapest Young Experimental Artist’s exhibition. No doubt, their entering the network was facilitated by their choice of work for this exhibition. They sent in four photographs showing a woman (Tat’jana Nikol’skaja) sunbathing with a bare back bending forward. The photographs showed her naked back with a large Old-Style Cyrillic letter placed on the skin, while similar letters were left white on the dark background to the left of the image. Although very simple, this work showed a number of features that must have convinced already established artists of the experimental nature of Nikonova and Segay’s work. These images united artistic photography, happening, documentation, visual poetry, and body art in one. These were aspects of Western experimental art from the 1960s on and, therefore, Nikonova and Segay fell naturally into the experimental environment of the time.

After the 1985 Budapest exhibition, an invitation arrived to Nikonova and Segay from Nenad Bogdanović, the editor of the Yugoslavian assembled magazine Total. This magazine came out in a total of 17 issues from 1984 to 1988 (Perkins 1996: 35). The first issue, in which Segay and Nikonova were to contribute, was No. 13, which came out in January 1987. For the issue, each participant was to send in 133 copies of a piece in the size of an A5. For this first participation in a mail art project, Nikonova and Segay had no precise idea of what kind of work was expected. Technically, mail art relies...
on simple duplicating techniques such as ink marking, rubber stamping, signing, dating, and attaching of stamps and stickers. These are elements taken from the postal system and require no advanced means of reproduction. However, in a country where photocopying and duplication were practically impossible, reproduction was naturally a key to speculations: How to reproduce a piece in 133 exact copies? Nikonova and Segay realized that they had to develop a form, which enabled them to reproduce the required number of copies without the help of off-set, Xerox, or other duplicate means.9

In spite of these obstacles, more than any of the Soviet artists who have been participating in the network, Nikonova and Segay achieved some success in becoming a part of the mail art community. After their first participation in the mail art network, both Nikonova and Segay received invitations to participate in a long range of mail art projects and to send in material for several assembled magazines. Gradually, they entered the wider international (mostly Western) mail art network and contributed actively to the network in the period from 1986-1998 (while Segay still contributes to some magazines, Nikonova stopped her active participation around 1998).

In this article, my focus will be on the inner mechanisms, which, to a certain extent, determine the success or the failure of an artist’s participation in the network community. I will argue 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. Thus, an artist’s belonging to the network community relied on how well he or she recognized and (re-)produced recognizable signs of subjectivity. This structure, I will claim, constitutes the foundation of the network community in the making. The conceptualization of “subjectivity” within the network “community” will be a special focus for this article. This “subjectivity” takes the form of signs of authenticity and internal memory, which are used and reused by its participants, thereby creating a certain communicative language within a group.

Mail Art Language

The mail art language is particularly interesting, because the stamps, slogans and other textual-visual elements acquire the status of a signature. These textual-visual elements include the artist’s style, method, and artistic approach and they are often used as a means of communicating an idea within a group of mail artists; they are signs of subjectivity. Before venturing on to an analysis of Nikonova and Segay’s mail art, I will analyze the use of one such very simple sign of subjectivity, which nevertheless is a significant constitutive mark of belonging. To the Zurich-based assembled magazine Copy Left (No. 9, 1986?), the British mail artist Robin Crozier sent in a page, which
contained the handwritten heading “everyone is”, a small rubberstamped image of a head, the rubberstamped text “Art object”, and Crozier’s handwritten signature. On the reverse side of the page, the same design is used (on top, the handwritten heading “different” is placed, a thumbprint is placed below in the middle, and the stamped text “Art object” beneath). Here, the page frames the signature/thumbprint as signs of authenticity. The “action” consists in visualizing the archetype ideal (“original”) of a signature when looking at the empty frame. However, the signature is staged in a complex play of confirmation and denial.

The “self” inscribed in the signature is a shifter; it is a trace with an existential link to the “hand of the maker”. It is 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). Put in another way, 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.

In the case of the page by Robin Crozier, the head (of Crozier) and the thumbprint are equal in size and printed on the same spot on either side of the page. When put together, the text on top reads “Everyone is different”. The thumbprint functions like a signature, a legal identity marker. It points to the artist “Robin Crozier”, who, with this gesture of marking a page with a fingerprint, states his identity. Thus, the thumbprint, the signature, and the handwritten inscription all point indexically to Robin Crozier, while the image, it can be presumed, is like Crozier; it is an icon. However, since the thumbprint and the head are of equal size and situated in the same place on either side of the page, the image is like the thumbprint or the other way around: the index becomes an icon of Crozier. However, the reader is not sure of the similarity with Crozier; it is an art object, as the stamped text reads. Thus, the thumbprint, the signature and the image signify the artist Robin Crozier, but as stated at the top: everyone is different. Not only is the image different from the thumbprint, these signs of “Robin Crozier” might also be different from Robin Crozier, who is absent.

In Robin Crozier’s contribution to Copy Left, the absence of Robin Crozier (and the difference of “Robin Crozier” from Robin Crozier) is further emphasized by the implicit repeatability of the thumbprint gesture. The thumbprint is not only a sign of “Robin Crozier”, 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 only recognizable and readable within the Fluxus or mail art community. Thus, the sign of identity becomes a sign of “Robin Crozier quoting Piero Manzoni”.

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 signified impossible. Not even a receiver of the text is necessary for it to function as writing:

In order for my “written communication” to retain this function as writing, i.e., its readability, it must remain readable despite the absolute disappearance of any receiver, determined in general. My communication must be repeatable – iterable – in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers. Such iterability [...] structures the mark of writing itself, no matter what particular type of writing is involved (whether pictographic, hieroglyphic, ideographic, phonic, alphabetic, to cite the old categories). A writing that is not structurally readable – iterable – beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing. (Derrida 1988: 7)

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:

Effects of signature are the most common thing in the world. But the condition of possibility of those effects is simultaneously, once again, the condition of their impossibility, of the impossibility of their rigorous purity. In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. (Derrida 1988: 20)

Thus, Derrida insists that citation and iterability is a precondition for every speech act. This means a shift from singularity and intention in Austin to convention and iterability in Derrida. In other words, subjectivity is not something we are given, but something we perform. In Crozier’s quoting Manzoni, Crozier also quotes mail art visual language. The thumbprint gesture can be found on numerous pages in the mail art assembled magazines. On one such page of the ten-year anniversary edition of the as-
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. Beneath the thumbprint, the name and date of birth of each of the artists are typewritten. In this tribute to the mail art magazine, the artists quote Manzoni, but at the same time, they quote 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. (Bell 1999)

Similar gestures are spread throughout the mail art magazine pages. Thus, in *Uni/vers* 2003, Michael Groschopp (Germany) has placed a thumbprint at the top left corner of a letter page (with a logo). A rubberstamped miniature hand points with the index finger to the thumbprint, quoting, perhaps, with this gesture Marcel Duchamp’s frequent use of pointers. On the top right corner, a text is rubberstamped: “I’d like to exchange this rubber stamp for one of yours.” The logo shows a globe with “art” written inside a belt across the equator, an envelope dug into the top half and “around the” and “m. Groschopp” written in the outer circle of the globe. This page shows a number of elements that constitute what I will call the mail art language: the signature, the thumbprint, the pointing finger, the logo, and a rubberstamp. It also shows allusions to the postal system: the letter paper, logo, and exchange. Finally, these elements interact on several levels: first, Groschopp presents his own name and logo on a page combining different elements; second, the elements signal knowledge of art history (Duchamp and Manzoni); third, the elements signal a belonging to the mail art community. These levels of interaction with history and the mail art community rely on a system of repetition and signs of recognition, which give access to the network community and signal a sense of belonging. It is the combination of these levels, which gives the community a certain institutional and legislative foundation. In the following, I will analyze Nikonova and Segay’s mail art language.
Identity

As I have shown, the mail art network is constituted by artists, who identify themselves with the means of a number of simple techniques. One such technique is the use of a thumbprint, but the devices are numerous. They include slogans, stamps, rubberstamps, stickers, logos, or kisses of painted lips. Some of the devices (the thumbprint, kiss, signature, burnt holes, or hair samples) directly point to the “author in flesh and blood”. The devices 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. One example is, of course, Jackson Pollock, who imprinted his hand in the paint on his canvases. Pollock is without a doubt an important point of reference for many mail artists. As a counter-culture operating within an alternative gallery space, the point of sale, i.e. the commoditization 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, which mocks the official art system. At the same time, the “signature” is an important means of identification. Since the artists only rarely meet in “flesh and blood” and the only means of communication is through posted mail, the signature becomes a kind of virtual identity through which the artist communicates with other artists. In fact, many of the mail artists identify themselves by an invented name. Chuck Welch calls himself Cracker Jack Kid, Dorothy Harris calls herself Arto posto, Al Ackerman calls himself Blaster, and Mark Corroto calls himself FAGAGAGA (Janssen 1997a; 1997b). These are only a few of the many invented names with which mail artists have created an identity.

Thus, the first thing to consider (especially for a non-English speaking mail artist) is a means of communicating identity. In the USSR, the artists already operated under the pseudonyms Ry Nikonova (Anna Taršis) and Sergej Sigej (Sergej Sigov). In the mail art network, they took the names Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay. However, usually the Russian and English names are used side by side. A widespread praxis is to create stamps with the artist’s name and a symbol or logo. Such rubberstamps were also created by Nikonova and Segay. Nikonova frequently used a circular stamp with her name in the outer circle, and a symbol (a contraction of an “A” and a “T”, from Anna Taršis), a simple rectangular stamp saying Rea Nikonova, or a simple signature “Rea”. Segay often used a sign looking like a sheriff’s badge with his name in an inner circle or an oval shaped stamp saying “Serge Segay – Visual poetry” in the outer circle and the Russian Old-Style letter “jat”’ in the inner circle.

A second thing to consider is how to present an address of the artist. Since the network relies on posted art and magazines, the address is of considerable importance in order to participate in the communication. A list of the names and addresses of contributing artists for a magazine is often
included on the front pages, however, on single pages an indication of an address can be very useful. For this purpose, Nikonova created an oval rubberstamp with the address (SU 333660 Eysk) in an outer circle and the name (Ry Nikonova) in the inner circle, while Segay often uses a circular rubberstamp divided into three inner circles, the inner saying “Zaum”, the middle has the address in Eysk, and the outer circle saying “Sergei Sigei – Visual poetry”. As I have shown, the visual elements such as emblems, indices, and logos are important elements of the mail art language, however, the textual elements are equally important. Thus, slogans and signatures are other important elements. These elements were already part of Nikonova and Segay’s textual-visual vocabulary as it can be seen in Transponans. Thus for the mail art, they had only to simplify and refine some aspects of the techniques and ideas which already constituted parts of their visual poetry.

In the mail art network, inventing a name functions as a signature. The name signals a certain kind of imagery, a certain style, and a certain vocabulary. However, removed from the artist “in flesh and blood”, the name can be used by other artists as a slogan in order to pay homage to an artist or as a signal of belonging. Segay created a stamp as a homage to the Italian mail artist G.A. Cavellini (1914-1990) and inserted it on a page for the project “Hommage a” (1989). The circular stamp quotes Cavellini’s conceptual self-promotion: in the outer circle, Segay has written “hommage a Cavellini”, and in the inner “Segay 1947-2047” (just like Cavellini’s circular sticker in which the inscription “Cavellini 1914-2014” was written diagonally). The background colors equally quote Cavellini’s sticker (green, white and red). Similar tributes to Ray Johnson can be found throughout the assembled magazine pages.

The name can also function as a kind of personal biography. Nikonova uses several different stamps in her mail art. One is simply “Rea Nikonova”; another is wordplay in the double inscription “Ry-alizm / Rea – lism”. An image shows a circle with “Rea Nikonova” written on the inside and a net of black ink rays emanating from it. The rays give associations to nerves and the image can be associated with Ryosuke Cohen’s Brain Cell, which is an ongoing project to which numerous artists and amateurs have contributed. Each artist must send in a page with a rubber stamped image or text. The stamp is transferred to an A3 size sheet of paper, sometimes in an un-orderly chaotic layered manner, which makes it difficult to distinguish one stamp from another. Cohen described the origin of the project’s name in 1985: “Well, I’ll title my work ‘Brain Cell’, because the structure of a brain through a microscope looks like the diagram of the Mail Art network. Thousands of Neurons clung and piled up together are just like the Mail Art network, I believe” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brain_Cell). Nikonova and Segay were active contributors to the project from the very beginning of their mail art activity. One such contribution is a rubber stamp containing the text “Peace-
dada / Rea Nikonova”. For a non-Russian this will simply be a way to signify a relationship with Dadaism just like any other similar slogan in mail art (Canadada, dadaland, and FaGaGaGa), however, pronounced by a Russian, the slogan sounds like “pizda” (cunt). Therefore, the joke is in the double-language connotations, which are common for Nikonova and Segay. The page gives a good example of the variety of contributions to this project. It contains a contribution by Ray Johnson (a small bunny), an image of a bust by John Held Jr., a pointing hand, as well as political statements (Por Nicaragua) and tributes to post punk music (Psychic TV). Other pages contain slogans and images against AIDS, apartheid, invitations to mail art projects, simple stamps with addresses of mail artists, mail art archives, or announcements about exhibitions or art shows. The project presents itself as a cacophony of voices from Psychic TV fans to highly specialized artistic productions, or, indeed, as a brain overloaded with information.

This kind of meta-description of the network is common and part of the network’s self-understanding and its attraction to many artists. The conceptualization of the network can be found in H.R. Fricker’s tourism-project and in such a concept as “nomadism”. In Copy-Left (No. 9), an envelope has been rubber stamped with the slogan “Media Identity Nomad”. The envelope contains a number of small images, pieces of paper with stamps, inscriptions, or slogans. For this project, Segay sent in one small square of paper, which is a piece cut from a larger image containing letters made with frottage. Although the piece is small, Segay is identifiable due to the frottage technique and the Cyrillic letters, which are common features of his mail art. The network concept can also be found in the inscription found on Michael Groschopp’s contribution for Uni/vers “I’d like to exchange this rubber stamp for one of yours”. This slogan can also be found on an envelope included in Copy Left (No. 9). Another example is the slogan “A metanetworker in Spirit” which is used by, among others, Cracker Jack Kid as well as Nikonova and many others. Such slogans become detached from the “original” author and are circulated in the network among the artists, and in the end, it is sometimes impossible to trace back the origin of the slogan.

In a similar manner, the name of an artist can be used as a brand signifying a certain style, which constitutes the artist’s identity. Nikonova uses her own name as a brand in Nikonova’s assembled magazine, Double (and before that, in Transponans), in which the layout is named a Rea-structure. These uses of the name Rea Nikonova are ways of displaying different aspects of a style or an artistic biography. In a similar way, the name can signal the belonging to a certain circle of mail artists or to a historical set of artists to whom an artist associates her- or himself. This self-historification can be pictured in the image of a cow. The image is taken from the butcher’s chart displaying the different parts of a cow. This is a standard image used by numerous mail artists. One example can be found in the Bambu anniversary
On this page, two cows are pictured facing each other with each part of the body filled in with a name of an artist. The page is not signed, but since most of the listed artists are Eastern Europeans, one can assume that the author is from the Eastern European network. Listed are, among others, Vittore Baroni, Cracker Jack Kid, Ray Johnson, Robin Crozier, Ulysses Carrion, Guy Bleus and Mohammed, who are known and prominent members of the Western mail art network. On the other cow are listed, among others, Pavel Patasz, Guillermo Deisler, Andrej Dudek, Robert Rehfeldt, Andre Tôt, but also Shozo Shimamoto. A similar image is made by David Jarvis, Nikonova and Segay, only their cow is turned into a childish Soviet Mail Art Dragon, whose hind legs contain the names of the artists themselves, the tail has the name FaGaGa, while the dragon wing contains the name Matthias Kuhn, Iliazd, Boris Konstrktor and August A (Welch 1995: 99). Other listed artists are Cracker Jack Kid, Miekal And, and Liz Woods, but the names of Lenin, Stalin and Hitler are also included. This ironic display of influence is clearly referring to the mail art cow, which, in turn, is referring to Cavellini’s cow in whose quartered body names of prominent masters of twentieth century’s art history were inscribed: Picasso, Mondrian, Manzoni, and Beuys. Included were also Cavellini (Segay 1989: 5). Again, a commonly used mail art image is woven into a net of semantic and historical significations, which binds the network community together.

Thus, the name is an important part of an artist’s identity in the network; however, the artist’s names also become historical figures in the network’s self-understanding. In the network community, the name of an artist can become the subject of a project. Thus, on a page in Double (No. 4, 1993), the artists Angela Pähler (Küstermann), Peter Küstermann, and Kimmo Framelius use the name Rea Nikonova. The page is divided into 12 squares, each constituting a stamp with the text ZAUM POST beneath an image. The images show Kimmo Framelius and Peter Küstermann in front of shop windows with huge signs saying REA. The signs are like “for sale” or “discount” signs posted on the window glass or hanging down as banners in front of shop windows, however, the playfulness does not signal allusions to Western protests against the commoditization of art, rather, together with the “Zaum post” inscription, it signals an allusion to the early avant-garde idea of “art into life” in a new playful and ironic version. The images are a playful tribute to Rea Nikonova from three mail art colleagues. In this way, the name – and the signature – becomes a concept rather than a name of a person in flesh and blood.
Another function of such identity markers is appropriation, which is a widely used montage technique. A superimposition of a personal mark on the body of the *Other* text is a sign of appropriation, of over-writing the *original* text with a new one. It is also 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. For Nikonova and Segay, this was not a new technique; it was used frequently by both artists during the years predating the first participation in mail art projects. It was included in their concept of “Transponans” (transposing). According to these concepts, the past can be seen as a reservoir of potential material, which can be integrated into new constellations. Such a relationship is not so much a relationship of quotation and intertextuality as a relationship of appropriation. This overturns the status of previous texts as complete and untouchable works and of the author as the incontestable originator of this or that work of art. In an interview, Serge Segay ironically compares the author function with that of the cattle breeder. The sign of authorship is merely a stamp of appropriation just like the cattle breeder brands his cows with a mark different from that of his neighbor: “This is my cow, therefore on the cow we burn a mark, thus in order to appropriate, we have to put a stamp. I stamped it, thus it is mine” (Greve 2004: 221). Duchamp undoubtedly plays a significant role in Segay’s visual poetics and in the relation of his own work to works by other authors, which he sees as an act of signing or appropriation. Thus, especially significant is what he calls Duchamp’s “moustache-technique” referring to Duchamp’s adding a moustache to Leonardo da Vinci’s image of Mona Lisa and thereby appropriating this work of art, “signing” it as if it were his own work.

For the 1987 issue of *Total*, Segay sent in a page in English from a book by Stephen Ullmann on which the text was crossed out. On top of this, he had written “Re-making”. Frottage has been used through which “Re Re Re” is visible in blue and red. Along one side, he has written: “total’naja pererabotka pechatnoj produkci 1971-1986” (“total reworking of printed production 1971-1986”). The page was stamped with a rubberstamp saying: “PERERABOTOTAL’NAJA” (a contraction of “reworking” and “total”), “N. 175” (the house number of their Ejsk-address), “SI” (the initial two letters in Segay’s Russian artistic name) and “451°”. Thus, many of the rubberstamps such as “Appropriatart” from a piece by Nikonova for the No. 16 issue, “Re-making”, “pererabortotal’naja” or “The Second Layer” directly refer to appropriation, while others (i.e. N. 175, SI) are signatures with which a text (a page by Stephen Ullmann for example) or image can be appropriated. A simple handwritten signature is a frequent mark of appropriation in Segay’s works.
On another level, appropriation is a technique of using a ready-made form. An example of this is the cow and another is the stamp. This small square form is determined by strictly formal rules of size and form but is also an “empty” frame waiting to be filled “precluding any actual relation between structure and the ‘filling material’” (Blom 1998: 76). H.R. Fricker made a series of such stamps after visiting Nikonova and Segay in Ejsk in 1990. One image shows a photograph from 1983 taken by the artists themselves of alternately Nikonova and Segay blowing a duet through Nikonova’s book-flute (‘A pneumatic flute’). The photograph is cut up in small-size squares and colored in bright blue, red or yellow. Very often, such stamps refer to a person or event from the avant-garde history or from the network itself. Nikonova and Segay also made such stamps. One such stamp sheet shows drawings of John Held Jr. and Vittore Baroni, a photograph of Nikonova and Segay in the early days of the Uktus School at the beach of Koktebel’ (1972). Another sheet shows drawn portraits of Russian avant-garde poets: Chlebnikov, Il’jazd, Kručenych, Tufanov, Čičerin, Ol’ga Rozanova along with Nikonova and A Nik (member of the group of Transfurists) (Segay 1993a). However, most successfully Nikonova developed the form in her vector-poetry, since it corresponded perfectly with Malevich’s Black Square, so important for these poetic experiments (see Greve 1994: 240-243). In this way, mail art, Russian avant-garde imagery, and Nikonova’s visual poetry merged into one.

Mail artists not only produced their own stamps but also simply included stamps in their imagery to signify network and correspondence. At the same time, however, the inclusion of stamps in a work alludes to a similar practice in the works of – among others – the Dadaist Kurt Schwitters. One such example can be seen in the beautiful booklet Iliazdic Zaumail (1995) produced by Vittore Baroni and Segay in collaboration. On some pages with wordplay (Re–sidues / Re–appeared, De–vious / De–sires, Con–fuses, St–amp / St–age), stamps, and postal stamps, Segay has added membranes and letters. These pages clearly show (in image and text) the use of “found” texts, forms, and items.

Mail art is not just about sending art or poetry through the postal system. As a highly self-reflexive art form, the network itself and the postal system, which is its frame, becomes a subject for creative manipulation. All parts of the postal system have been appropriated and reinvented: stamps, rubber stamps, postcards, envelopes, stickers and so on. In addition, the network’s anti-hierarchical, anti-power, and anti-bureaucratic idealist conception makes parody of the official bureaucratic postal system and administration a central element of its own self-understanding. However, elements of the postal system permeate the mail art network on more profound levels as well.

In her analysis of the Fluxus artist Nam June Paik’s postal music, Ina Blom names two aspects of the postal system which, I will argue, have
significance for 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’” (Blom 1998: 76). 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 (76). 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” (77). It is a temporal framework 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” (77). These are significant elements of the mail art network, but mail art adds a spatial framework to the postal system. It is not just about sending something from one place to another; it is about circulation, networking, and transgression (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, what I will call, an archival community of the network itself.

In Vittore Baroni’s contribution to *Iliazdic Zaumail* a kind of “traces” or “residues” is alluded to. An example of such a practice is Robin Crozier’s project of collecting samples from the native soil of the participants. Nikonova participated in 1991 with one such small plastic bag of earth from the soil of Ejsk. The bag was stapled to a “certificate of authenticity” with the text “I hereby certify that the earth attached hereto was collected by me at 10 july 1991 on Eysk, USSR”. Beneath this certification, Nikonova has added her own work, a vector form (reminiscent of the *Black Square* – or the stamp form) and a photograph of herself inside the square. Similar practices can be found in several projects. Participants are asked to provide hair samples, kisses, and other residues, but also objects or simply stories about the actions at a certain time on a certain day. Guillermo Deisler, the editor of *Uni/vers*, frequently stamps his work with the term “found poetry”, and Segay practices “found poetry” in almost all of his works. However, unlike the often strictly formal use of scraps and pieces of paper in Deisler’s work, Segay favors chaos and the disorder which many different pieces of paper create.

One of the contributions of Segay to the mail art vocabulary is *Zaum*. Thus, in an “Overview words used in mail-art & networking Part 2” from TAM-publication (a publication of I.U.O.M.A. – the unofficial “union” of mail artists – edited by Ruud Janssen), Zaum is defined as a “system of poetics including creative languages, Serge Segay, Russia” (Janssen 1997a).
With Zaum, Velimir Chlebnikov, Il’jazd, and Aleksej Kručenych entered the ranks of the European avant-garde and along with Dada and Fluxus provided something from which the mail art network can find inspiration and historical justification. It is already clear, from the description of *Iliazd Zaumail*, that Zaum is an important element of Segay’s mail art vocabulary. Zaum is part of several stamps made by the artists: “Glasnost’? / Zaumnost’!”, “Zaum / ail / art”, and “zaumail”, but it has also become an imprint, which is used for Xerox copied booklets with visual poetry and mail art. One example, which shows that Zaum entered the network vocabulary, is the page in *Double* by Angela Pähler, Kimmo Framelius, and Peter Küstermann with the inscription “Zaum post”.

*The Network Community*

The focus of this article has been on the institutional and legislative rules of the mail art community. A special focus has been on how subjectivity is formed and constituted by the structure of citation and repetition of the mail art community. The artist’s belonging to the network community relied on how well he or she recognized and produced recognizable signs of subjectivity. The signs of subjectivity, I have argued, take the form of signs of authenticity and internal memory, which are used and reused by its participants thereby creating a certain communicative language within a group.

The success or failure of an artist’s participation in the mail art network can be determined by rules on three different levels, which I will call the practical, the aesthetic, and the structural level. On a practical level, an artist’s participation in the network is determined by such matters as economy, postal system, access to means of duplication, politics (censorship and restrictions in travel possibilities, restricted access to information and to art history). Many other factors could be mentioned, but these are obvious practical factors, which can determine an artist’s entrance into the network, his or her possibilities once in the network, as well as the nature of his or her artistic production. If an artist’s access to information is limited, he or she may never hear about the network. If an artist wishes to enter the network, he or she must have the economical means in order to continually send a large amount of mail to other countries over a longer period of time. If the post to or from mail artists is disappearing, or if the post is opened and censored, on the way to its addressee, this sets natural limitations to an artist’s participation. These and other factors, such as danger of imprisonment, deprivation of jobs, harassment by local authorities, and limited access to traveling and information, were real practical obstacles, which were experienced by Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay even in the post-Soviet era. These factors were decisive for the time of their entrance into the network, and they were
decisive for their later emigration to Germany (1998). Thus, their participation in the network was only possible due to will power and determination.

On an aesthetic level, there is no either/or in mail art, the phenomenon is all-embracing. The works rarely include strictly poetic or artistic approaches, but rather include a range of approaches from what is now characterized as visual poetry, concrete poetry, conceptualism, body art, actionist art, environments, collage, photography, and music. The previous artistic production of Nikonova and Segay, which included many experimental art forms (i.e. collage, visual poetry, happenings, book production, magazine production, artistic photography, conceptual art and appropriation), fell well into the artistic environment of the mail art network. In entering the mail art network, in which the postal system is the medium, Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay had only to develop some of their techniques and to produce new ones (i.e. rubberstamps, stamps, slogans) and they quickly adapted to an English speaking audience.

On a structural level, it seems, there are certain “rules” that govern the mechanisms of the mail art language. This language is built upon textual-visual elements such as slogans, pointers, signatures, and iconic imagery. These are signs of subjectivity, signatures pointing to an artist’s mail art (virtual) identity. They signify a mail artist’s existential (name, address, portrait, hair samples, kisses) or artistic biography (previous works). At the same time, the signs of subjectivity often quote another artist’s previous use of a device (thumbprint, pointing finger, and kiss). Finally, the signs of subjectivity quote other mail artists’ use of a certain device. A structure of repetition and quotation develops within the network community and the mail art textual-visual elements are woven into a net of semantic and historical signification. This is the structure which constitutes the network’s mechanism of inclusion; a participating artist must be able to quote and repeat recognizable signatures. The artist must be able to perform his or her belonging to the mail art community. In this way knowledge of art history, production of recognizable identity markers, and quoting signs of identity make a successful communication among the mail artists possible.

As I have shown in this article, Nikonova and Segay already produced art which fell within the aesthetic concerns of the late 1970s. When entering the network, they had worked on visual poetry and other alternative art forms for well over ten years. Segay had a deep and broad knowledge of Russian as well as Western avant-garde art from the beginning of the century, but also from the post-war period. They had already worked on appropriation as an aesthetic approach, and they were aware of the semiotic implications of signature markers. Therefore, they were able to produce recognizable signs of subjectivity and communicate within a structure of quotation and repetition. Especially their knowledge of Russian avant-garde art (Chlebnikov and Malevič) and their active re-working of Zaum and Russian avant-garde
imagery, techniques, and poetry gave them a name within the network community. However, in some instances it becomes clear that the language of Nikonova and Segay must have been different and even inconceivable in a (mainly) Western mail art network. When Nikonova and Segay include Lenin, Stalin and even Hitler in their self-historification-cow/dragon it must seem strange to a Western artist. In the West, such an ironic and comical approach to these traumas is still unprecedented. This was also a problem when Segay decided to do a project on Marinetti, who for many Italian and other Western European intellectuals is apprehended as a fascist, and, therefore, should only be mentioned in that context.

On a more fundamental level, the Eastern Block artists faced problems of understanding and recognition in the mail art network. The network was founded on an anti-bureaucratic and anti-institutional idealism, and it came to function as an alternative gallery or publishing space. It was founded on a reaction against the commodity status of art; therefore, the art, magazines, and projects were rarely bought by museums, archives, or collectors, and it was rarely included in official gallery or museum exhibitions. Therefore, the Eastern European and Soviet artists rarely spoke the same language as the artists in the West. One is tempted to ask: Do the slogans “Art Strike”, “Competitive Art Still Sucks” or “Mail Art Uses Institutions in the Places of Institutions Against Institutions” mean the same in the East as in the West – even today? Does “signing” mean the same in an Eastern European and (post-)Soviet country, which, it seems, has always fought for artistic autonomy and the right to sell art to whomever the artists pleased, while the Western artists fought against the notion of autonomy in order to free themselves from the commoditization of art? This contradiction in ideological background meant that participation of the Eastern European and Soviet artists was looked at with some reluctance in the West. An example of this is Hannah Higgins’ questioning of the Czech Fluxus artist Milan Knizak’s works. She argues that his post-communist production is “like so much department-store kitsch in the West” and that his art objects “lose their critical edge [...], [and] merely affirm the commodity status of art, or even worse fetishise the estranged object itself”. This reaction within the Fluxus community reflects how many Western critics and artists received the Eastern European and Soviet art. Furthermore, the problem for the Eastern European and Soviet mail artists after the breakdown of communism was to realize that participating in the mail art network and gaining recognition within the network community did not necessarily pave the way for official recognition. This is a logical consequence of the predominantly Western character of the network.
NOTES

This article was made possible due to a 2.5 months study in the spring of 2005 (funded by the Danish Research Academy) at the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa – the University of Bremen, the Staatliches Museum Schwerin, and the private collection of Serge Segay and Rea Nikonova in Kiel. I have had the opportunity to study the following assembled magazines and box-projects: Copy Left (CH), Uni/vers (D), Arte Postale (I), Bambu (US), Brain Cell (Japan), Mani art (F), Pintalo de Verde (E), Spinne (D), Dreambox (D), Peace-Dream Project (D), Lovebox (D), Total (Yo). These magazines came out in the period from 1979-1996 and included material by and were edited by a number of leading European Mail Art figures: Vittore Baroni (I), Ryosuke Cohen (Japan), Antonio Gomez (E), Guillermo Deisler and Ulrich Tarlatt (DDR/D), Carlo Pittore (I), Roggero Maggi (I), Chuck Welch (US), Guy Bleus (B), John Held Jr., Shozo Shimamoto (Japan), etc.

I owe this point of departure to recent theoretical studies of the concept of the archive (see Derrida 1996 and Foster 2004). These theoretical studies stress the institutional aspect of the archive, and in the case of Derrida’s study, the ways in which the archive relies on a sense of consignation or gathering of signs. The archive implies, as Derrida shows it, a striving for consensus, for unity and homogeneity, towards a “we”.

In this I paraphrase Hal Foster’s characteristic of the new “Archival Impulse” in contemporary art (Foster 2004: 5).

This investigation cannot give a complete picture of the mail art network, of the participants, magazines, artworks or the nature of the network. The network projects are only rarely exhibited at recognized galleries or museums, the magazines are rarely collected by archives, museums, libraries, or other official institutions. This makes it extremely difficult to examine the network in its entirety. This kind of investigation is also made difficult because of the rare publications about or analyses of the network. Some exceptions are John Held Jr., Vittore Baroni, Géza Perneczky and Chuck Welch, who are active members of the network community, and have written and published books about the network.

See Perneczky (1993: 8). It is striking how this network resembles the Internet, and it could be interesting to examine how the network adapted to the new technological situation in the late 1980s, however, this is beyond the scope of the present article. But it should be mentioned that much information about mail art is now available on the Internet. One can simply search for one of the names of Vittore Baroni, Chuck Welch, Ruud Janssen, Ryosuke Cohen, or any other of the active mail art networkers.

This journal was made by hand in 5 copies of each issue (37) from 1979 to 1987 (1990). The Forschungsstelle Osteuropa holds the issues 1-36 of the journal. The number 37 issue of the journal was made for the exhibition “Fanzine as an object” in 1990 (at the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum in Hagen,
Germany, St. Gorikshallen in Brussels, Royal Horticultural Society Old Hall in London, De Media in Eeklo, Belgium, and Confort Moderne in Poitiers, France).

On the history of this influence in Segay’s artistic career, see Segay (1993b: 40). A review of D’jačenko’s attempt at Fluxus post was written in the journal Nomer (No. 35, 1974 [1994]). This is a samizdat journal of which a total of 35 unique issues were made from 1965 to 1974. In 1974 the artists fell prey to suppression from the Soviet authorities. The journal was confiscated and survived in re-edited versions (held at the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, F. 97).

See catalogue for “The Experimental Art Exhibition”. October 21-November 21 (org. by The Young Artists’ Club of Budapest, 1985), pp. 165-166.

Segay (1993a: 69) ironically and sadly remembers the lack of materials and duplicate means: “[U] menja večno byli problemy s bumagoj: ee ne chvatalo katastrofčeksí i čaše vsega v chod šla obertočnaja – ljudimye sorta prodavšič kolbasy i pročich otechestvennych ščedrot, a kločki takoj bumagi ja vsegda berežno sobiral […]. Tipografija ne dostupna, izdatel’stva prinadležat ponjatno komu, litografija polnosh’ju ‘s’edena’ futuristami – ostaečsa toli’ko ‘bægsto v počerk’ kak begstvo v prošloe u togo že Chlebnikova” (“I had endless problems with paper: there was a catastrophic lack of it and most often wrapping paper would do – my favorite kind came from sellers of sausages and similar native generosities. I always carefully kept the pieces of such paper […] Typography was out of reach, the publishing houses belonged to you know who, lithography was completely ‘consumed’ by the futurists – one could only resort to handwriting like the escape into the past by that very same Chlebnikov”). For a long period of time, Segay and Nikonova had no typewriter: “Ab 1965 gabem wir mit unseren Freunden die Zeitschrift NOMER (‘Nummer’) heraus – in Sverdlovsk. Wir schrieben alles von Hand nieder; es gab keine Schreibmaschine, die Texte wirkten dafür avantgardistisch: sur und absurd. […] Aber der wichtigste Traum jener Zeiten war die SCHREIBMASCHINE” (Hirt and Wonders 1998: 127). Only later they acquired their own Xerox machine.

An icon is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometric line. An index is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for example, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not. A symbol is a sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification. (Peirce 1932: 170)
3741&page_number=1&template_id=6&sort_order=1.

I owe this theoretical outline to Mieke Bal (see Bal 2002: 174-182).

Guglielmo Achille Cavellini (GAC) was an Italian conceptual and mail artist, who invented the term self-historicization. See www.cavellini.org.

Henning Mittendorf wrote in an interview with Ruud Janssen:

Now networking attracts me especially for three reasons:

1. It corresponds to the change of paradigms according to new sciences. This change teaches that the world is no machine, that there exists no teleology and that one cannot recognize an objective reality. There only exists vagueness that one has to fill with viabilities constructed by cognition and communication, interactions, interconnected with the ones of the fellow-(wo)men, fellow-creatures.

2. It corresponds to the tendency of establishing alternative networks, i.e. networks corresponding to the change of paradigms. More and more (wo)men struggle for their own matters by themselves. Concerned persons interconnect themselves to find out the best solution for their problems, viability, by interconnection and change of views and perspectives.

3. It corresponds to the experiences, especially shocks, artists have got recognizing the commercialization of art and the human catastrophes-productions despite developed culture, civilization during and after world war II, i.e. killing of people, racism, holocaust, nature-devastation etc. It corresponds to all these experiences and the lessons the artists drew from them. They aim to make art as concerned persons for concerned persons, in a democratic-participative manner, i.e. not for money, but to enrich nature by enrichment of human culture. They aim at constructing fictional ambivalent up to “open” realities as part of everyday-reality, of micro-, meso- and macro-cosmos.

In 1985, the Swiss mail artist Hans Ruedi Fricker coined the concept “Tourism” as a way of extending the postal network communication with in-person visits to mail artists all over the world. See also ‘H.R.FRICKER VISITS REA NIKONOVA & SERGE SEGAY’ (1990http://jas.faximum.com/asg/asg_0094.html).

Double was a handmade journal for international mail art and visual poetry, edited and assembled by Rea Nikonova. It came out in 8 numbers from 1991 to 1994 (the last issue was initiated in 1994, but only finished in 2000). It included a number of renowned Western visual and mail artists as well as several Russian poets and artists working on mail art. The complete issues are held at the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa in Bremen.

The only requirement for participating in the mail art journal was that the format (with certain permissible variations) of the contribution matched the
standard template of the Ry-structure, a triangle and square far from the standard format of a book. The challenge of this book form is a creation of a kinetic object which is perceived and handled like a sculpture. It is not easily stored and creates another sensibility towards the book form. Furthermore, in this structure, the archetype of Nikonova’s form language – Malevič’ Black Square – can be recognized. Once again, the Ry-structure challenges not only our perception of the book form but the finite form of this painting, which Nikonova perceives as a visual-verbal collapse (see Greve 2004: 252-253).

In Postproduction, Nicolas Bourriaud (2002: 36) characterizes the art of the twentieth century as “an art of montage (the succession of images) and détourage (the superimposition of images)”. Bourriaud analyzes a number of works of art from the 1990s, which use and re-use, re-exhibit and reproduce preexisting cultural products. He names this phenomenon the culture of post-production. In this culture the DJ and the programmer are the key figures epitomizing the new artist:

These artists who insert their own work into that of others contribute to the eradication of the traditional distinction between production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work. The material they manipulate is no longer primary. It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on the basis of a raw material but working with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, which is to say, objects already informed by other objects. (2002: 7)

Bourriaud traces this new phenomenon back to Marcel Duchamp’s readymades which complete “the definition of the term creation: to create is to insert an object into a new scenario, to consider it a character in a narrative” (2002: 19).


See Kornelia Röder’s interview with the artist in Röder (2003).


John Held Jr. cites Jean-Mark Pinsot for this characterization of mail art:

It isn’t entirely satisfactory, but it does indicate some of the mail points. MAIL ART. This expression underscores the use of postal material, while not neglecting the specific characteristics of the institution. It designates mailing, by which we mean sending a simple object or document through the postal system, as well as the system of exchange and the particular form through which the message is expressed. We have preferred the term “mail art” to “postal art”, since it seems richer in connotations. (Welch 1995: 19)

Internationally acclaimed Fluxus artists from the Eastern countries were Milan Knizak from Czechoslovakia and Endre Tót from Hungary, while Nenad
Charlotte Greve

Bogdanovich (Yugoslavia), Pavel Patasz (Poland), and Géza Perneczky (Poland) entered the mail art network in the 1970s and 1980s.

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[...] as a Czech artist he was often held to constraints of censorship, which meant that much of his contribution to Fluxus was confined to what he could send by mail, in particular a magazine called Aktual. His recent work reflects these difficulties. Thus it requires some analysis as Fluxus, but also as eastern bloc, work (Higgins, Hannah, 50). (...) In his recent institutional affiliation, his threatened past as a clandestine artist in a totalitarian context and his movement back and forth between the two sides of the cold-war border, Knizak literally embodies the possibilities and problems of eastern-bloc artists in a Western context. The transition is uneasy. How is Knizak’s newfound power and recognition emblematic of a transformed dominant political ideology? Is there an inherent problem of official recognition of previously “outsider” artists as an affirmation of political and aesthetic orientations commonly associated with the West throughout the cold war? Is this why he chose to produce these disturbing, even tacky, figurines that look like so much department-store kitsch in the West? (...) And yet, in our context – more specifically in mine as an American – these objects lose their critical edge. They seem to conform to a long trajectory of representational and freakish objects that merely affirm the commodity status of art, or even worse fetishise the estranged object itself. (Higgins 1998: 53)


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