



(Un)Mapping Infrastructures:
Transnational Perspectives
in Modern and Contemporary Art

Infrastructures of Art Producing, Transporting, and Logistics from a Transnational Perspective

Burcu Dogramaci, Ursula Ströbele (Eds.)

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Introduction

Burcu Dogramaci and Ursula Ströbele

A sculptural work by Alice Adams, entitled *Threaded Drain Plate* (1964, fig. 1), features two wires that are wound and fixed around the central steel plate, evoking a circular momentum of their own, with the four end points virtually running into the void. The bundling of the bent, only partially flexible steel cables into a round, sculptural form supporting the structure embodies the force required to bring them into this (shiny) shape – with one little rusty hint – demonstrating the temporality and growing fatigue of the material itself (see e.g. Applin 2025, 33, 74f.). Rather than following a linear, intentional logic of functional infrastructures, Alice Adams transforms materials from technical infrastructures into a sculpture, reflecting the tensions between ‘usefulness’ and ‘uselessness.’ From the mid 1950s, the New York-based artist made woven works with different textiles, later incorporating new (found) materials from the building trade like carbon steel cable and plate, duct tape, or telephone wire that she called ‘structures’ (Kafka 1967, 16). In 1966, she participated in the exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction* at Fischbach Gallery in New York, curated by Lucy Lippard.

Alice Adams’s *Threaded Drain Plate* serves as a starting point for *Infrastructures of Art Producing, Transporting, and Logistics from a Transnational Perspective* and is reproduced on the cover of our publication. Her work leads to questions of ongoing relevance for an infrastructurally oriented art history and theory: How are materials, techniques, and practices of infrastructure connected to art production and logistics? How are immaterial and material infrastructures of making, transporting, and exhibiting art linked together? Furthermore, Alice Adams’s work can also be placed in the context of a “dialectical exploration of infrastructural dispositions,” as Sabeth Buchmann emphasized in her reflections on Michael Asher’s radiator installation at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1992 (Buchmann 2023, 21). Asher recalled the connection between art and technology, as well as the technical conditions of art and its perception. Something comparable could also be stated for Alice Adams, who – in this sculpture – exhibits technology as art, thereby implying art as technology and considering the technical conditions under which art is produced and experienced.



Fig. 1 Alice Adams, *Threaded Drain Plate*, 1964, carbon steel cable, carbon steel plate, duct tape, 20,3×26,7×47 cm (Courtesy of the artist and David Hall Gallery, Wellesley, MA).

Our publication, with Alice Adams's thoughtful work on its cover, is based on an online workshop that took place in 2021 during the pandemic, which was initially supposed to be held in Munich as a cooperation between Zentrallinstitut für Kunstgeschichte (Ursula Ströbele) and Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (Burcu Dogramaci). The workshop and publication are part of the international research project "(Un)Mapping Infrastructures: Transnational Perspectives in Modern and Contemporary Art."¹ Adopting a transnational perspective, the group seeks to question the infrastructures that have arisen since the modern era, as well as examine their possible alternatives. It addresses the blind spots of previous art historiography by adopting a

¹ Part of the introduction is based on a previous text by the authors, published in Bismarck et al., 2023, 123–135.

multi-perspectival approach and interweaving narratives that shift our understanding of modern art production beyond the dominant canon. In doing so, it maps and surveys how technical, political, and economic conditions have shaped the cultural field. The aim of the group is to make the concept of infrastructure productive for art history.

The general meaning of ‘infrastructure’ (from the Latin *infra*, and *structura*) refers to a substructure or ground, and to static constructions that establish important lines of connection and guarantee supply. The term was coined around 1875 in the context of French railway terminology (see Laak 1999, 280). However, over time, the term came to encompass more and more areas of society, describing what seems to be fundamental for society and prosperity: “In the process, the term came to stand not only for expectations about the welfare state but also for the assumptions – often preconscious – regarding necessity, predictability, planning, security, reliability, and functionality” (Laak 2021). In economic contexts, the term infrastructure refers to the “basic equipment of an economy (a country, a region) with facilities [...] such as transport networks (roads, railways, and waterways) as well as supply and disposal facilities (energy, water, communication networks), without the existence of which private-sector production of goods or services would not be possible, or at least only with lower efficiency (business-related infrastructure)” (Klodt 2018). A distinction is made between material infrastructures, institutional infrastructures – be they governmental, DIY, subcultural, guerilla, or subversive infrastructures as symbols of resistance – and immaterial infrastructures, which include education and research facilities.

Applied to the arts, the term might designate institutions like museums, exhibition venues, private collections, funding institutions, publishers, and especially studios, academies, and other production sites. The term can also extend to transport systems, logistics, and artistic practices that consider mobility, transport, and logistics from the outset in the production of artworks,² and situated knowledge that contributes to relevant discourses and networks. This is to emphasize that infrastructure does not only refer to institutions or facilities, but also to “their relationships to life. In this ‘praxeological’ understanding, it is the availability of infrastructures for intensive anonymous use that makes them infrastructures to begin with” (Laak 2021).

The term’s meanings have expanded over time to include power grids and telecommunication networks, subways and freeways, sewer systems, oil

² One example among others is Marcel Duchamp’s *La Boîte-en-valise* (1936–41), which brought his art works together in a transportable miniature form and as a mobile museum, see <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/oeuvre/6KKGgV9>. Accessed 8 July 2025.

pipelines, and server farms and their relation to usage. Together with the term ‘media’ and the development of telecommunications, the term ‘infrastructure’ is often associated with modern electronic communication. But infrastructure has a much longer history, as is well known; it is closely connected with human civilization and has made human settlement possible. During the last years, infrastructural studies have become a burgeoning research field.

Scholars have been working on issues related to infrastructures for many years, particularly in critical media studies, where Lisa Parks (2015) and Shannon Mattern (most recently 2025) have made valuable contributions to the field. Media studies explore the material conditions in which broadcast, cable, satellite, internet, television, and mobile telephone systems are arranged to distribute audiovisual content around the world – infrastructures that are also used by the art world in general.

While such systems have historically been referred to as “telecommunication networks,” Lisa Parks, for example, proclaims a reconceptualization of them as “media infrastructures,” an approach that underscores the importance of interdisciplinary engagements across fields like sociology, urban studies, anthropology, history, architecture, science, and technology studies. In an effort to develop a humanities-based approach, Parks’s focus is on “infrastructural imaginaries,” which entails where infrastructures are located, who controls them, and what they do (Parks 2025, 355). This encourages an interdisciplinary engagement with a renewed focus upon materialism, distribution, territoriality, and conceptual visualization. Visualization involves questions of documentation, representation, and accessibility – also highly relevant for art historical perspectives – including the power relations and socio-technical conditions connected with the existence of infrastructures.

Shannon Mattern explores the deep time of media infrastructure in a media archaeology approach, acknowledging the close interconnectedness between media’s history and the history of our cities. As examples, she names the new printing technologies in the 15th century, publishing centers, and (public) architecture in antiquity, which functioned as an “infrastructure for communicating territorial claims and codifying beliefs” (Mattern 2015, 100). The anthropologist Brian Larkin explains that “the physical shape of the city emerges from the layering of infrastructures over time” (Larkin 2008, 5). They build strata over the course of centuries, so infrastructures have “distinctive temporalities” and “evolutionary paths” (Mattern 2015, 103) consisting not only of institutions but also of people’s everyday life. This sense of people as infrastructure echoes the relational temporalities of infrastructures highlighted by Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder (Star/Ruhleder 1996). In the

“Ethnography of Infrastructure,” Star points out infrastructures’ paradoxes as being both transparent and opaque (Star 1999, 377), often perceived as “boring things” or “hidden mechanisms” that primarily become “visible upon breakdown” (ibid., 382). This possible double character of the term’s meaning is subsequently further developed by Larkin: “Infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter. Their peculiar ontology lies in the facts that they are things and also the relation between things” (Larkin 2013, 329).

Building upon this quotation from Brian Larkin, our book brings together essays that examine both the ‘things’ and the ‘relationship’ between them through individual case studies. “Infrastructures are not, in any positivist sense, simply ‘out there.’ The act of defining an infrastructure is a categorizing moment,” Larkin continues (ibid., 330). While the anthropologist is interested in the ontology of infrastructures in general, our book, as its title suggests, pays particular attention to the infrastructures of art production, transportation, and logistics. Infrastructures enable the global mobility of artworks, challenged by factors such as borders and duty restrictions, territorial claims and disruptions, as well as material limitations.

In art history, the infrastructures themselves and their structural, technological, and socio-political challenges have changed throughout modernity. Today, infrastructures have become more ‘institutionalized,’ centralized, and networked, as Mattern explains (Mattern 2015, 107). They might be considered in various scales, “including the corporeal, local, urban, regional, national, international, and global” (ibid.).

Marina Vishmidt even claimed to expand the institutional critique of 1960s and 1970s art into an “infrastructural critique” (Vishmidt 2017). She suggests a shift from institutional critique to infrastructural critique “for the need to do infrastructure differently” and as “the move from the institution as a site for false totalizations to an engagement with the thoroughly intertwined objective [...] and subjective [...] conditions necessary for the institution and its critique to exist” (Vishmidt 2017, 266), such as labor markets and property development. Her approach to infrastructural critique – engaging the entanglements of historical, socio-economic, political, and individual artistic conditions that underpin an institution’s existence and its inherent critique – offers a rich, multifaceted point of departure for art history. Infrastructures mirror the material and social conditions of possibility “to enable a set of activities.” In this context Vishmidt asked whether the term art could be substituted by the term “capital” (ibid., 269). Thus, she also emphasized a critique of the powerful infrastructures of the Western art market system and its capitalist logic – informed by the Frankfurt School, such as Karl Marx and Alexander Kluge (ibid., 267). Infrastructure is considered here as “enacting

the material guarantee of a movement's persistence in time – time as infrastructure but also time as something made of infrastructure (ibid., 265).” Criticality enters through a temporal cut.³

Linked to this inherent potentiality, the conference volume *Broken Relations: Infrastructure, Aesthetic, and Critique* (2022) deals with often invisible, overlooked infrastructures and brings together interdisciplinary texts that consider infrastructures not only in their physical appearance but rather in their immaterial, ideological, and symbolic relationships that shape our modes of perception. In a research project, the British Academy raised the question of how social and cultural infrastructure could be measured and valued (2023) and what role cultural and educational institutions play in this societal context.⁴ A summer school entitled *Cultural infrastructure(s)* at the Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect in Munich focused on the potential dis:connections of cultural infrastructures, honing in on the disruptions, disturbances, and absences that occur despite our increased connectivity.⁵ The concept of global dis:connect, which emphasizes the interaction between connectivity and disconnection in global relationships, can bring new perspectives to infrastructure. Infrastructures can cause friction and marginalization because they can be exclusive and exclusionary, such as when infrastructures for transporting goods or raw materials are only available to those who built them (Menger refers, for example, to oil infrastructures in Equatorial Guinea, see Menger 2025, 157).

If we speak of the so-called situated concepts of an infrastructure of (art) history – recognizing its situatedness, historicity, and cultural context – the question arises whether we mainly become aware of infrastructures if they are broken, disrupted, or disconnected, as Star has argued. Larkin instead emphasizes: “Infrastructures are not, in any positivist sense, simply ‘out there.’ The act of defining an infrastructure is a categorizing moment” (Larkin 2013, 330).

An art history of production itself is closely linked to an art history of materials, but also to a history of exhibitions, and this includes an art history of transport and logistics. The production and mediation of art go along with complex infrastructures and a network of actors in the field of logistics, which

³ According to Vishmidt, institutions of negation need the affirmative moment that is infrastructure – both the technological and the social infrastructure, situated in the global social and ecological crisis (ibid., 268).

⁴ See details of the research program here: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/profgrammes/social-infrastructure/>. Accessed 3 July 2025.

⁵ The summer school of global dis:connect took place 22–26 July 2024 at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. See the announcement of the event here: <https://www.global-disconnect.org/05/24/23-26-july-gdc-summer-school/>. Accessed 3 July 2025.

now operates globally. This concerns the procurement of materials, artistic work *in situ*, and the transport of artworks across national borders. From a historical and contemporary perspective, the workshop and the invited papers look at related art-historical, political, ecological, and production challenges. This includes the extent to which mobility is already considered in the production of art and to which extent works are conceived as transportable from the outset and therefore placeless – as well as the role played by customs regulations, political border restrictions, and sustainability. The art of logistics is often dependent on politics and statehood, whether in the form of country-specific border and customs restrictions or, for example, when art is forcibly transported as cultural looted goods. Due to the growing mobility of artworks in international traveling and temporary exhibitions, art handling became an important factor within the art system. It encompasses storage, crating, transport, installation, and manuals, oscillating between ensuring an artifact's mobility and protecting its fragility.

The standardization and modularization of transport infrastructures became central in the 20th century for the control and management of flows of goods. Art handling particularly shows the limits of mechanization and automation for logistics and the transportation of goods, even if new technologies and digitalization imply huge changes. But despite growing digitalization, couriers and warehouse workers remain essential human resources. Artworks are often physically accompanied, which evokes a personal instance of trust. Through courier accompaniment, the high quality and value of the art is constantly celebrated. Monika Dommann, for example, examines art logistics with the methods of science and technology studies, illuminating the material culture and sign systems inherent in storage and shipping practices: wooden crates with special adhesive labels, polyethylene packaging, pallets and containers as normative standards, technical tools such as lift trucks. She asks to what extent the paradigm “follow the logistics” could be a worthwhile heuristic for a research project by mapping the material flows of logistic companies and the global transfer of artworks (see for example, Dommann 2023). This would allow a world map of art transport hubs showing the density of dealers, museums, and bonded warehouses. Peter J. Schneemann, for instance, considers art handling as a performative moment of self-representation, power, and an alternative concept of reception, which institutions communicate demonstratively through superlatives regarding the loans, budgets, production costs, and international coordination necessary to organize their exhibitions (Schneemann 2016). Art as a commodity has inscribed itself in globalized production while claiming to comment critically on the conditions of production.

In the following, we discuss the four sections of the book and their respective contributions. The chapters adapt the concept of the infrastructure to diverse case studies while simultaneously contributing to its theorization.

Section I: Performing the Making

This section is dedicated to the production of modern and contemporary art, looking at the relationship between art making, the time and place of making, local traditions, and contemporary conditions. While art is still made behind the closed doors of the studio in many cases, there are also many examples of cooperative, publicly visible, transparent, and interactive art production in workshops, communities, actions, and happenings in the history of the 20th century. In these cases, the gesture of production often becomes an action that is simultaneously exhibited. In the 1950s, Olga Jevrić developed nearly thirty monument proposals that reflected an artistic breakthrough in the abstract language of sculpture. In her contribution “Monuments in the Measure of a Palm: Scale and Mobility in the Work of Olga Jevrić,” Ana Ereš considers the corresponding infrastructures, such as transportation networks and institutional collaboration as a methodological approach to analyze how these small-scale sculptures were “mobilized, mediated, and re-framed within shifting cultural and political landscapes” (p. 28).

The section includes forms of art production that understand (performative) making as part of the work, whether networked (analogue/digital), cooperative, or participatory art. This includes medializations such as textual and visual documentations of art production, as well as screening and broadcasting. Some artworks are conceived so that the artists initiate the setting and then allow the partially auto-generative work to ‘act’ independently. In terms of production, the topic of infrastructures also concerns the material, the ‘stuff’ artworks are made of. This includes infrastructures of material extraction, processing and transportation, the material flows, and its journey:⁶ Where does the raw material come from and what infrastructures are associated with its extraction and processing? From the standpoint of an environmental art history, an artwork is inscribed with the interwoven history (or histories) of its material and of its formation, extraction, travel route, and related logistics.

⁶ See e.g. “Before the Object. Material Histories, Infrastructures, and Ecologies,” workshop and upcoming publication by Ursula Ströbele and Kaja Ninnis in the context of their “Art | Material | Ecology. Working Group for the Study of Material Flows and Ecologies in the Arts,” Braunschweig University of Art, November 2024.

In “Production and Art in 1990s Net Art Initiatives” **Anna-Lisa Scherfose** discusses the complex phenomenon of net art as a new genre with new (digital) material conditions through the example of *Die Internationale Stadt Berlin* (1995–1998) and *Public Netbase* (1994–2006). Both served as venues for artistic creation and demonstrate a close interconnectedness with their infrastructural foundations – such as server capacities – emphasizing performative production characteristics like transparency and participation.

Two works are at the center of **Tobias Ertl**’s contribution, namely Melanie Gilligan’s *Self-Capital* (2009) and Merlin Carpenter’s *Midcareer Paintings* (2015). With “Infrastructural Realism,” the author analyzes artistic gestures of institutional critique within the context of capitalistic crisis. The works discussed display their “economic context as content” (p. 77) and incorporate the institutional conditions of art production, distribution, and logistics in the structure of the artwork itself, thereby “indexing the crisis of artistic subjectivity” (ibid.).

Sophia Prinz’s “Performing the Trade: Zheng Mahler’s *A Season in Shell*” investigates an artistic research project that dealt with the growing economic and social entanglement between China and Africa in the form of a small trade business commuting between the two continents. The essay examines the roles of the parties involved in this endeavor and analyzes the infrastructure of ‘trading’ as a curatorial method.

The Romanian performance and conceptual artist **Lia Perjovschi** contributes two diagrams that she created especially for our book: *Infrastructures of Production and Logistics in Transnational Perspective* (2024) and *Mobile Studio* (2024). In her commentary “Lia Perjovschi’s Diagrams: A Visceral Act of Cultural Translation,” **Luciana Tamas** traces Perjovschi’s practice of mapping and rewriting conceptual and art historical connections along with their inherent infrastructures and networks.

Section II: Mobile Studios

Over the centuries, artists have frequently drawn inspiration from traveling. Artists embark on research trips to remote regions to search for specific motifs and territories, work *in situ* for exhibition projects or international residencies, or find themselves compelled to leave their home country due to political or religious persecution. Or they seek to go beyond traditional studio practices and established modes of exhibition. The section “Mobile Studios” explores the various motivations, working practices, trajectories, and infrastructures expressed through artistic nomadism, mobility, exile or forced migration, and translocation – as well as the loss of artworks, materials, and tools – and addresses the methodological challenges posed by archival gaps

and missing communication. How is artistic mobility reflected in the craftsmanship of the works? Academies, workshops, and art schools beyond the traditional institutions in a global context – such as the Académie André Lhote, the École Municipale des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca, the Feminist Arts Program at CalArts, Black Mountain College, and Pond Farm – as well as international sculpture symposia – represent vital sites of education, production, and collaboration. These spaces foster shared or transferred knowledge and support time-based studio practices, which are also considered here.

Cai Lyons reflects on art production on the move as an infrastructure of mobile art making in the work of painter Mary Swanzy. “The Suitcase as Mobile Studio: Mary Swanzy’s Career and Travels, 1919–1923” focuses on the ‘wandering’ artist and analyzes the interdependencies between landscape painting and mobility beyond state borders. While Swanzy freely chose her mobile lifestyle, other artists had to leave their country of residence for political reasons. In her essay “Lost and Found: Transporting and Producing Art in London Exile” **Burcu Dogramaci** explores how, on one hand, exile was a challenge for artists attempting to organize the transportation of their works and tools while fleeing the Nazi regime, as unreliable logistical infrastructures often prevented the timely delivery of their belongings. On the other hand, the experience of exile and war could lead to new artistic practices in the arrival city.

Taking Alina Szapocznikow as a case study, **Ursula Ströbele** discusses different types of infrastructures that were decisive for the sculptor’s work, particularly as a woman in the male-dominated field of sculpture. “*Follow the Materials: Tracing Infrastructures of Production, Transport, and Communication in the Work of Alina Szapocznikow*” explores the travel routes and procurement of materials, as well as infrastructures in the form of her personal, international network, and written correspondence to ask for a productive use of the gaps and missing stories.

Simone Wille’s essay “The Question of Location: The Makeshift Hotel Room as Site of Production” focuses on the Bombay based artist Akbar Padamsee who lived and worked in different hotel rooms throughout his career, producing paintings while engaging in intellectual and artistic discourses. The contribution engages with questions about the hotel room as a temporary studio and how this specific touristic infrastructure informed the artist’s perception of Paris, Europe, and beyond.

Michael Asher left behind site-bound studio practices and traditional object aesthetics. His conceptual art was based on ‘situational aesthetics,’ working in situ. **Annie Ochmanek** elaborates on Asher’s work from the perspective of critical infrastructure studies and thereby sheds light on the relationship between his art production, global capital, and logistical systems. Rather

than disrupting and subverting infrastructures, Asher reveals their existence and function, thus drawing the recipient's attention to supporting conditions that usually remain hidden and overlooked.

Section III: Invisible and Overlooked Structures of Production and Transport

In a global world where growth, speed, and circulation increase value, the flow of goods and digital data has become currency itself and largely determines market systems. Today, trade has moved from objects to the immaterial production of data and the continuous exchange of information. These inherent supply chains and forced mobility are primarily provided by decentralized technologies, such as cloud computing deep-sea data and fiber optic cables, server farms in 'unknown' places, and other modes of publicly invisible and overlooked infrastructures.

This section focuses not only on digital art, such as browser art, using the various possibilities of the internet, social media platforms, and other interfaces, but also implies global exhibition logistics as well as analogue art forms like fax art, Mail Art, or Conceptual Art, which go beyond established object aesthetics in favor of innovative forms of collective authorship and various instances of "infrastructural sensibility" (Blom 2019, 3).

Barbara Preisig's contribution to this book, "'We fly from desk to desk!': Infrastructural Matters Beyond the Postal Network in Artists' Ephemera of the 1960s and 1970s," deals with the dispatch of printed matter such as adverts, postcards, and exhibition announcements. She asks whether artists used postal infrastructure solely for artistic promotion or if the postal network contributed to the decentralization of authorship and the formation of artistic communities.

The infrastructural logistics of exhibiting have another connotation in **Gideon Morison's** contribution "*Star Country* Exhibitions: Conceptions, Assemblages, and Event Logistics at Selected Postcolonial Pan-African Festivals (1966–1977)." The essay investigates festivals and embedded exhibitions on the African continent such as *Dakar '66* and *FESTAC '77*. In this analysis of these events, which strengthened pan-African relations, Morison focuses on conceptual strategies, infrastructures of assemblage, and event logistics.

Accessibility, (algorithmic) governmentality, control, and the power relations leveraged by the tech companies and communication platforms providing essential infrastructures like software and hardware are also addressed, underlining the close interdependence between information technology, production, logistics, and reception. From stereoscopic photography to early

1960s computer art by the likes of Herbert W. Franke, Vera Molnár, Frieder Nake, and Lillian Schwartz; feminist media art by Lynn Herschman Leeson; and contemporary augmented and virtual reality works; digital art is not conceived in a classical studio anymore but in the (seemingly) immaterial digital sphere, which also provides the corresponding channels of distribution.

Inge Hinterwaldner opens the black box to explore the volatile infrastructures of internet artworks in the technological environment in which they are situated: “Stretched Between Servers and Services.” She analyzes the corresponding artistic and institutional strategies that are often overlooked in favor of their so-called “field-specificity” (p. 214), both their soft- and hardware and their socio-political background. Even the broken state of an artwork and its afterlife might inform us about disrupted infrastructures, their historicity and possible restoration, as the author argues.

In his close reading of Kate Rich’s *Feral Trade*, **Christoph Chwatal** analyzes the art and trade networks embedded in the project’s business infrastructures, positioning them as elemental components of a long-term initiative through which groceries have been routed and traded via informal networks of artists, friends, and art institutions since 2003. The renunciation of commercial supply chains emphasizes “transactions, and frictions that typically remain unseen” (p. 235), going beyond a *representational* critique of infrastructure in favor of an *expanded* infrastructural critique.

Section IV: The Accompanied Object

In order to be seen and received, works of art must leave the place where they were created and find their way to institutions. Or they leave their collections to be exhibited in other places. Objects are packed and crated, made safe for travel, shipped by a transport company, and often accompanied by couriers. Infrastructures thus enable the global mobility of objects, which is challenged by borders and duty restrictions. Although the accompanied change of location has presumably been one of the constants of art and its history since the beginning, the topic of transporting art in the modern and contemporary periods has only become the focus of research in the past decade. In recent years, against the backdrop of the shift in thinking that has ensued from the increased awareness of human-induced climate change, numerous attempts at climate-friendly curatorial practice have emerged. Among recent exhibitions rethinking curatorial practices was *Grüne Moderne. Die neue Sicht auf Pflanzen* at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. Some of the exhibits were sent as image data, as the show aimed to comply with ‘green’ ecological standards, which required reducing art loans and transports. In

“Green Modernism: A Talk on Eco-curating and Climate-friendly Transport,” **Miriam Szwast**, curator of the exhibition, and **Burcu Dogramaci** reflect on the goals and challenges of *Grüne Moderne*.

This section does not merely focus on the conditions and practices of transporting art works to and from exhibitions. It also examines the techniques, actors, and modes of action that enable the mobility of objects of art in general – as well as the legacy of displaced objects. “Biography of the Archive: The Journey of the Photo Sender Archive from Istanbul to Athens” by **Dilara Ulu** explores how the Istanbul studio Photo Sender’s archive was forcibly displaced to Athens and Canada. The essay follows the archive’s routes, asking how technical, political, and economic infrastructural conditions have shaped the estate and how contemporary art historical work on Photo Sender might address the archive’s dispersion and its history of lost and new beginnings. The specificity of individual genres is also considered, i.e. how are sculptures and paintings transported, what challenges do installations pose, and how are immaterial works transported? Furthermore, to what extent is mobility already being considered in art production?

In her essay for this volume, “The Dresdner Werkstätten für Handwerkskunst and the Material Infrastructures of Making (an Armchair),” **Kaja Ninnis** explores the making of a ‘flamed birch’ chair (1903), which is in the collection of Berlin’s Bröhan-Museum. Ninnis traces the often-overlooked trajectory of ‘raw’ materials and their (possible) infrastructures, thus reflecting on the history, blind spots, and gaps in the record of the relevant archives.

Are there works conceived from the outset as transportable and therefore placeless – designed to exist as constantly accompanied traveling objects? In her contribution “From Buenos Aires to Brno to Lublin: Transnational Infrastructures of Mail Art and the Circulation of Czechoslovak Conceptualism,” **Aneta Zahradnik** understands infrastructure as an operating system and Mail art as a field of power relations that transcends state borders and political systems. The letter or postcard as a traveling object is transported via postal systems and at the same time shaped by social, governmental, legislative, and ideological structures, which impact the production, distribution, and presentation of mail art.

Final Considerations

The contributions in this volume explore infrastructures of art production, transport, and logistics while simultaneously investigating infrastructural approaches to art history from diverse perspectives that draw upon historical and contemporary case studies. All of the contributions in this anthology ad-

dress intertwined and interdependent structures, both visible and invisible, that accompany the work process or even make it possible in the first place. Similarly, the display of the object is a process based on diverse, interconnected stages of work.

Our book thus aims to contribute to the burgeoning field of infrastructural studies in art history. Further publications from the working group “(Un) Mapping Infrastructures: Transnational Perspectives in Modern and Contemporary Art” will continue to chart this field with different focal points. Together, we aim to broaden the perspective on modern and contemporary art in global contexts, shifting the focus from the artist or the work to contexts, networks, alliances, and the conditions of production and distribution.

Our thanks go to the authors of this volume who, through their contributions, have operationalized infrastructural access to art history. We would also like to thank De Gruyter, especially Anja Weisenseel and David Fesser, who enthusiastically accepted our book proposal. Jesi Khadivi edited our manuscript with great care, and we would like to thank her as well as the student assistants Sinem Arslan, Natalie Sophia Fischbeck, and Kaj Sophie Flora Häuser for their editing support. Finally, we would like to thank our colleagues in the working group “(Un)Mapping Infrastructures: Transnational Perspectives in Modern and Contemporary Art” for the intensive exchange of ideas at meetings and workshops.

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Section I

Performing the Making

Monuments in the Measure of a Palm

Scale and Mobility in the Work of Olga Jevrić

Ana Ereš

Between 1951 and 1961, the Belgrade-based sculptress Olga Jevrić (1922–2014) developed nearly thirty monument proposals.¹ These small-scale sculptures, created predominantly between 1954 and 1959, are distinguished by a unique sculptural vocabulary that utilizes iron rods as structural elements to organize abstract masses in a dynamic state of confrontational tension. Throughout the production process, Jevrić experimented with various materials – including cement, plaster, clay, and terracotta – while simultaneously developing an innovative mixture of cement and iron (ferric oxide). The modest scale and impermanent materials of these works align with the preliminary sketches typically produced in the early stages of monumental sculpture design, as they were conceived for realization on a larger, monumental scale. The majority of her monument proposals did not exceed 20 centimeters in any dimension, while some were produced on a slightly larger scale, reaching heights of 50, 70, or 140 centimeters. Some of Jevrić's proposals were conceived for specific public monument competitions, including the *Proposal for a Monument in Prokuplje* (1951), which received an award; *Proposal for a Monument – Milanovac* (1954); *Proposal for a Monument in Pljevlja* (1955) – another award-winning design that is now lost; *Auschwitz I* (1956); *Proposal for a Monument – Jajinci* (1958); and *Proposal for a Monument I – Bujanj* (1959).

However, the majority of her monument proposals were created independently of formal competitions and were often given generic, non-site-specific titles, such as *Proposal for a Monument* or *Memento*, numbered sequentially (I–IV) or referenced sites of World War II atrocities, such as *Hiroshima* (three versions, all 1959, figs. 1 and 2). As the artist noted, “those titles are actually virtual – a fiction that evokes a semblance to a specific event and occurrence in space – they are connected to the matter that has been inflicted by the historical circumstances in which we lived” (qtd. in Denegri 2005, 83). Although some of these proposals were recognized and awarded in public

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Fig. 1 Olga Jevrić,
Proposal for a Monument I. Bujanj, 1959,
bronze, 25×16×13 cm
(Courtesy of Olga
Jevrić's Legacy – SASA
Art Collection).

monument competitions, none were ever executed as large-scale objects in public space. Consequently, from the early 1960s onward, Jevrić decided to withdraw from public monument competitions (Marković 2012), instead shifting her focus toward gallery and exhibition-based sculpture.

Despite the failure to realize her ideas in the domain of public sculpture, Jevrić quickly established herself as one of the leading sculptors in socialist Yugoslavia with her authentic and innovative monument proposals, having made a pioneering breakthrough in the abstract language of sculpture during the early 1950s (Denegri 2005, 11). Yet, establishing herself professionally

Fig. 2 Olga Jevrić, *Memento IIa*, 1956–57, cement,
74×56×16 cm (Photo: The Heritage House / Digital
Archive of the Heritage House, Belgrade).

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was only possible within the (public) space of exhibitions, confined to the small format that was stereotypically associated with the work of women artists. However, the limited scale of Jevrić's monument proposals facilitated her participation in numerous exhibitions both in Yugoslavia and abroad. Over the course of six years, between 1956 and 1962, her proposals were showcased in over twenty-five exhibitions. Although not the original intent, this specific form of visibility granted Jevrić's unrealized monuments a unique state of mobility, allowing them to travel and be displayed in different contexts – unlike the permanent large-scale public monuments.

The case of Jevrić's monument proposals thus raises broader questions about the mobility of artworks in the global postwar cultural exchange and the infrastructures that underpin it. This includes not only the material aspects of transportation and logistical coordination but also the institutional frameworks and cultural networks that facilitated and sustained their movement. As her monument proposals traveled through extensive exhibition circuits internationally, they not only departed from their initial, local, and context-specific commemorative function but also became embedded in the evolving artistic and cultural dynamics of the period. This article considers infrastructures, including transportation networks of exhibitions, institutional collaboration, and political frameworks, as a methodological lens for analyzing how artworks are mobilized, mediated, and reframed within shifting cultural and political landscapes – a perspective that has not been explored in relation to Jevrić's work so far.

The Unrealized Monument Proposals: Navigating Spatial, Material, and Gender Constraints

Several factors contributed to the failure to realize Jevrić's monument proposals at full scale and in public spaces. She conceived these proposals as sculptural forms that embodied a new conceptualization of memorialization within the specific context of post-World War II commemorative art practices in socialist Yugoslavia. She first presented these proposals to the Yugoslav public in 1957 during her solo exhibition *Spatial compositions* (Prostorne kompozicije) at the ULUS Gallery in Belgrade (Jevrić 1957).

The culture of remembrance, which honored both the victory, and the sacrifices made during the war, played a crucial role in the official cultural and political strategies of the post-war period. Throughout the 1950s and beyond, numerous monuments and memorials were erected across Yugoslavia, simultaneously commemorating wartime events and reinforcing the legitimacy and authority of the newly established Communist Party government

(Manojlović Pintar 2014; Horvatinčić 2018). The monuments also served an important didactic function, emphasizing the significance of anti-fascism and the National Liberation Movement while embodying the ideological values of the socialist revolution won during the war. By the mid-1950s, Yugoslav memorial sculpture underwent a significant stylistic transformation. The prevailing Socialist Realist aesthetic that had dominated the immediate post-1945 period with its emphasis on figurative representation and a realist formal language, gradually gave way to modernist and abstract approaches. This shift, characterized by the introduction of non-representational and non-figurative forms in memorial sculpture, reflected a broader cultural liberalization within Yugoslav society and its increasing political and artistic independence from Soviet influence (Manojlović Pintar 2014). While inconsistent cultural policies led to diverse practices of commemoration and monument production over time (Karge 2023, 112–113; Horvatinčić 2023, 305), the official commemorative strategies of the late 1940s and early 1950s prioritized triumphant, optimistic, and defiant figurative representations, predominantly depicting war heroes, partisan fighters, and the oppressed, with a focus on gestures symbolizing resistance to the occupier in public space (Horvatinčić 2016, 192). Within this context, Olga Jevrić's 1957 exhibition represented one of the first critical sculptural responses to contemporary memorial production in Yugoslavia. Through her monument proposals, she challenged what she perceived as the "conventional" and "artistically unconvincing and naïve solutions" for public monuments, which, in their "cold and standardized production disregarded human suffering and heroic history" (Predić 1957, 9). Her proposals articulated a universal language of abstraction, transcending the dominant figurative and symbolically burdened rhetoric that had defined Yugoslav memorial sculpture up to that point.

Jevrić articulated her concept of monuments with precision, emphasizing that they should serve as sites of remembrance of suffering and sacrifice, rather than as celebratory markers of war achievements:

In my understanding, a monument is a sanctuary – a secularized temple. It assumes the existence of an external and internal structure. The external one has the function of a sign – it evokes; the internal one – a space for gathering, contemplation, and the removal from everyday life by focusing on those values that indicate respect for the silhouettes of the disappeared in the name of those values. (qtd. in Denegri 2005, 83)

Through this perspective, Jevrić proposed a redefinition of memorial sculpture, embracing abstraction as a means of commemoration that priori-

tized the spectator's empathetic response to the universal suffering of World War II victims. The experimentation with abstraction allowed Jevrić to deconstruct and open the monolithic body of sculpture, rejecting pathos or explicit narration in favor of a spatialized experience. Rather than depicting the human figure, her sculptures were conceived to perform their commemorative function through the observer's bodily engagement with space (Ereš/Putnik Prica 2023, 134).

Reflecting on her five-decade career in a 2002 interview, Jevrić remarked on the constraints that shaped her work:

I envisioned my sculptures as spatial events in which one dwells. Small formats were created as models for larger sculptures. The working conditions – space, force, means ... I was unable to realize my full vision ... They [the sculptures] were confined to fit within the scale, what I like to call the measure of my palm. Objective circumstances determined both the materials and the format. Had Richard Serra, one of the most prominent artists of our time, faced such limitations of the format of his sculptures, he too would not have achieved his renowned status. (Jevrić 2012)

This reflection underscores the material limitations Jevrić faced, which influenced both the scale and execution of her work. Not only did her sculptural concepts critically challenge the prevailing commemorative rhetoric in socialist Yugoslavia, but practical limitations also played a significant role. These included limited workspace, the scarcity of materials, and a lack of institutional support. During this period, Jevrić worked independently, without external assistance, under extremely modest conditions in a studio situated in the former Nazi concentration camp at Belgrade's Old Fairground (fig. 3). She utilized inexpensive and readily available materials for her sculptures, which she combined to develop a unique mixture of cement and ferric oxide powder that allowed her to create the abstract masses characteristic of her work.² Despite these challenging circumstances, she remained dedicated to her practice, continuously producing work and submitting numerous proposals for public monument competitions, as previously discussed.

² Jevrić described her approach to selecting materials for her sculpture as follows: "When choosing the material, I select the one that corresponds to my construction method and most adequately translates the character of my sculptural expression. Cement as a building material and iron as a prefabricated form allowed me to produce composite units – sets – to build a form through the precipitation of layers, to change it where necessary until it fulfills the designated task. My matter is austere, harsh, lacklustre, maybe even repulsive – these properties, and such an expressive bearing capacity, I found in cement and iron" (qtd. in Denegri 2005, 78).



Fig. 3 Olga Jevrić while working on the sculpture *Proposal for a Monument – Bubanj*, in her studio at Staro Sajmište (the Old Fairground), Belgrade 1959 (Photo: The Heritage House / Digital Archive of the Heritage House, Belgrade).

Similar constraints also impacted the work of her colleague Ana Bešlić (1912–2008), whose sculptures – particularly those conceived as proposals for public monuments during the same period – remained limited to the scale of models.³ Unlike their male contemporaries, who created large-scale sculptures for public spaces, the work of these sculptresses, offering radical responses to official memorial production in both form and concept, primarily existed on a smaller scale and was accessible to the public through exhibitions (Ereš 2025, 126–132). The limited scale and small format of Olga Jevrić’s monument proposals thus reflected various factors shaping the presence of sculpture in public space of political representation. These constraints were not only a result of official commemorative strategies and cultural policies

³ Ana Bešlić created a series of abstract sculptures *Sketches for Monuments* in 1957. These small-format sculptures were conceived as vertical three-dimensional volumes made in bronze and marked by “wounds” and “cracks” (as the artist herself described them) that penetrated the solid body of sculpture. They have not been developed into full-scale works.

that favored the defiant rhetoric of memorial sculpture – an approach Jevrić critically engaged with – but also stemmed from gendered hierarchies in the Yugoslav art world, which privileged male sculptors as creators of large-scale public monuments (Horvatinčić 2021). The sculptural practices of women artists in Yugoslavia, including Jevrić, gained public recognition primarily within spaces deemed ‘less significant’ for ideological representation, which resulted in their work being integrated into a sculptural canon based predominantly on formal qualities, rather than its broader impact on public discourse.

From Commemoration to Circulation: Transnational Trajectories of Olga Jevrić’s Monument Proposals

Preceding her first solo exhibition in Yugoslavia, the first public display of one of Olga Jevrić’s monument proposals (*Proposal for a Monument – Milanovac*, 1954) took place in Paris at the *International Exhibition of Contemporary Sculpture* (*Exposition internationale de sculpture contemporaine*), held in the garden of the Musée Rodin in 1956. As the representative of Yugoslavia at this prominent sculpture show, she exhibited alongside well-established postwar artists, such as Alexander Calder, Alberto Giacometti, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Germaine Richier, David Smith, and Alina Szapocznikow. This event marked Jevrić’s first participation in a large-scale international exhibition, where French critics identified constructivist tendencies in her work, distinguishing her from other Yugoslav artists (Goldscheider 1956, 724). Following this, another piece from her *Proposals for a Monument* series was featured in *Salon 56*, a major exhibition of Yugoslav modern art hosted by the Gallery of Fine Art in Rijeka (Croatia) in the same year. This exhibition, among the most significant in Yugoslavia during the mid-1950s, gathered a younger generation of artists exploring geometric, expressive, and lyrical abstraction, as well as existentialist realism, whose works were presented in dialogue with French artists associated with *art informel* – a movement introduced to the Yugoslav art scene on this occasion (Kolešnik 2006, 266f.). Instead of being enlarged and installed in a space of public commemoration, Jevrić’s monument proposals first circulated internationally and then domestically, engaging with contemporary artistic trends both abroad and in Yugoslavia. Presented in formats characteristic of small-scale gallery sculpture, primarily mounted on pedestals, these monument proposals underwent a process of recontextualization, transformed into autonomous sculptural objects and stripped of their intended commemorative function. The mobility of these monument proposals across exhibition contexts facilitated not only novel forms of public engagement but also their aesthetic and contextual resignifi-

cation. This process was critically shaped by the complex infrastructures that enabled their nomadic display, encompassing transportation networks, institutional collaborations, and logistical frameworks that managed the movement of artworks. The transportability of these sculptures, which enabled their integration into an expanding transnational artistic horizon, was contingent upon broader geopolitical conditions that fostered the circulation of cultural artifacts, as well as advancement in modern transportation and specialized art shipping methods. The institutional infrastructure of galleries, museums, and biennials provided the necessary framework for exhibiting these sculptures, thereby reinforcing their evolving meaning beyond their original commemorative function.

Following the exhibitions in Paris and Rijeka, Jevrić's monument proposals were included in a series of representative group exhibitions of Yugoslav modern art abroad. These large-scale panoramic exhibitions often featured works by more than twenty artists, representing diverse stylistic approaches within modernist explorations in painting, sculpture, and graphic art, aiming to present the liberal and open character of post-war Yugoslav society to the international audience. Among them were *Arte jugoslava contemporanea* (Contemporary Yugoslav art), first organized at the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana in 1956, before traveling to the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome and Palazzo della Permanente in Milan, and the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 1957. Jevrić's monument proposals were also included in the exhibition *Neue jugoslawische Kunst* (New Yugoslav art) presented in 1961 in the City Museum in Wiesbaden, the Municipal Museum Brunswick, the Badischer Kunstverein in Karlsruhe, the Museum Folkwang in Essen, and the Suermondt Ludwig Museum in Aachen, as well as in the *Contemporary Yugoslav Painting and Sculpture* exhibition held in 1961 in the Tate Gallery in London, the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry, the Ferens Art Gallery in Kingston-upon-Hull and the Brighton Art Gallery, and the exhibitions of Yugoslav art held in 1962 in Italy (*L'arte contemporanea in Jugoslavia* in Palazzo Esposizioni in Rome and *25 artisti jugoslavi* in Galleria dall'Opera Bevilacqua La Masa in Venice).

The practice of organizing traveling exhibitions of modern art was characteristic of the centralized cultural policies of Yugoslavia at the time. Exhibitions intended for international display, and particularly Western and Central Europe, were typically prepared by one of the country's museum institutions – most frequently the Museum of Modern Art in Ljubljana, due to its geographical location near Yugoslavia's western borders and the proximity to exhibition destinations. The museum institutions were responsible for the logistical management of exhibitions, encompassing artwork transportation,

specialized packing, and customs clearance. The partially preserved archival documentation reveals that artworks were transported for international exhibitions via a combined network of truck and railway that was carried out by the state-owned company Jugošped – the leading transportation provider in Yugoslavia at the time.⁴ The State Insurance Institute (Državni zavod za osiguranje – DOZ), another state institution, regulated the insurance of the artworks for international exhibitions. Furthermore, budgetary analyses highlight the significant financial investment in transportation, indicating that transportation costs constituted an average of approximately fifty percent of the total exhibition expenditure.⁵

The planning and organization of all exhibitions listed above was overseen by the Federal Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, established in 1953. This Commission's primary role was to facilitate, support, and implement artistic and cultural cooperation between Yugoslavia and other nations. Among its earliest initiatives were the 1956 exhibitions in Paris and Rijeka, marking some of the first projects of artistic exchange under its direction. The Commission was also responsible for organizing Yugoslavia's official participation in major international biennials, including those in Venice, São Paulo, Tokyo, Alexandria, and Paris, as well as for coordinating large-scale representative exhibitions of Yugoslav art worldwide. Under the coordination of this cultural-political body, Jevrić also participated with her monument proposals at *Expo 58* (Brussels World's Fair in 1958), at the 5th edition of the Middelheim Sculpture Biennial (1959), at the 4th Alexandria Biennale (1961–62), as well as the Venice Biennale (1958), which will be discussed in more detail.

The Federal Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries was established in the early 1950s as part of a broader restructuring of Yugoslav cultural administration. This reorganization aimed to redefine and systematize the country's cultural policies in foreign relations by implementing regulatory procedures and institutional frameworks to facilitate the execution of cultural initiatives abroad. Functioning as the principal regulatory entity overseeing cultural exchange, the Federal Commission coordinated the activities of specialized departments and expert committees responsible

⁴ Partial details regarding exhibition transportation, including carrier information, costs, and customs documentation, are preserved within the archival records of the Federal Commission for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (Archives of Yugoslavia, Belgrade, Fund *Savezna komisija za kulturne veze sa inostranstvom*, No. 559).

⁵ As an illustration, the 1956 Venice Biennale exhibition budget for the Yugoslav pavilion dedicated 500,000 dinars to transportation and an equal sum to specialized packaging and display pedestals, representing a total allocation of 1,000,000 dinars within a 2,000,000-dinar budget.

for the development and management of international cultural programs. These initiatives, including art exhibitions, were delegated to institutions such as art museums and galleries, ensuring that Yugoslav artistic production was strategically presented to international audiences. In the field of visual arts, these developments reflected the complexity of the country's art system and its institutional framework, which expanded significantly with the establishment of state museums and galleries specializing in modern and contemporary art. This evolving cultural infrastructure enabled a more structured approach to international exhibitions, positioning Yugoslavia as an active participant in global cultural exchange. The key objective of these efforts was to promote the openness and liberal character of Yugoslav society, particularly during the politically sensitive period of Yugoslavia's realignment toward the Western sphere in the early 1950s, and after the political split from USSR (Perišić 2013, 43). Exhibitions were instrumental in the Federal Commission's cultural strategies, serving both as platforms for promotion of Yugoslav art and as tools for advancing the political interests of Yugoslav authorities in the international arena (ibid., 44–46). Their significance was shaped by the broader geopolitical context of the Cold War, wherein cultural diplomacy played a vital role in international positioning.

Cultural representation – particularly through art exhibitions – became means of projecting an image of Yugoslavia as an open society engaging with the global cultural and political horizon through the universal language of modernism. This carefully constructed narrative of post-war modernity emphasized artistic freedom and individuality as defining features of Yugoslavia's socio-political climate (Ereš 2020, 138–140). In the sphere of visual arts, this approach prioritized exhibiting different positions by Yugoslav artists, characterized by exploration of expressive possibilities of modernist media and materials, often employing the formal language of abstraction. Within this framework, Olga Jevrić's monument proposals were valued for their radical and authentic formal characteristics and were thus incorporated into Yugoslav cultural representation strategies through circulation in exhibitions, while also being tactically utilized as expressions of Yugoslav cultural modernity.

The Venice Biennale and Beyond: Olga Jevrić's Monument Proposals as Objects of Cultural Exchange

Within the extensive itinerary of Jevrić's monument proposals, the 29th Venice Biennale of 1958 represents a particularly important milestone. Her inclusion in the Yugoslav pavilion, where she exhibited three small-scale *Proposals for a Monument* (1956) alongside a group of three larger *Proposals for a*

Monument I–III (1957), marked a departure from the customary selection practices of the Federal Commission for International Cultural Relations. This institution prioritized the selection of established male artists to represent Yugoslavia at the Venice Biennale, such as Krsto Hegedušić, Edo Murtić, Gabrijel Stupica, and Drago Tršar, who were also featured in the pavilion that year. Jevrić's inclusion, however, was the result of a recommendation by the prominent Italian art critic Gillo Dorfles to Aleksa Čelebonović, the acting commissioner of the Yugoslav exhibition (qtd. in Ereš 2022, 34–35). Dorfles, having encountered Jevrić's works during her solo exhibition in Belgrade in 1957, was profoundly impressed by her sculptural practice (ibid.).

This chain of events resulted in Jevrić becoming the first woman artist to exhibit in the Yugoslav pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The reception of Jevrić's monument proposals was exceptionally positive, surpassing the critical attention previously afforded to any Yugoslav artist at this international platform (ibid.).⁶ The success of her work at this event played a crucial role in expanding her European recognition, culminating in her first solo exhibition abroad at Gallery Notizie in Turin in October 1959. Founded in 1957 by art critic Luciano Pisto, Gallery Notizie was dedicated to the promotion of contemporary trends in gestural abstraction, Informel, and experimental approaches in sculpture and object art. It functioned as a key nexus for international artistic exchanges, featuring artists such as Carla Accardi, Sam Francis, Mario Merz, Antoni Tàpies, Cy Twombly, and Wols (Farioli 1983, 115). To fully contextualize Jevrić's participation in this exhibition, it is worth noting that her show was preceded by the first European presentation of the Japanese avant-garde collective Gutai and followed, one month later, by a retrospective of Lucio Fontana, the founder of Spatialism. Her exhibition in Turin not only reinforced her presence within the international art scene following her success at the Venice Biennale but also positioned her artistic practice as a novel artistic response within the broader post-war 'International Style' developing in a volatile global landscape "that sprang from conflicts and the experience of change" (Enwezor 2016, 14). Her commercial success continued with an exhibition at Drian Galleries in London in 1962. The networks facilitating the mobility of Jevrić's monument proposals expanded beyond the representational frameworks established and regulated by Yugoslav cultural diplomacy, encompassing the emerging system of the international art market. This

⁶ Jevrić's monument proposals were included in reviews about the most interesting art tendencies at the Venice Biennale, along with works by Max Bill, Eduardo Chillida, Roel D'Haese, Seymour Lipton, Umberto Mastroianni, David Smith, and Richard Stankiewicz, who won the Grand Prix for sculpture. For a detailed overview of her reception at the Biennale, see Ereš 2022, 36–37.

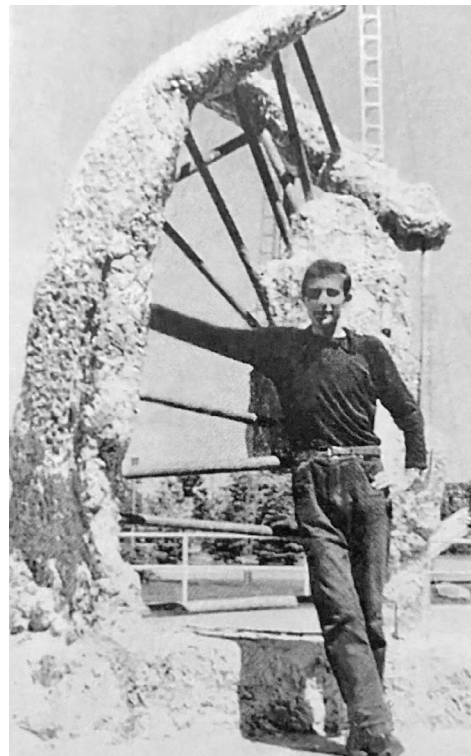


Fig. 4 Olga Jevrić's Monument Proposal at the first *Yugoslav Triennial of Fine Arts* in Belgrade (1961) (Photo: Ješa Denegri: *Olga Jevrić. Topy / Vojnoizdavački zavod*, 2005, p. 74).

broader infrastructure not only enabled the mobility of the unrealized monuments but also affirmed their status as authentic modernist objects of distinct cultural and marketable status.

Simultaneously with their international presentations, Jevrić's monument proposals were featured in some of the most prominent exhibitions in Yugoslavia. Notably, they were included in the inaugural edition of the *October Salon* in Belgrade (1960) and the first *Yugoslav Triennial of Fine Arts* in Belgrade (1961). At the latter, according to the photo documentation available (Denegri 2005, 74, fig. 4), one of her monument proposals was displayed in the exhibition's exterior space. With an approximate height between 2,50 and 3 meters, this work marked the only instance in which one of her monuments was realized on a larger scale and placed in a public setting, albeit within the temporary context of the exhibition and without a commemorative function.⁷ In recognition of this work, Jevrić was awarded a prize at the exhibition.

Despite their unrealized monumental scale in public space, Jevrić's monument proposals achieved unexpected prominence and visibility through extensive mobility and circulation. This dissemination was facilitated by a

⁷ The sculpture is not preserved today.

complex network of exhibition infrastructures, encompassing institutional frameworks, logistical and transportation coordination, as well as cultural policies, both within Yugoslavia and abroad. The very limitations that confined the artist's work to the small-scale paradoxically enabled a wider dissemination and visibility, allowing her sculptures to traverse borders and contexts in a manner that permanent public monuments could not. The dynamic circulation in Yugoslavia and abroad redefined the function of her monument proposals, shifting them from commemorative objects intended for fixed public sites to autonomous sculptural objects embedded in the horizon of global post-war modernism. The institutional infrastructures of the Yugoslav art world, while framing her palm-sized monuments as they moved between various exhibitions within the modernist discourse of aesthetic autonomy and liberated artistic expression, also transformed her monument proposals from spatial agents of remembrance into 'nomadic' objects of cultural exchange. Jevrić's monument proposals navigated the material, gender, and ideological constraints through their capacity to move and be reinterpreted in different settings, ultimately carving out a distinct position within post-war modernist sculpture.

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Production and Art in 1990s Net Art Initiatives

Anna-Lisa Scherfose

Net Art: New Genre, New Materialities

The rise of the internet in the mid-1990s gave way to a range of new art practices, including net art. With the internet serving as both the site of production and reception, novel methods emerged for rendering artistic production processes visible and for treating the act of creation itself as a performative event. Joachim Blank and Karl Heinz Jeron illustrate how terms such as material, production, and art are intertwined in a net art context in their discussion of an intentional indecision regarding whether a work is art *or* net: the word itself puts the action or the process of networking in focus (Blank/Jeron 2001). The iconic *Simple Net Art Diagram* (SNAD) by artist duo MTAA (fig. 1) also emphasizes this in-between. The diagram shows a schematic representation of two computer terminals connected by a line and a red lightning bolt with the inscription “The art happens here” positioned in the space between. The notion of net art as *happening* frames it as an action or performance in which the process of creation is itself (part of) the artwork. In order to illustrate how tightly interwoven making and artwork are in concrete examples of net art, it is necessary to examine the entire process of creation and therefore the (digital) infrastructures that make it possible. This infrastructural reading and holistic approach are intended to open up new perspectives on net artworks and the components that made them possible.

One of the first attempts to expand the concept of material in net art was undertaken by Hans Dieter Huber. As material factors, he lists the computer itself, its location and that of the recipient, along with the operating system, browser, code, and socio-economic factors (Huber 1998). However, these material conditions remain very close to the artwork itself. If the work is considered a process, the focus should be broadened to include the places of creation, starting with the initiatives dedicated to the circulation of net art in the early and mid-1990s.

The material conditions of net art and their peculiar relationship to the works’ production processes become particularly evident in the examination

Simple Net Art Diagram

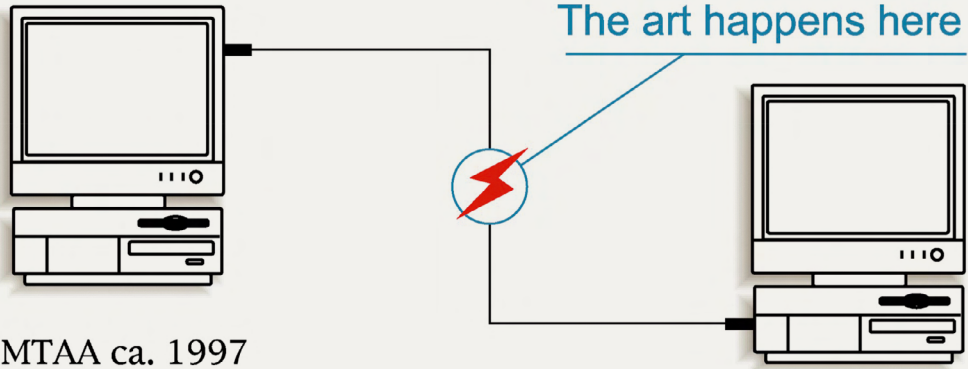


Fig. 1 MTAA, *Simple Net Art Diagram*, c. 1997, animated GIF, www.mtaa.net/mtaaRR/off-line_art/snad.html (Public domain via CC0 license).

of two 1990s net art initiatives from Berlin and Vienna: Die Internationale Stadt Berlin (1995–1998) and Public Netbase (1994–2006). Both served as on-line venues for artistic creation and presentation, a non-hierarchical dual role combining the functions of artistic platform and communication. But above all, both examples show a particularly intensive conflation of the terms material, production, and artwork, while expanding the understanding of digital material towards a larger infrastructural definition. This points to an interesting tendency regarding the visibility of such infrastructures as part of net art's general understanding and, furthermore, may suggest a certain fragility of the artworks stemming from an interdependence with certain components of their infrastructure.

To view and analyze the websites of Internationale Stadt Berlin and Public Netbase at the time of their activities in the 1990s, the Wayback Machine was used – a digital archive of the World Wide Web that allows users to view earlier website versions. It also enables access to websites that no longer exist and makes it possible to view several snapshots of one website from different moments in time and trace its development. The Wayback Machine, however, does not offer a complete archive and in most cases, storage only began in 1997.¹

¹ The Wayback Machine was founded by the Internet Archive, an American nonprofit organization based in San Francisco, California. It was created in 1996 and launched to the public in 2001 (Internet Archive). For reasons of limited space, I will not go into detail about the various processes but only mention the sources. For further information on the Wayback Machine and the Internet Archive's work, see Stokel-Walker, 2024.

Internationale Stadt Berlin

One initiative that facilitated an entire infrastructure on their website – which blended artwork, material, and production – was the Internationale Stadt Berlin (International City Federation/ICF). It was founded in December 1994 by Barbara Aselmeier, Joachim Blank, Armin Haase, Karl Heinz Jeron, Thomas (Thomax) Kaulmann, Frank Kunkel, and Gereon Schmitz, who were joined in 1996 by Max Bareis, Valentina Djordjevic, and Norbert Hartel. The founders all came from the hacker and media art scene and shared the vision of a place on the internet that “combined art, communication and service under a single name” (Porombka 1998). The group realized this idea with the creation of two successive ICF website versions. In its short three-and-a-half-year lifespan, the ICF functioned as a platform for net artworks, presented documentation of artworks, offered online discussion and working groups, included a chat, and was a portal for services relating to the internet. Access to the website and its viewer’s experience was characterized by different roles and modes of membership. There were private and public areas as well as areas reserved exclusively for registered residents of the ICF. One became a resident by filling out a form and sending it to the physical address of the ICF office (Aselmeier/Internationale Stadt Berlin e.V. 1996). The numbers of residents increased significantly over the ICF’s short lifespan, although sources are contradictory. The figure of 300 repeatedly appears as the highest number of residents (Arns 2002), but this likely refers to the number of users at the start of the International City in January 1995 (Blank/Jeron 1998), because in December 1996, Tillmann Baumgärtel mentions 600 residents (Baumgärtel 1996) and the archived website from May 1997 lists 947 residents. The website’s final version in March 1998 by the archive project Digital Craft shows 1,123 residents (Internationale Stadt Berlin e.V. 1998). The first version of the ICF homepage existed from January 1995 to October 1996. It is not fully accessible via the Wayback Machine and only fragments can be viewed in an archived version of the second website, which can be supplemented by descriptive texts from the time. The landing page shows a network diagram organized by color: red fields belong to the cultural sector; blue denotes the service sector; and inner-city areas are green. The orange Arena was intended to suggest a mix of different areas. Residents had access to their Workspace on the ICF website, described as a “comfortable working environment” that allowed users to create their own documents as well as those of public and private groups, review these documents, or read news and email (Aselmeier/Internationale Stadt Berlin e.V. 1996). The group of residents was not just limited to artists who presented their work on the website, and oftentimes, the boundaries between artists and audience were blurry. In this context, artworks that created such a

fusion and aimed to facilitate a public collaborative process on the website are of particular interest. The ways in which the possible constellations of individual users and groups could be used to merge single and collective production and presentation is outlined in the following scenario:

A person can start a novel quietly (user area private), then publish samples of it on a trial basis for a while (user area public) until a few interested people get in touch, who then retreat together as a group of authors (group area closed) to finally present the new work to the world (group area public). (ibid.)

This example may have played out in a similar way in the case of Norman Ohler's *Die Quotenmaschine* (1996), considered the first German hyperlink novel. Its text, the story of detective Maxx Rutenberg, is fragmented into text parts, where single words are repeatedly highlighted as hyperlinks, allowing the reader to branch off to other storylines by clicking on them. The novel also consists of a simple map that allows readers to navigate the storyline to the location of their choice. Instead of a linear, coherent narrative, the reader moves through the storyline according to their own direction. However, participation in the work was not limited to reading, as the website declares:

The hyper-novel is growing. [...] The network wants to be expanded, nourished by creativity. Initially foreign influences should fertilise each other, allow meanings to blossom that a single individual cannot produce. All ideas, all conspiracies and files, all stories are collected with the aim of integrating them into the novel space. (Ohler 1996)

All interested parties are invited to submit their own text fragments via a link. Unfortunately, none of these contributions can be found on the archived website versions of the ICF. Moreover, since the novel was published as a printed book in February 1996 – even before the Wayback Machine had archived *Die Quotenmaschine* – only a compact version of the original is accessible online. Although the actual hyperlink novel and its production process only lasted for a brief moment, the example of this work demonstrates how the ICF website facilitated this particular collaborative work and emphasized the extent to which the process of its creation played a role.

The fact that the first version of the ICF website, its graphic design, and navigation layout is not immediately accessible to every potential resident is expressed by Dieter Grönling, who describes it as “the stylish organization chart of a waterworks [rather] than the plan of an urban internet community” (1996). Instead, the author suggests a revised design that would enable visi-

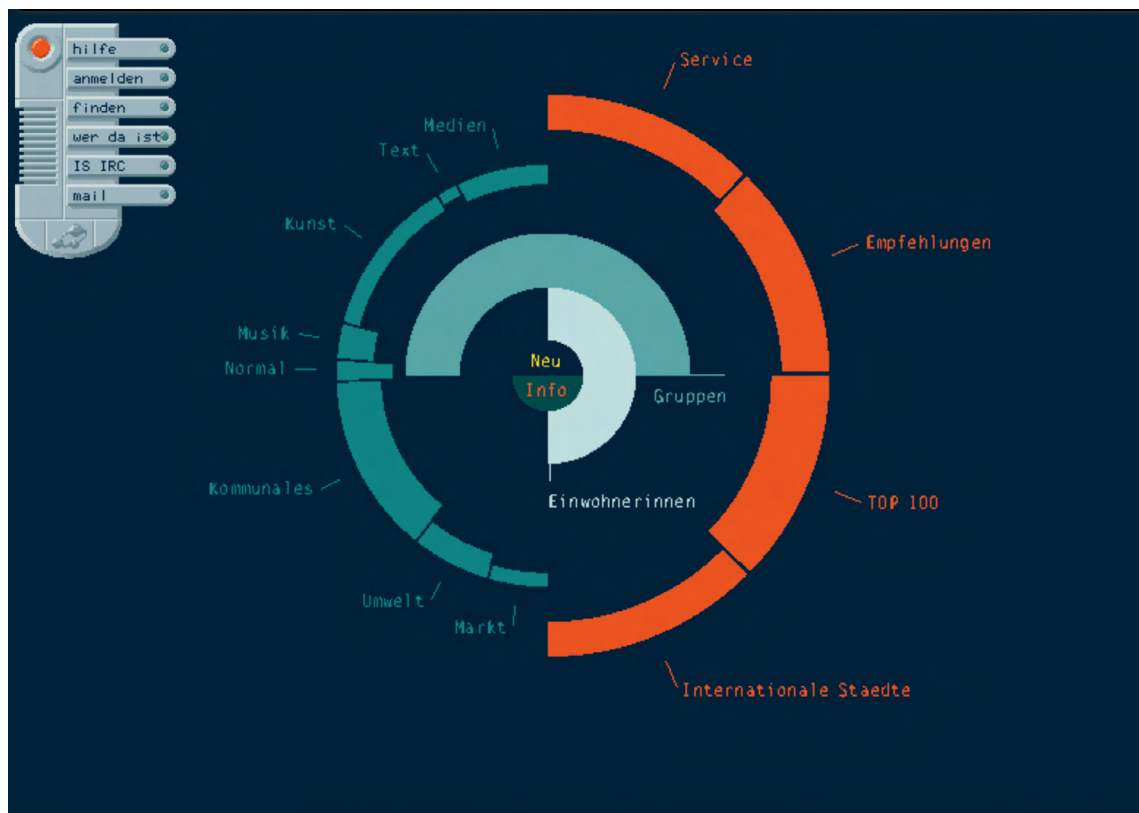


Fig. 2 Internationale Stadt Berlin, Website, 1997, Wayback Machine (© Joachim Blank / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026).

tors to navigate the website efficiently. Such revision took place in October 1996, and this is also the version I am referring to in my further examination of the website's content to expand on the definition of the artworks' infrastructure (fig. 2). Although not all sub-items of the website have been archived, it provides deeper insights into the extent to which the International City made the process of making public and served as a production site and home for net artworks.

By 1996, when the new website version was introduced, the ICF had grown into a complex organization (Baumgärtel 1998). In terms of appearance, the graphics on the homepage, which led to the 14 subcategories, were more oriented toward the distinction between inside and outside, between public and privately accessible areas than the previous version. However, the ICF's infrastructure was not merely limited to what was visible on the screen. To extend Huber's definition of the material complex beyond the individual computer, the infrastructure should be regarded as part of the artwork.

When Inke Arns writes that the majority of early net art projects in Germany were located on the ICF website (Arns 2004), *located* meant not only that

they were listed on and accessible via the website but also on the ICF server, as a list of projects from May 1996 specifically naming projects using ICF server space shows. A total of 53 projects are listed here (Internationale Stadt Berlin e.V. 1996) with a wide range of subject matter. Examples are well-known net artworks such as *without addresses* (1997), a project by Joachim Blank and Karl Heinz Jeron for documenta X, or humorous works like *Meisenknödel* (1996) by Wolfgang Müller, a test series of suet balls from various manufacturers. One artwork that highlighted the repeated engagement with its website was the project *Siberian Deal* (1995) by Eva Wohlgemuth, Kathy Rae Huffman, and Tatjana Didenko. The artists traveled through Russia and tried to exchange Western consumer goods that they had brought with them, while regularly updating all the barter deals and their travel itinerary on the *Siberian Deal* website.

One work on the ICF server that incorporated the performance of making into its self-conception was *C@C: Computer aided Curating* (1993–1995) by Eva Grubinger. The artist describes it as a computer program that allows contemporary art to be produced, viewed, discussed, and purchased. With *C@C*, artists both created a piece of art as well as actively developed the context for their work by inviting up to three artists of their choice to contribute to the work. In this way, the act of selecting the contributors was handed back to the artists and some of the participants included Agentur Bilwet, Nina Fischer, Maroan el Sani, Pit Schultz, and Mark Tribe, among others. To broaden the group of interested participants beyond media-artist circles, *C@C* provided each of them with a password-protected editing system. The Artist Menu contained automated tools for creating digital artworks without requiring any prior knowledge of programming. Grubinger describes the Navigator tool as its core feature:

It was a minimalist interface which was organized as a tree structure and could be navigated through by the simple use of buttons. Each branch would lead to another artist. In this way visitors were able to experience a social network of artists. (Grubinger 2005)

Together with Thomax Kaulmann, Grubinger developed a file-uploading tool and additional features that supported the creation of new pages, the linking of content, the copying and deletion of files, and the curating of artists. Part of *C@C* was also the Public Discussion Area and the so-called Business Class. Users could comment on single works, participate in an ongoing discourse, or get in touch with artists and acquire a piece. In addition to its online presence, *C@C* was exhibited in numerous exhibitions and festivals. In

the end, however, Grubinger's intention to facilitate a system of growing exchange did not fully succeed, and considerable support was needed to encourage individual artists to create their artworks within the program (Grubinger 2005). Nevertheless, this example demonstrates how the process of creating was part of the artwork. At the same time, this example also shows that various components of the infrastructure are inextricably intertwined with the work – whether through the website and the server of the Internationale Stadt or the elements that the artist herself contributed to this infrastructure by creating her own tools. One could argue that the artwork itself is only the computer program – but it would not be complete without the contributions of other participants. Through this interplay, concepts of materiality and production merged into the artwork.

In addition to the website and server, the ICF provided another crucial element of infrastructure that made net artworks possible and visible in the first place, by providing access to the internet, both for the artists and the recipients: when registering as a resident, one could also sign a contract for internet access via modem or ISDN. It included an email address and storage space for websites, an offer “not to be underestimated at a time when internet access was not yet available from every online service” (Baumgärtel 1997). Therefore, in addition to being a platform for (net) art and a website host, the ICF also functioned as an independent internet provider, which, compared to commercial providers, offered internet access for a comparably low price. However, as this service was offered at a low cost, it did not entirely cover the costs of the organization, which was split into a GmbH (a limited liability company) and an e.V. (a registered non-profit association). The ICF did not receive any public funding and, alongside the provider fees, was financed through individual donations – some monetary, but the majority consisting of donated hardware. Most of the ICF's income came from its so-called International City Services. The ICF team offered webpage creation services as well as commercial services, such as setting up public internet terminals at the Deutsche Telekom booth at the 1996 CeBIT computer fair in Hanover (Internationale Stadt Berlin e.V. n.d.).

Throughout its three and a half years of existence, the ICF developed into a center for artistic activities on the net. In addition to its own activities, the organization facilitated collaborations such as the project *Café X-ESS*, which consisted of 15 public computer terminals providing internet access, installed at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin during the summer of 1995 (*Der Spiegel* 1995). Furthermore, Internationale Stadt also started the Media Arts Lab at Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin (1997–1998) – a residency program providing artists physical and digital spaces for living and working.

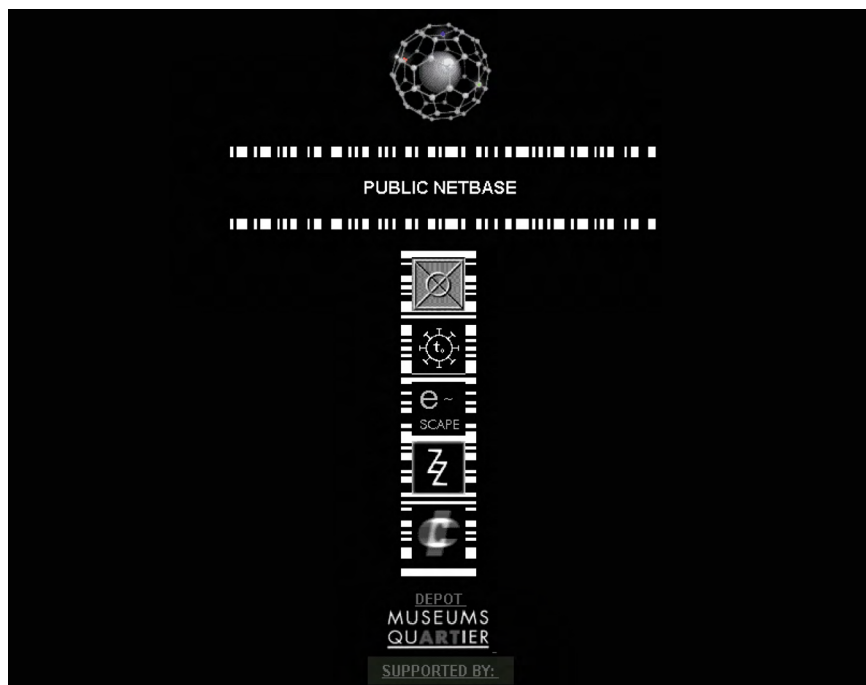
By mid-1997, access to the internet had become less difficult and more affordable. The presentation of net art on computers in the exhibition space at documenta X in 1997 and on documenta's website, along with the first major exhibition of net art in Germany at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien in Karlsruhe in 1998, illustrate a normalization of interaction with and access to the internet and websites. With growing numbers of internet providers that could offer access and storage for a low price, one of ICF's sources of income became obsolete. As a result, the group announced its dissolution on their website in December 1997. Although the individual websites and works of net art were to be transferred to the server of the initiative In-Berlin e.V. in February 1998 (Porompka 1998), by spring 1999 access was in fact no longer possible, as a time jump using the Wayback Machine shows. With the end of the ICF, including its server and website, many projects that had not been moved to another server prior to that got lost. The archive version of the Internationale Stadt Berlin, created in 2004 by the project Digital Craft – a collaboration between the ICF's founders and the Museum Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt am Main – featured only the surface of the ICF's website; the original artworks on it were not restored.

The example of the Internationale Stadt and some of the net artworks located on its website demonstrate well how an entire infrastructure was created to facilitate the realization of an artwork as a group. The ICF provided internet access, storage space, and a platform for both creating and presenting. This demonstrates why an understanding of the production processes of net artworks should not be limited to the individual computer but must be extended to include the underlying infrastructure of these works, and this infrastructure encompasses the engagement of the users who visited the website and contributed to the artworks. Although such contribution is an act via a computer, there are parallels with what Lisa Parks calls “supporting acts” (Parks 2015). In her essay discussing media infrastructures, she highlights the persistence of bodily acts among automated processes.

Public Netbase

The initiative Public Netbase, which took place in Vienna simultaneously with the Internationale Stadt, demonstrates how essential these infrastructural components are. Public Netbase was founded by Konrad Becker and Francisco de Sousa Webber in the early 1990s. The forerunner of the larger organisation Public Netbase was the t0 server with its own domain, hosted on the webserver of the General Hospital Vienna (AKH), where de Sousa Webber, then a medical student, was working in the IT department. Upon realizing

Fig. 3 Public Netbase, Website, 1998. Accessed with OldWeb.today emulator (© World-Information Institute/t0).



that the server was not in use at the hospital, de Sousa Webber began uploading his own computer games and source codes, inviting the public to contribute their own material by offering free hosting. The server quickly turned into a platform for artists, experimenters, and theoreticians exploring topics related to the internet, impressing its initiators with the “sheer depth, breadth, reach and seriousness of that stuff” (de Sousa Webber 2008, 274). Eventually, growing numbers of contributions and the high traffic drew the attention of the AKH, prompting the operators of t0 to launch their own server.

Stella Rolling, founder of Depot – a center for dialogue surrounding contemporary art in Vienna’s MuseumsQuartier (MQ) – offered t0 a physical space in exchange for providing the technological infrastructure for both Depot and the entire MuseumsQuartier (ibid.). In December 1994, the Public Netbase website was launched and at the beginning of the following year the physical space of Public Netbase in the MQ, including a public internet terminal, was officially opened (Apprich 2014).

Public Netbase’s website has hardly changed since its beginnings in 1994 (fig. 3). All content was accessible to everyone and there was no membership system tied to different levels of visibility as with the Internationale Stadt website. On the landing page, designed only in black and white, five menu icons are arranged one below the other beneath an animated network sphere with flashing dots. The third symbol from the top, with two overlapping Zs,

points to the ZERO ZONE. Here, Public Netbase users could upload and introduce their own projects. All contributions are visible in a long list which, in the earliest archived website version from October 1997, featured 45 projects. The community's level of activity is reflected in the growing number of projects, with 164 projects already listed on the website by January 1998. By 1999, they were sorted into the sections for art, music, film, and a range of other interests. The art section lists approximately 64 projects (Public Netbase 1999). For the most part, however, these were not net art, but websites of artists and art institutions. Among them were, for example, the artist group Wochenklausur, the collective Gelatin, publishing houses, magazines, and museums, along with websites for individual exhibitions. These websites were all stored on the t0 server and, in addition to the institutions of the entire MQ, which got their first website through Public Netbase, a number of other Viennese museums and organizations were among them. Nevertheless, there was also a small number of net artworks hosted in ZERO ZONE, including *Siberian Deal*, already mentioned in the context of Internationale Stadt. The Public Netbase version of *Siberian Deal*, however, seems to have emerged after the project was already completed. It shows a much more elaborate graphic design and different structure than the version on the ICF website, which suggests that it is merely an archival version of the original work. Another noteworthy project that was also featured in ZERO ZONE as an archival version offering several languages was *Refugee Republic* by Ingo Günther (1993). The project was the result of extensive investigations and was essentially a website proposing a supranational and supraterritorial refugee state that might become a model for the rest of the world. The core of the work, however, was the refugee.net web address, whose professional appearance lent the partly satirical project its explosive power (Günther 2013).

In addition to the submitted projects under ZERO ZONE, the homepage provides access to ZERO NEWS and DATAPOOL, a critical online publication platform and information service featuring contributions from over thirty authors, including Hakim Bey and texts on Nikola Tesla. It encompasses thematic subsections such as AUTONOMOUS NEWS AGENT, a digest of newsgroups and databanks for topics like politics, cyber, copyright, and MS GUIDANCE, offering instructional resources on internet use. Further components include forums, a mailing list, and a music-oriented section titled MUSICK. Additional links direct users to the Media~Space, which documented activities at Public Netbase's physical venue, and to the e~scape lounge, which offered a live broadcast of shows by musicians performing elsewhere to the visitors in Vienna's MQ alongside other music related links to record labels, concert venues, artists, and sound experiments.

One project that illustrates the role of Public Netbase's website as a platform rather than a site of artistic production is *Dolores Bulimic Breakfast*, initiated by Marie Ringler, an early collaborator and Managing Director of Public Netbase from 1998 to 2000. *Dolores Bulimic Breakfast* could best be described as a cyberfeminist literature and art platform, which, however, was not a place of collaboration, but merely published the results of externally organized collaboration. It featured texts and interviews by theorists like Sadie Plant, author of *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (1997) and Rosi Braidotti, but also artists like Linda Dement, Gash Girl, or VNS Matrix.

Public Netbase's activities functioned similarly: its core activities were located less on the website than in the MuseumsQuartier itself, culminating in the opening of the aforementioned Media~Space in 1997. When Public Netbase moved to a larger space, it was able to significantly increase the number and size of its events. Approximately 15 to 20 people worked for the organization at peak times and the team consisted of permanent employees who organized and implemented projects, events and technical support, and a number of freelancers and volunteers who worked on specific projects. From its very beginning in 1994, the organization was funded by the City of Vienna. Public Netbase had long faced conflicts with its funding body primarily due to its critical stance against conventional cultural norms and government policies in Austria, culminating in funding cuts justified by claims that projects like youth workshops did not align with city policies. According to Katharina Ludwig, this contributed to a perception of Public Netbase as adversarial, leading to the withdrawal of funding in 2006 and, ultimately, its closure as political tides shifted toward more traditional, de-politicized cultural policies (Ludwig 2009). Clemens Apprich adds that Public Netbase's understanding of an adequate space for action and production – a space that would reflect the latest artistic forms of expression and offer appropriate exhibition and performance facilities – began to fall out of step with that of the management of the MuseumsQuartier in Vienna, which at that time was “initiating a large-scale reconstruction scheme” (Apprich 2010).

The end of Public Netbase meant the loss of a central platform for critical debate and artistic projects in the field of digital culture and politics in Vienna. However, although the website was part of this platform it was not the central point of these activities. What characterized Public Netbase's web presence as a whole, as well as single sub projects like *Dolores Bulimic Breakfast*, was the large volume of stored text material. The website functioned like a library with content relating to the internet and digital culture that could be accessed by everyone. It therefore offered the theoretical tools for the ex-

changes that otherwise mainly took place in the physical space of Public Netbase, the Media~Space. The website provided the background literature, announced events, and in some cases provided written documentation of public programs. The Media~Space hosted workshops for hands-on instruction as well as week-long festivals featuring international multimedia artists and theorists. The initiative provided a holistic approach to the internet, offering both access as an internet provider and instruction on how to set it up, as well as critical analysis and literature that could accompany new users in their exploration of this new digital environment. This independent organization executed a pedagogical approach to media that could scarcely be replicated by other educational institutions after its demise.

Online and Offline Material

A fully comparative analysis of International Stadt Berlin and Public Netbase is not possible, particularly because Public Netbase continued to exist for nine years after ICF had already dissolved. What connects both organizations, however, is that they began their activities as Internet providers, thereby laying the foundations for many individuals and art institutions' to gain their first internet access in Berlin and Vienna. For both initiatives, this basic infrastructural supply was also associated with financial incentives, but it was not pursued for purely economic reasons. Rather, it can be seen as the first, fundamental aspect of an educational mission to familiarize an art-interested public with the internet. Visualizing and disclosing the functions of the internet and the associated empowerment of public participation can be seen as guiding principles of both institutions, although their online presence played different roles in the execution of this mission, which accounts for their distinct infrastructures.

The Internationale Stadt made the production processes of artworks visible on their websites, allowing viewers to experience and participate in them, whether by following the project's development, as with *Siberian Deal*, or direct participation, as with the novel *Die Quotenmaschine* or *Computer Aided Curating* (C@C). Public Netbase's website served less to follow the creation process of individual works than to create the intellectual basis for an examination of net artworks and to approach questions about artistic production in relation to the internet. With the opening of the Media~Space, one could say that the artworks moved into the physical space while their foundational component remained online.

A commonality shared by both organizations is that they each disclosed development processes as a means to foster awareness and understanding of

the theoretical and technical structures behind them. Both organizations approached this task and mediation for potential viewers, who were invited to become participants in the processes taking place in their own way. At the ICF, only resident users could access all functions while for Public Netbase, the website served as an invitation to participate in the events at the Media~Space in the MuseumsQuartier where most activities took place. The annual reports of the Internationale Stadt and Public Netbase show the enormous variety of their respective programming, which ranged from hands-on introductions to modem installation, detailed instructions for beginner internet users, courses for getting started, and events that critically examined the use and functions of the internet such as talks by media studies scholars. What links these organizations is that, as internet providers, they offered the infrastructure to ensure that participation in the process was possible in the first place.

Internationale Stadt Berlin and Public Netbase exposed audiences to an interplay between material production processes and art in real time, representing a new approach to artistic practices. In both cases, the aim was not only to present art, but also to create an environment that enabled and supported artistic production, reception, and mediation through access to technology, server capacity, and theoretical knowledge of the technical and social conditions of digital art and beyond. They did this by offering digital and physical space for active participation and giving both artists and the public the opportunity to be involved in the creation and reception of the works. The disclosure of these processes, whether through collaborative projects or theoretical and practical educational programs, promoted a deeper understanding of digital art as a process and not just as a finished work.

These examples of net art initiatives also show that art in digital contexts cannot be conceived without its infrastructural foundations, such as servers and the online and offline networks in which they are created and perceived. The initiatives Internationale Stadt Berlin and Public Netbase therefore illustrate a paradigmatic shift towards an art practice that emphasizes transparency, participation, and an open approach to the conditions of its own production. They also demonstrate the precarious temporalities in both online and offline spaces and the consequences of collapsing infrastructures for artworks and communities.

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Infrastructural Realism in Melanie Gilligan's *Self-Capital* (2009) and Merlin Carpenter's *Midcareer Paintings* (2015)

Tobias Ertl

I

During her residency at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in the summer of 2009, artist Melanie Gilligan used the gallery building to publicly rehearse, and then shoot, a three-episode melodrama-styled fictional miniseries about global capitalism in crisis. For his 2015 solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Bern, Merlin Carpenter exhibited transit blankets mounted on stretcher frames of identical format in all rooms of the gallery and titled the show *Midcareer Paintings*. Despite obvious differences in terms of aesthetic and material procedures and their historical reference systems – performative video art that draws on visual conventions of television in the first case and a conceptual intervention into the discourse of painting that revisits the legacy of the readymade in the other – both artists are concerned with the infrastructural conditions of art production, which they incorporate into the structure of their works. Gilligan employs the public gallery as a site of production, which she then allegorizes as a space of global capital through performative gestures and filmic narrative. Carpenter displays the packing material for art transportation *as* artwork and thereby inverts the relationship between the content of art and the transnational context of its distribution mechanisms and logistics.

Distinctly marked by the post-2008 moment, Gilligan's and Carpenter's works reexamine the self-reflexive strategies of institutional critique against the backdrop of a generalized economic crisis. As I will argue in this article, the works by both artists exemplify a broader shift within a political art discourse that has increasingly questioned the theoretical and practical effectiveness of an 'institutional' critique in the face of neoliberal capitalism's catastrophic crisis dynamics. In 2009, two publications revisited the legacy of this term, perhaps indicating the fact that the practice it designates had ultimately become historical. Alexander Alberro's introduction to a comprehensive anthology of four decades of artists' writings concludes with references to positions that renew the utopian aspirations of neo-avant-gardist groups like the Situationist International against the supposedly conservative turn of

a self-reflexive, sociological criticism. The latter, which declared the public art institution its ultimate horizon, thereby remains unable to “imagine an alternative to, or outside of, its framework” (Alberro 2009, 15). In an essay published the same year, Gerald Raunig similarly attacks the perceived defeatism of ‘second generation’ institutional critique. Andrea Fraser had famously argued that artists are “trapped” in their “field,” because the art institution is “internalized, embodied, and performed by individuals.” The critical question then addresses what “kinds of values we institutionalize” (Fraser 2005, 283). Against this ethical turn of an “immanent” critique informed by Bourdieusian sociology, Raunig proclaims an “exodus” – inspired by post-structuralist and post-operaist thought – of “political practices that traverse the fields, the structures, the institutions” (Raunig 2009, 11).

What comes after institutional critique can be formulated as a two-fold question: what replaces the ‘institution’ – as simultaneous object, addressee, and eventually subject of ‘critique’?¹; and/or what replaces ‘critique’ as the operational mode of artistic practice? Such a double shift of terms has already been at work in institutional critique’s inception as a discourse, if we follow Benjamin Buchloh’s now-canonical account of a move within 1960s Conceptual Art from an “aesthetics of administration” to a “critique of institutions” (Buchloh 1990). The post-minimalist conceptual practice of artists like Robert Morris or Sol LeWitt is interpreted by Buchloh as still being bound to a “phenomenology of visual and cognitive experience” (136), even though the traditional notion of a subject of representation and aesthetic experience is hollowed out and mimetically identified with the logic of late capitalist bureaucracy. In contrast, Hans Haacke’s or Daniel Buren’s interventions into the museum space demonstrate that the forms and materials of aesthetic experience are “always already inscribed within the conventions of language and thereby with institutional power and ideological and economic investment” (ibid.). The shift from a general reflection, in artworks, of “administrative” late-capitalist culture to the concrete economic politics of art institutions corresponds with a shift from an “aesthetic” to a “critical” mode of artistic practice.

Both these tendencies, however, are still predominantly grounded in a modernist notion of self-reflexivity, handed down by minimalism’s concerns with objecthood and the physical, spatial, and eventually socio-economic parameters of exhibition spaces. As to the question of what comes *after* institutional critique, Buchloh invokes an altogether different genealogy when, in his 1995 essay on Allan Sekula’s *Fish Story* (1989–1995), he portrays the genre

¹ The latter case is expressed in Fraser’s formulation “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique” (Fraser 2005).

of photojournalism as an innovative violation of modernism's "prohibition on representation, narrative and realism" (Buchloh 1995, 192). In Sekula's reportage-style photographic capturing of sites of global commodity trade and automated labor, critique as an operational mode is maintained, but its object has shifted from the public art institution to social reality – or from the 'museum' to the 'world.'² Visually representing a reality that is not predominantly observed under the aspect of its correlation with the system of art production – in Sekula's case capitalism's global logistics and the laboring body of the worldwide proletariat (fig. 1) – parts ways with a mode of critique that is chiefly concerned with self-reflexively addressing its own transcendental conditions of possibility rooted in the social practices of institutions.

To use Buchloh's terms, any "realist" position is then confronted with the risk of relapsing from a "critical" to an "aesthetic" mode of operation. We cannot get rid of the problem of representation. Positioned against the linguistic paradigms prevalent in modernist and postmodernist critiques of representation, the new realisms were informed, first, by the field of visual studies emerging in the 1990s (Möntmann 2003, 109) and, more recently, by decidedly post-critical notions of material agency (Latour 2004). If classical institutional critique – say, Michael Asher's architectural interventions – made the museum a *site* of politics (and thereby confined politics to its site), with the new realisms it tends to become a museal *display* of politics (or 'life' or 'matter') situated beyond the framework of the art system. The return of a representational politics of the image, a pre-sociological, perceptual transcendentalism of experience, the conflation of a critique of capitalism with its iconography, or a quasi-metaphysical belief in the agency of matter might together be considered the potential flip sides of a realism after institutional critique. Somewhat paradoxically, the self-limiting attitude of a sociological critique of art institutions guaranteed a far more 'realistic' image of its material possibilities

² In the earlier essay, Buchloh had identified precisely the "prohibition of any and all visuality"—i.e., Adorno's *Bilderverbot*—as the logical core of conceptualism in all its variants, thereby setting up an "inescapable aesthetic rule for the end of the twentieth century" (1990, 119). His lauding, half a decade later, of a return of visual representation via Sekula's journalistic mapping of global economy seems to signal that in the 21st century, this rule might be turned down. The tendency was confirmed when Okwui Enwezor included Sekula's *Fish Story* in a wide range of documentary representations of global politics at Documenta in 2002, and in further publications which cemented Sekula's status as pioneer of a new realism (Baetens/Gelder 2007; Linck et al. 2010). Buchloh, a dialectical spirit and Adornian modernist, is careful, however, to avoid absolutizing his representational stance by reinscribing Sekula's practice in the framework of a poststructuralist discursive critique, thereby rendering it coherent with the semantics of institutional critique performed in the earlier essay. Sekula's practice is one that "addresses the institutions and discourses of (photographic) signification; it is within this field that Sekula's work performs its 'realistic' interventions." (1995, 196).



than some of the new realisms, which seem all too trapped in subjective fantasies of an immediate access to politics and matter.

As institutional critique runs out of steam, mainstream art institutions increasingly self-advertise as institutions of critique. By the mid-2010s, it seemed that Fraser's warning against neo-avant-gardist "mythologies of radicality and symbolic revolution" (Fraser 2005, 283) had gone completely unheeded. Mainstream curatorial discourse now used the semantics of sociopolitical and ecological realism as a signpost of art's social legitimacy in the face of economic crisis and public austerity. To cite but one significant example, Adam Szymczyk's claim that the *documenta* exists "beyond [its] legal organizational frame" as an "autonomous, commonly owned, transnational and inclusive self-organized artistic undertaking – one that is carried out by a multitude and not limited to any location in particular" (Szymczyk 2017, 40) turns the existing bourgeois public sphere on its head. The structure of this idealist rhetorics, which, sadly, has set the tone for what was to come, could be called an institutional critique without critique, or realism as aesthetic fantasy.³ Whereas institutional critique locates politics within the institution – measuring its "normative (ideal) self-understanding" against its "(material) actuality" (Alberro 2009, 3) – and realism acknowledges the necessity of its site being irreducibly outside in "actual industrial production" (Buchloh 1995, 196), in the new mainstream curatorial discourse the institution itself appears as political subject; it is imagined as a "coming community" of "radical subjectivities" (Szymczyk 2017, 40) which has no site at all – except in the topsy-turvy world of a curatorial head.

II

I understand the concept of "infrastructural critique," introduced by Marina Vishmidt in 2016, as an attempt to counter such institutional idealism. As a mediating third term between institutional critique and realism, infrastructural critique performs a materialist turn in art criticism, drawing on both traditions while attempting to avoid the shortcomings of an immanent sociological critique concerned only with the politics and ethics of art systems on the one hand, and a sociologically unspecified aesthetic representation of political and material realities on the other.⁴ The term infrastructure

³ For a critique of the "idealist" conception of realism in *documenta 14* see Prange 2018.

⁴ In Vishmidt's writings, infrastructural critique appears less as a periodizing category, or a normative art-critical term applied to propagating a new avant-garde than as a way of thinking through the complexities and contradictions of artistic politics. Rather than proclaiming a new movement, infrastructural critique proposes a shift of perspective onto historical and contemporary practices, many of which can be attributed to both the conceptualist and realist traditions sketched out above. See Vishmidt 2016, 2017, 2021.

designates technological and, by extension, social systems that operate “below the threshold of what we discern as structure in our everyday life” (van Eikels 2022, 81). Where institutions are still representable as (relatively) autonomous actors, infrastructures are that on which every institution is materially dependent. To paraphrase what Niklas Luhmann says about social systems: infrastructures have no telephone number; they cannot be reached by a subject of communication (Luhmann 1997, 866). In other words, as an object of critique, infrastructures are situated beyond intersubjective reason. Where institutional critique still upheld the semblance of a liberal public sphere, infrastructural critique, operating in an “expanded field of structural violence” (Vishmidt 2016, 221), does not. For the very same reason – their unavailability via communication – infrastructures cannot appear, in a work of art, as the content of representation, but must rather be reflexively grasped as a condition of production.⁵

I read Melanie Gilligan’s *Self-Capital* (2009) and Merlin Carpenter’s *Midcareer Paintings* (2015) as examples of artistic practices that address production, transportation, and logistics as their unavailable infrastructural conditions. Both works start from conceptual parameters associated with institutional critique – site-specificity, self-reflexivity, the sociopolitical conditions of artistic production – but drift away from the gravitational center of the public institution and speculatively gesture towards a less graspable epistemic object: capitalist economy. In my reading of Gilligan’s and Carpenter’s works I will foreground the conceptual relevance of economic infrastructures on the level of subjectivity. I argue that, by means of semiotic and psychoanalytic methods, the institutional sites of these works are fictionalized as a symbolic space (rather than investigated as a literal space) of capitalist subjectivation. Gilligan’s video work allegorizes its mode of production as economic performance and Carpenter uses his institutional solo show to highlight the transnational infrastructure of art transit as a material and symbolic nexus of capitalist social relations. I attempt to show that it is this bracketing of the infrastructures of the art system and “total social capital” (Marx 1990b, 664) through the fictitious staging of economic subject production that distinguishes Gilligan’s and Carpenter’s practices from both the realist representation of a capitalist world and the self-referential investigation and normative critique of art institutions.

Although they refer to distinct art-historical and cultural models – monochrome painting and the readymade in Carpenter, and performance art, TV drama, and caricature in Gilligan – *Self-Capital* and *Midcareer Paintings* share

⁵ A list of post-institutional-critique artists to whom this description applies could include Martin Beck, Patricia L. Boyd, Ruth Buchanan, Carolyn Lazard, Ghislaine Leung, Sam Lewitt, Park McArthur, Cameron Rowland, Mirjam Thomann, and Constantina Zavitsanos, among others.

a common conceptual logic that can be linked to the transformation of institutional critique's methods in the post-2008 moment of global economic crisis.⁶ Against institutional critique's literal engagement with factual social and economic conditions and ideologies materialized in concrete institutions like the museum, Gilligan and Carpenter deal speculatively with the totality of global capitalism. If transnational infrastructures of production and logistics figure as their main referents, these do not, however, appear as representational content, as, for example, in Allan Sekula's photographs of dock workers and containerships. Therefore, their works must also be distinguished from the discourse of realism and its attempt to visualize intangible infrastructures through an "aesthetics of the economy" or an "aesthetics of logistics" (Kinkle/Toscano 2015, 188, 33). In Gilligan's and Carpenter's works, infrastructures are not addressed subjectively. Rather, the subject is addressed as infrastructural. The subject does not see the infrastructure. The infrastructure is the subject.

III

The title of Melanie Gilligan's *Self-Capital* should be read both ways: the self is capitalist, and capital is the self. Gilligan has woven this speculative statement into the fictional narrative of her three-episode video series. The viewer is presented with a personification of the global economy of contemporary capitalism and the performative embodiment of a capitalist subject simultaneously. A woman "in the typical age of personal midlife crises" (Buchmann 2019, 147) rehearses capital's worldwide financial breakdown of the previous year as a damaged subject undergoing therapy. Bridging the boldly didactic, the awkwardly funny, and the theoretical complexity of Marxian analyses of capitalism's impersonal structures of domination, *Self-Capital's* narrative functions primarily through the mode of allegory. Marx's ghostly metaphor of the "automatic subject" of value (Marx 1990, 255) is given a fictitious embodied presence (capital as self) and at the same time the unconscious affects (the subject's infrastructure) of a 'real' human psyche consti-

⁶ During the 2000s, both Carpenter and Gilligan were involved, as artists and writers, in an art scene between New York, London, Cologne, and Berlin, in which the renegotiation of institutional critique was a prime concern. See for example Gilligan's review of the Lower East Side artist space Orchard for a *Texte zur Kunst* issue on *Institutionskritik* (Gilligan 2005) or Carpenter's and Gilligan's respective contributions to a round table on "criticism and its markets" organized by Isabelle Graw in 2007 (Birnbau/Graw 2008). Within this context, Carpenter's and Gilligan's respective practices can be situated as contributing to a broader shift from (Bourdieuian) sociology to (Marxian) critique of political economy as main theoretical frame of reference. For their more recent respective theoretical engagements with Marxist theory, see Carpenter 2018; Gilligan 2022.



Fig. 2 Melanie Gilligan, *Self-Capital*, 2009, HD video, color, 16:9 format, stereo sound, media player, 3 episodes (23 minutes), film stills (Courtesy the artist and gallery Max Mayer).

tuted under the law of a capitalist social order are experimentally tested (self as capital). Both these perspectives are, to the point of being indiscernible, condensed into a single filmic character.

Commissioned by the ICA London in the context of an artist residency, the work is realized in two stages: first, as a publicly accessible rehearsal in the museum's galleries during which Gilligan worked with professional actor Penelope McGhie to write and finalize the script; and second, as a three-episode video series shot on ICA premises during one week in August 2009.⁷ Blending performance art with psychoanalysis, genre television with caricature, slapstick with linguistic comedy, the largely improvised script unfolds through a series of sketches corresponding to the physical, logopedic, and meditational

⁷ The video was then shown as a one-channel screening in the theatre of ICA, streamed on YouTube (https://youtu.be/_ATnDUzYilg?feature=shared) and eventually presented as a three-channel video installation in further exhibitions. The script, still in the making, was included in Gilligan's *Five Scripts* (2009) under the title "Notes for a Work in Progress" (2009). Quotes in this article are from the script and/or the final video version (which are not identical).



Fig. 3 Melanie Gilligan, *Self-Capital*: ICA, 2009, Institute for Contemporary Arts, London (© Melanie Gilligan).

exercises in which a patient named Global Economy reenacts the trauma of the financial crisis. The role of the therapist is also played by McGhie, as are all the supporting roles (a receptionist, a colleague of the therapist, a cashier) (fig. 2). While emulating the aesthetics of a TV melodrama, the scenes lack strong narrative coherence, as they are rather loosely connected through the experimental therapeutic framework.

During the public rehearsals, the actor's task to performatively implement Gilligan's experimental premise – to let capital's unconscious speak – was supported by a variety of visual research material, mainly early modern prints showing allegorical representations of the political body. Large-scale reproductions of caricatures employing the body metaphor to discuss the relationships between modern political power and the economy – like the *Homme aux Assignats* (1790) or Daumier's *Le ventre législatif* (1834) – were hung in the gallery, as to suggest a link between Gilligan's performative and video work and the traditions of caricature, print, and the press image as critical political tools (fig. 3). In terms of the latter's object, however, a historical shift must be

accounted for. If, in the age of bourgeois revolutions, caricature could perform “symbolic beheadings” of feudal sovereignty and social orders, the body of capital is “infamously acephalous and so un-beheadable” (Gilligan 2009, 102). Methodologically, this shift is registered as a displacement not so much from the printed to the moving image (these can be seen as congruent, especially at the moment when broadcasting was democratized through the internet), but rather from visual to linguistic representation, or from the primacy of the imaginary to the primacy of the symbolic. Gilligan’s work seems to suggest that the global economy is structured like a language – an abstract system of equivalences mediated through the speaking body of the analysand. In a reenactment of Daumier’s satirical image for the redistribution of wealth during the July monarchy – a Rabelaisian feast where Louis-Philippe is swallowing the people’s money and defecating privileges for the noblemen (*Gargantua*, 1831) – the personification of capital is chewing and spitting out linguistic signifiers:

Creative economy...Hmmm...Chamber of commerce... The ‘mmm’ becomes a sound of satisfaction as if she is relishing the word, her mouth making a chewing motion. Comm...Hmmm...Commercial Real...Hmmm...Real Estate... Mmmm...Emerging Markets...Mmmm...Em....Em...Employees...Mmmm... Migrant Workers...Yumm. I want workers [...] Urgh...Lab-urgh. (Gilligan 2009, 119)

Short-circuiting the somatic with the semantic, the material with the symbolic, and political economy with psychoanalysis, the scene allegorizes capitalist accumulation as oral drive, following Marx’s tropes of capital’s gargantuan “‘all-engrossing’ appetite” (Marx 1990b, 521) for surplus-value.⁸

Allegory also determines how the institutional and infrastructural conditions of the work’s production come to signify on the level of its content and form. The fact that the filmic narrative was conceived on-site, aided by McGhie’s largely improvised portrayal, points to a peculiar method of production in which conventions of performance art interfere with those of television screenwriting. In its blunt opposition to the visual and narrative codes of contemporary video art and through its barely artworld-related content, Gilligan’s mock financial TV drama *Crisis in the Credit System* (2008) had already set the tone. With *Self-Capital*, however, the artist introduces dimensions of site-specificity and context-reflexivity to her genre of economic melodrama.

⁸ For a historical contextualization of Marx’s literary metaphors, see Breyer 2017; Bies/Mengaldo 2020. For an in-depth discussion of the homologies between Marx’s concept of capitalist accumulation and psychoanalytic notions of the drive, see Tomšič 2015.

The therapeutic disciplining of crisis-induced physical contortions of the body politic was easy to read as an allegory of the ICA's post-2008 austerity measures.⁹

On the level of the filmic image, this multiplication of references – to personified total social capital and to the museum as a singular economic actor – is translated into an allegorical doubling of spaces. In the final video, the film set is still recognizable as the ICA building. The gallery space signifies both literally and allegorically: on the one hand, it points to the documentation of a performance in a specific institutional environment; on the other hand, it is portrayed as the 'therapeutic' space of global capital, conveyed cinematically as the backdrop of the video's fictional narrative. The "circumstantiality" (Owens 1980, 71) of the artist's symbolic intervention into an existing system of production is superimposed onto the fictitious 'world' of the filmic diegesis.

Every statement in the script's dialogue about global capital can also be related back to the conditions of art making, or to the subjectivities produced by the art system. As Buchmann has pointed out, the video's narrative content and its performative mode of production are interrelated through the performative tropes of improvisation, exercise, and rehearsal (Buchmann 2019). *Self-Capital* therefore also functions as an allegory of the artist – especially the artist under the precarious and de-localized conditions of post-studio practice. The therapeutic scene can also be linked to the imperatives of creativity the neoliberal "entrepreneurial self" is subjected to (Bröckling 2012), particularly if we consider that the roles of artist-as-director (Gilligan) and artist-as-performer (McGhie) are mirrored in those of the therapist and patient on the diegetic level. What the therapist prescribes as a cure is a series of creative performative exercises. Incorporating the built infrastructure of art's display as an element of its production and staging a coercively 'creative' subjectivity, Gilligan's fictionalization of the art institution amounts to a speculative identification of art and capitalism.

A long tradition of artworks exists in which the site of production is fictionalized and displayed as a site of social critique, from the 'real allegory' of Gustave Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* (1855) to Paul McCarthy's studio replica *The Box* (1999). But whereas in these works, lines are blurred between the private space of production and the public space of display, Gilligan's work adheres to a genealogy of feminist post-studio practices in which the museum serves as primary space of (discursive) production, or performative non-

⁹ For a detailed account of how Gilligan's video reflects the institution's director's budget policy see Fields 2019. When the work was first shown at the ICA, its title read *SELF-CAPITAL: ICA* (<https://archive.ica.art/whats-on/artists-film-club-melanie-gilligan/index.html>. Accessed 23 October 2025).

production. This tradition – say, from Mierle Laderman Ukeles to Andrea Fraser – has utilized tropes of parasitical interaction with or intrusion into the readymade space of the museum as materialized ideology. Like Fraser in her video-recorded *Gallery Talks*, McGhie (as the “delegated” [Bishop 2012] performer of Gilligan’s piece) strolls around the museum’s peripheral, i.e. infrastructural, sites: shop, foyer, offices, corridors. A sense of impermanent and clandestine intrusion similar to that of Fraser’s parodistic museum tours is conveyed, for example, as we see the allegory of “Global Economy” pass by the wall of fame of male minimalist sculptors on view.

A difference must be noted, however, concerning the referentiality of the respective approaches. Where Fraser uses her body and voice to highlight the concrete power structures of class and sexuality unconsciously inscribed in the museum’s material fabric – for example, the “powerfully sensual curves” of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Bilbao building advertised in the audio guide (*Little Frank and His Carp*, 2001) – McGhie’s therapeutic exercises hallucinate global capital as a language of the unconscious, or as economic discourse unhinged:

Time to go to work. Indonesia. Labour.

Global high yield cheap.

U.S. investors get impatient to see a recovery on their computers. (eating the word computer). U.S. investors tie twelve monkeys to a tree in order to get the best value from their money.

Money/monkey/money/monkey. (Gilligan 2009, 120)

If Fraser’s project can be situated within an “expansive, sociologically and psychoanalytically inflicted sense of ‘institution’” (Vishmidt 2016, 220), Gilligan’s work both builds upon and speculatively overcomes this position. The self-critical gesture of the ‘artist’ or ‘performer’ is, in her case, less to ironize concrete institutional power structures than to ventriloquize global capital directly, on the general level of the unconscious infrastructure of social subjectivity.

IV

“Walls stand cold / And speechless, in the wind / The weathervanes creak”

Friedrich Hölderlin, “At the Middle of Life” (1804)

For his 2015 institutional solo-exhibition *Midcareer Paintings* at Kunsthalle Bern, Merlin Carpenter presented twenty-two grey transit blankets mounted on vertically hung stretcher frames of identical format (234×198.5 cm), one



Fig. 4 Merlin Carpenter, *MIDCAREER PAINTINGS*, installation view, Kunsthalle Bern, 2015 (Photo: Stefan Jäggi © Kunsthalle Bern).

on each wall of the ground floor and basement galleries (fig. 4). Although no paint has been applied, the designation of these objects as “paintings,” explicit in the show’s title, is legitimate if painting is understood as a discursive formation rather than a technical procedure.¹⁰ The discourse of painting is signaled by the tableau form, while the scale of the works, their being hung on the museum walls, and the reproduction of grainy black-and-white installation shots in the exhibition catalog somewhat nostalgically invoke the post-war history of the medium, painterly tropes of minimalist abstraction and, more specifically, the microgenre of the grey monochrome. But this is pure mockery, as the material is fake, cheaply produced industrial textiles from recycled material commonly used to protect artworks and other goods for transportation. Carpenter typically plays with patterns of expectation and incorporates the discursive infrastructures of reception – here the exhibition

¹⁰ “Painting is whatever current theoretical structure exists around it in the art world.” (Carpenter/Graw 2018, 182). For an understanding of painting as a discourse formation of modernity, see also Draxler 2021.

catalog – into the work’s strategy, laying out evidently false trails. Art critics reviewing the show did not fail to register the formal similarities between the delicate fibers randomly pressed into the readymade textiles and Jackson Pollock’s drippings of paint.¹¹ The full-page color reproduction of all twenty-two ‘canvases’ jokingly invites such stylistic comparisons, but the colored fibers running through the dull grey fabric are just so many red herrings.

Carpenter’s artistic practice addresses its audience as knowledgeable – but not connoisseurs – and incorporates this knowledge into its mode of production. It could be described as an art form that acknowledges its awareness of not being expected to take itself too seriously. To portray *Midcareer Paintings* as a “thorough exercise in disappointment” (Knoll 2017, n.p.), as does the curator of the show, is suitable, but only if we see it from the vantage point of aesthetic experience. From a phenomenological perspective, the structure of the work is boredom. On the spot, there is literally nothing to ‘see’ or to ‘experience’ – or even to ‘think,’ for that matter. However, it should be noted that this type of work does not exist in its empirical, phenomenological actuality, but rather in the social communication it prompts. In this sense, it is paradigmatically post-conceptual and affords a semiotic reading. Rather than as a traditional art exhibition, I suggest considering *Midcareer Paintings* as a “gallery gesture.”

The term was coined by Brian O’Doherty to designate artistic practices which – like Marcel Duchamp’s *Twelve Hundred Coal Bags Suspended from the Ceiling over a Stove* (1938), Yves Klein’s *Le Vide* (1958), or Robert Barry’s *Closed Gallery Piece* (1969) – “subsume an entire gallery” under a single idea for the duration of an exhibition (1999, 69). O’Doherty links these gestures to the proto-conceptualist inversion of “context” and “content” (ibid., 65), a logic at work in many of Carpenter’s projects, for instance in his 2007 painting performance *The Opening* in which the ephemeral social interactions of the vernissage event are staged as the show’s conceptual center and photographically documented in the exhibition catalog. A similar inversion is performed when the material of the artwork (canvas) is mimicked by the material of its packaging for transportation (transit blankets). Infrastructures of the artwork – such as institutional, social, and discursive parerga like the press release, website, catalog, gatherings, venues, and the logistical and economic connections between them – serve as the specific artistic material upon which Carpenter’s work builds.

¹¹ See for example Bieri, Martin. “Das Nur-so-tun-als-ob und seine Grenzen,” *Der Bund* (Bern), 21 September 2015, p. 27; Lagger, Helen. “Kunsthalle hat die Krise,” *BZ Berner Zeitung*, 21 September 2015, p. 4.

Its mode of signification is that of an excessive “referentialism” (Rottmann 2008) of names, places, scenes, and social networks of art world participants. Three types of referentiality can be distinguished in *Midcareer Paintings*: those concerning the history of art, the sociology of the art system, and relationships between art and the capitalist economy. In terms of its art-historical reference, Carpenter’s minimal presentation revolves around the two logical endpoints that have since become archetypes of a modernist critique of representation: the readymade and the monochrome (see Egenhofer 2008, 33). They are cited not as operative devices (as this was still the case when Blinky Palermo, in the 1960s, or Rosemarie Trockel, in the 1980s, mounted readymade textiles onto a stretcher frame) but repeated as dead signs in a quasi-post-historical limbo in which painting is still, or perhaps, again, a signifier for the concept of art. The classical hanging in the impeccable white cube of Bern’s Kunsthalle could also imply a certain return to order, given the material-specific allusions to post-minimalist works like Robert Morris’s or Joseph Beuys’s felt sculptures in which the conventional orthogonality of modernist spatial relations in painting and sculpture were overcome in favor of “anti-form” (Morris 1968). More than on the medium’s strictly art historical filiations, Carpenter insists on painting’s social and economic functioning, on the intersection of “canvases and careers” (Birnbbaum/Graw 2008).

If the investigation of art opening audiences in *The Opening* was sociological, in *Midcareer Paintings*, the social dimension of painting is captured in a (stereotyped) autobiographical mode. Carpenter foregrounds a potentially precarious form of mobility (transit blankets) as the condition for an artist to traverse the marketized “desert” (Knoll 2015, n.p.) of their midcareer phase. The catalog further pictures the affective state of a transient globalized art world sociality in a spread of images intermittingly positioned between the installation views of dull grey “paintings” – snapshots of airport halls, fleeting gatherings of friends and strangers, vans parking in streets in front of lofts, and billboard advertisements for the show displayed in non-specific, placeless urban and suburban environments. The figure of the artist is central in this imaginary arrangement, and it can be read as something like the late-capitalist version of the Baudelairean “painter of modern life”¹² who eternalizes the beauty of the transitory. On the first page of the catalog, Carpenter, like a grunge version of the Beuysian shaman, crouches on an armchair covered in grey textiles; with long blond hair, black leather jacket and vintage Adidas sneakers, his introverted gaze is turned away from the beholder (fig. 5).

¹² See also Gilligan’s eponymous text on Carpenter (Gilligan 2004).



Fig. 5 Merlin Carpenter (Photo: Sebastian Böttcher, 2016).

Mythologies of the male bohemian artist as romantic nomad are simultaneously evoked and disenchanted in Carpenter's work, as the affective qualities attached to the fleeting and the placeless are indexed as purely economic. In capitalism, the movement of people is dictated by the circulation of commodities. I would argue that Carpenter's gesture interrogates the way in which (art-)sociological categories of habitus and communication, the autobiographical, social networks, milieus, and subjectivities are positioned within capitalist commodity production and circulation. The relationship between the contemporary artwork and the industrially manufactured commodity – the central topos of the history of the readymade – is addressed explicitly in *Poor Leatherette*, a show Carpenter presented a few months prior to *Midcareer Paintings* at Berlin's MD72. The exhibition consisted of four brand new luxury items: a midcentury-style fridge, a Silver Cross pram, a Ducati racing motorcycle, and a DJ controller serially arranged as sculptural tableaux among the four gallery rooms. The two shows can be seen as dialectical

counterparts, underscored by the fact that Carpenter chose a photographic still life of the four objects as the poster design for the Bern exhibition (by which they are reinscribed in the autobiographical context of the artist's mid-career – or midlife – crisis) (fig. 6). Where the Arte Povera gesture of *Midcareer Paintings* ironically upvalues packing material as a 'form' of painting, the Pop Art gesture of *Poor Leatherette* exposes the 'content' of the readymade artwork as luxury commodity.

In the press release for the show, Carpenter takes issue with the identification – frequent in discussions of Pop Art and the readymade – of the reified consumer object with the Marxian notion of commodity fetishism (Carpenter 2015, n.p.). The latter describes a fetishized social relation (capital), not the objectification of consumer status in specific commodities. For Carpenter, the consumer object is not a commodity, because the moment it is bought it no longer functions as commodity; the objects on display in the luxury segments (and, by metonymy, the artwork) actually represent something that is functionally negligible in the reproduction of capital on a general social level. His choice of objects reflects, in an almost formulaic manner, the gendered structure of the bourgeois family – recreational toys for the boys, and the tools of reproductive labor "dressed up in the decorative and the nostalgic" (ibid.) for the girls. But as luxury items, these objects are not part of the basket necessary for the reproduction of labor power. Rather, they are "the rewards of the capitalist manager's husband or daughter, and deductions from productive labour" (ibid.).

Carpenter's main conceptual idea – likely a reaction to the dominance, during the 1990s and 2000s, of post-Marxist attempts to identify artistic and proletarian labor through the figure of the "multitude" (Negri 2011) – is to homologize the role of the artist with that of the capitalist manager. In *Midcareer Paintings*, the artwork is allegorized as yet another facet of capitalist market relations. Here, it is not the industrially manufactured commodity, but the money commodity that is on display. Infrastructures of transportation figure as the material shadow of financialized transactions. Through a principle of serial chains and displacements, the Kunsthalle building itself is fictionalized as a microcosm of the globalized art market. Carpenter dedicates each of the seven rooms to one of his seven international private galleries, the locations of which are emblazoned in golden letters on the catalog's light brown cover: New York/London/Los Angeles/Brussels/Berlin/Miami/Lisboa/Porto. The individual "paintings" are titled after the name of the gallery (depending on the room in which they are hung, for example "Courtesy Simon Lee Gallery, London"), postdated by one year to 2016, and announced as "not for sale." In addition to the international network of galleries mir-

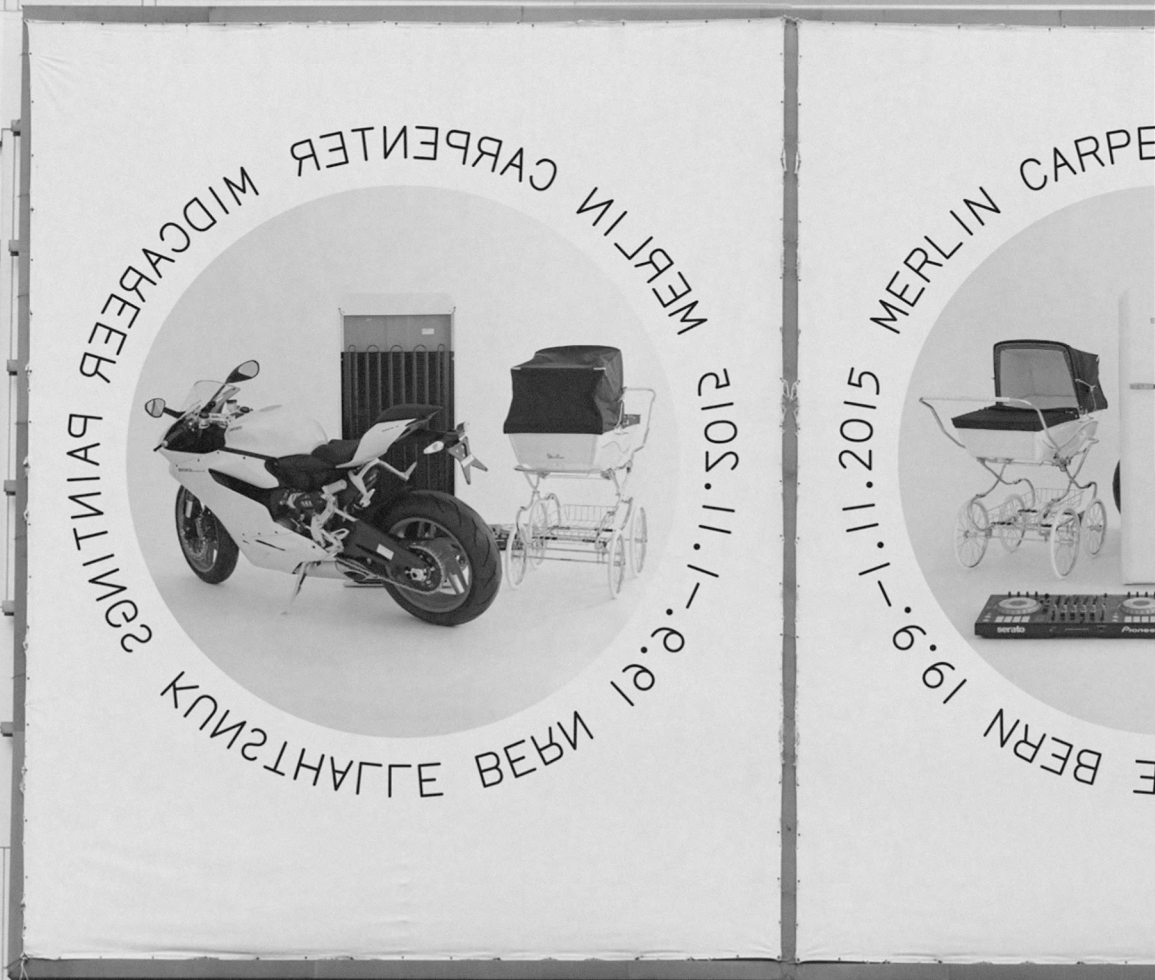
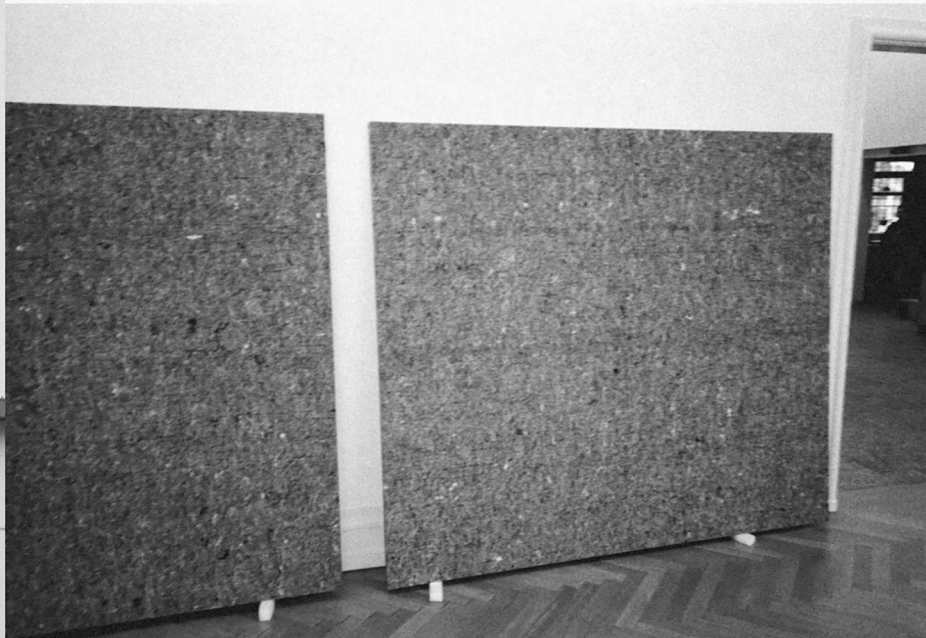
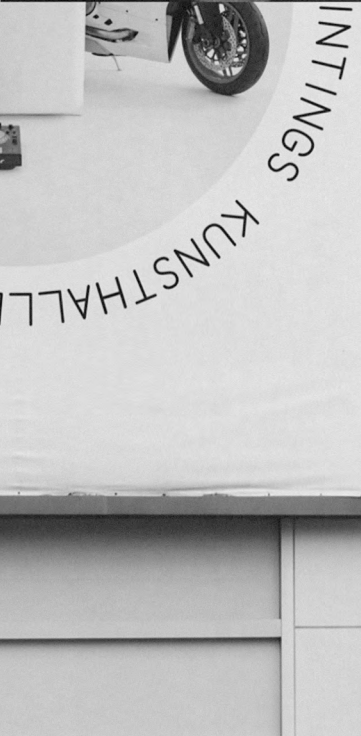


Fig. 6 Double page from: *Merlin Carpenter – Midcareer paintings: Kunsthalle Bern 19.9.–1.11.2015*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, 2017, n.p. (left: Non-Format & ANTI, image of re-imagined posters; top right: © Merlin Carpenter; bottom right: photo taken during the installation of the exhibition © Kunsthalle Bern).



rored in the space of the Kunsthalle, the postdating of works establishes a further structural analogy between contemporary art and global capitalist markets, namely the futurity of financialized valorization. The fiction produced is that we are made to 'see' the physical bearers of commodity values that are not yet manufactured but already valorized. In that they are commodities which are prized in circulation and only indirectly linked to (industrial) production, artworks resemble financial products like derivatives (see Beech 2015; Vishmidt 2018). And although advertised as "not for sale," Carpenter's mock paintings can very well be marketized and sold, as can any ready-made authored by an internationally known conceptual artist.

Midcareer Paintings could be discussed as an example of non-site-specificity, if this category existed. The signs and material traces gathered in the museum space do not, as in Robert Smithson's conception of the non-site, refer to specific sites (in 'nature' or elsewhere), but to a chain of non-sites: the art gallery system, financial markets, the delocalized transnational spatiality, and the futural temporality of capital. Carpenter's enigmatic comment that there "is a difference proposed between first order allegory or for that matter mere institutional critique, and a second order allegory which deliberately exaggerates reference" (2015, n.p.) might be understood as the difference between a sociological account of the "economization" of public art institutions (Behnke 2012) and a fictitious identification of artistic subjectivity with financialized capitalism. This difference can also be demonstrated by comparing *Midcareer Paintings* to another gallery gesture, performed about a decade prior in the same venue. Maria Eichhorn's project *Das Geld der Kunsthalle Bern* (2001) consisted in meticulously documenting the economic history of the institution and intervening in its current spending policy (by proposing, for example, renovation works of the building and issuing share certificates) – and sidelining the socialite aspect of the art circus Carpenter seems to be so fascinated with ("Es gibt keine Vernissage," the press release for Eichhorn's exhibition concludes laconically).

Although both projects utilize the conventional format of an institutional solo-exhibition to expose economic infrastructures of the art system, their working methods couldn't be more different. Eichhorn practices institutional critique as applied sociology, resulting in research-heavy inquiries into empirical sites and organizational structures and premised on a trust in the institution as public discourse that can function as a normative yardstick. Carpenter, on the other hand, presents his viewers with less work-intensive artistic 'research,' defying expectations not only in terms of traditional artistic skill, but also in terms of work ethics more generally as they could be applied to the transdisciplinary intellectual labor of post-conceptual art. Where

site-specific works like Eichhorn's archeological and discursive interventions convey an image of the museum as a solid material structure that is significant in its positive historical substance, for Carpenter, the institution seems to only exist as a figment, or as a transitory state of market fluctuation – one of the metamorphoses that the artwork as a circulating commodity can take on.

V

Both works I have discussed in this article construe the art gallery as a symbolic space of a specifically capitalist form of subjectivity. I have argued that both works rehearse strategies of institutional critique while extending their scope to include the economic infrastructures of global capital. Specifically, I have focused on how the semiotic procedures of allegory and fictionalization are utilized to inflect the institutional context of art production, circulation, and display with symbolic layers that signal its dependence on capitalist social relations.

In both works, politics seem far away, be it in the sense of the imaginary representation of global political conflicts and crises, in the sense of a neo-avant-garde politicization of art as transversal activism, or in the sense of institutional critique's *realpolitik* which normatively and ethically negotiates art's position within the socially differentiated power structures of the bourgeois public sphere. But that does not mean that Carpenter's or Gilligan's works are necessarily apolitical. At a historical moment when mainstream art institutions are idealistically inflated as institutions of critique, it could be helpful to recall the materialist proposition that artists are less "radical subjectivities" (Szymczyk 2017, 40) than "exemplary figures that represent the capitalist organizational form to itself" (Graw/Carpenter 2017, 200). We might call this the articulation of an infrastructural realism. Under the conditions of capitalist crisis, *realistically* performing the making of art, displaying its economic context as content, and incorporating the means of production, distribution, and logistics into the very structure of the artwork might, above all, amount to indexing the crisis of artistic subjectivity and its representation through public institutions.

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Performing the Trade

Zheng Mahler's *A Season in Shell*

Sophia Prinz

For their 2014 installation *A Season in Shell*, the Hong Kong-based artist-anthropologist duo Zheng Mahler (Daisy Bisenieks and Royce Ng) transformed the gallery space of the newly inaugurated Johann Jacobs Museum¹ in Zurich into a temporary storage room for two tons of abalone shells in transit from the port of Berbera, via Dubai, to Guangdong, China (fig. 1).

With this gesture, two distinct “ecologies of infrastructure” (Star/Ruhleder 1996)² were entangled: the institutional practice complex of the museum, shaped by established rules of production, display, and reception, and the (in)formal ways of sustaining global trade routes between China, Africa, and Europe. While some of the shells were spread all over the floor and on a round Chinese banquet table in the middle of the room like a treasure trove or a Dutch still life from the so-called Golden Age, most of the shells were packed in plastic sacks that were formerly used for camel fodder, as indicated by the imprinted Arabic writing and pictures. They also smelled, as one would expect from sea creatures that had been stored in the desert and enclosed shipping containers for a lengthy period of time.

But how did these dirty, foul-smelling shells end up in these beautifully renovated museum spaces in the first place? And what does this have to do with art? To address these questions, we follow Zheng Mahler on their research trip into what anthropologist Gordon Mathews has termed the “low-end of globalization” (Mathews 2011, 19) – the informal Chinese-African trade networks and business practices that operate parallel to the large-scale commercial activities of international corporations. Zheng Mahler’s research, supported by the Johann Jacobs Museum as part of its transdisciplinary exhibition program on global trade routes, soon evolved into a collaborative, per-

1 For documentation of the exhibition, see: <https://crabflowerclub.net/jjm/en/formate/royce-ng-daisy-bisenieks-a-season-in-shell>. Accessed 20 May 2025. For the artist’s website see <https://www.zhengmahler.world/a-season-in-shell>. Accessed 20 May 2025.

2 Star and Ruhleder understand infrastructure not merely as technological systems serving as material media or conduits for information and movement, but as dynamic socio-technical networks (re)produced through relational practices that are historically and culturally situated.



Fig. 1 Zheng Mahler, *A Season in Shell*, 2014, installation view, Johann Jacobs Museum Zurich (Photo: Geneviève Frisson, 2014; © Johann Jacobs Museum).

formative practice. Among the distributed constellation of collaborators, companion species, and socio-material actants assembled through this multi-layered process of (non) art-making, I was – then serving as the museum’s head of research – implicated simultaneously as observer, adviser, and co-agent in its ongoing enfoldment.

Low-End Globalization at the Chungking Mansions

The story began a year earlier when Daisy and Royce stepped into the dense and heterogeneous world of intermingling lives, goods, and cultural practices within the Chungking Mansions, a seventeen-story building in the middle of Kowloon, Hong Kong’s tourist district. Its run-down façade, which clearly showed the marks of its fifty years of existence,³ stood in stark contrast to the luxurious, shining surfaces of the surrounding shopping malls, hotels, and restaurants. Its inner life is equally complex. The building, which gained recognition in Wong Kar-Wai’s film *Chungking Express* (1994), functions as a nearly self-sufficient ‘global village’ or transnational trading hub.

Since its construction in the 1960s, the building’s interior layout, electrical systems, and plumbing have gradually evolved through the hands of its several hundred owners, coming from diverse national and international backgrounds. On its various levels, one can find a vibrant mix of businesses:

³ The façade was recently renovated.



Fig. 2 Zheng Mahler, *A Season in Shell*, 2014, video still (© the artists).

wholesalers for electronics, shops selling fake designer watches, Indian restaurants, barber shops, hairdressers, brothels, clothing outlets, and, perhaps most notably, ninety guesthouses of varying sizes that accommodate up to 4,000 guests per day. Once frequented by Western dropouts and backpackers, by the 2010s, the guesthouses of Chungking Mansions had become predominantly inhabited by businessmen from Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, and other African nations. These visitors, often traveling on short-term visas or registered as asylum seekers, stayed at Chungking Mansions primarily to engage in business dealings with local wholesalers.

One flourishing business was the Chinese-African trade of used or fake mobile phones. Gordon Mathews, who wrote a detailed ethnographic portrait of the socio-material entanglements of the building, estimated that around 20% of all mobile phones used in Sub-Saharan Africa changed hands in Chungking Mansions (Mathews 2011, 106). Unlike the digitally and logistically advanced supply chains of the big players of globalization, this informal trade is based on fragile socio-technological infrastructures “with minimal interference from legalities and copyrights” (ibid., 19). The mobile phones were commonly exchanged for cash and transported in large suitcases to their destinations – an arrangement that succeeded only because the sellers allocated part of their profits to bribes, enabling them to smuggle the goods through customs. Some of the African businessmen came to Chungking Mansions only for a stopover on their way to Guangzhou, a production hub of fake watches and mobile phones, as well as Chinese-style imitations of traditional African goods (Bodomo 2010).



Fig. 3 Zheng Mahler, *A Season in Shell*, 2014, installation view, Johann Jacobs Museum Zurich (Photo: Geneviève Frisson, © Johann Jacobs Museum).

In the hope of gaining an initial understanding of the ecology and unspoken rules of the Chinese-African trading networks coalescing within the building, Royce and Daisy helped Mathews organize English debate classes for African residents of the Chungking Mansions. During one of the classes, they met a young, well-dressed and well-mannered Somali named ‘the Bull,’ who showed a deep affinity for philosophy and poetry (fig. 2). However, it wasn’t until an acute emergency occurred that they became aware of his activities. In an email addressed to Roger M. Buergel, director of the Johann Jacobs Museum, and me, Daisy and Royce recounted the story of receiving an unexpected call from ‘the Bull,’ who said he was in hospital and desperately needed their help. During their visit, they learned not only that he had fled Somalia and was seeking asylum in Hong Kong, but that he was also acting as a manager at Metalplast Industries, a powerful North Sudanese mining company, despite lacking a valid work permit. Zheng Mahler later incorporated this conversation into a ten-part prose poem that they wrote for the exhibition (fig. 3)⁴:

⁴ https://crabflowerclub.net/jjm/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Season_Leporello_E.pdf. Accessed 20 May 2025.

"I am an asylum seeker and torture claimant in Hong Kong, but my business partners do not know this."

"Who do they think you are?"

"To them, I am the son of a respected military general from Somalia who works as the regional manager for their mining company."

"So what's your dilemma?"

"Well, I ordered twelve secondhand caterpillar excavators from Japan, though the customs officers in Sudan will only accept imports of new equipment into the country. So I have them refurbished en route in Hong Kong and they're sitting in the Aberdeen container yard awaiting delivery. That day, I received a letter from our bank informing us that they were closing our company's account. I had a panic attack, I collapsed on the street; I had money and goods to move urgently. We visited the address that the letter was sent from to find out why, but all we found was a warehouse full of computers. We went to the bank and those monkeys refused to tell us why exactly, but they implied that it had something to do with the account holder's nationality. I guess it's because economic sanctions were renewed against North Sudan in July 2012 and the bank here is still recovering from the punishment meted out to it for facilitating money laundering by Mexican drug cartels."

"These monkeys, these racists, they take one look at my face and shake their heads. This is why business between China and Africa can never work. I want you both to come with me to the bank. You have the face of a local and you are a white woman, they cannot refuse you as they've refused me." (Zheng Mahler 2014)

Simply put, 'the Bull' asked the artists to convince another bank to open a new business account in his name after his already fragile financial arrangements had collapsed. What at first seemed like a simple bureaucratic issue quickly revealed a deeper infrastructural friction: the moment when informal transnational trade circuits collided with the hard edges of institutional finance.⁵ After initial hesitation, Daisy and Royce eventually decided to commit to action and actively engage in the actor-network of Chinese-African trade. However, it did not stop with a single favor – 'The Bull' also learned how to benefit from Royce and Daisy's artistic skills, whether it was for designing new business cards or furnishing the company office. As the prose poem reveals:

We are all fast learning the art of impressions. Soon after, he takes me to furniture stores and declares, 'You choose what is best for the office.' I have be-

⁵ On infrastructural friction and breakdown as moments of visibility and negotiation, see Star/Ruhleder 1996; Bowker/Star 1999; Tsing 2005.

come a substitute Somali 'wife,' selecting furniture for our 'marital residence'... We begin to bicker over lighting at Ikea. 'Light means everything in an office,' he decides. Lights reflecting off of the mirrored glass dazzle him as we walk through the warren of material excesses, a rabbit caught in headlights. 'Let's play with mirrors,' the Bull ecstatically chimes. (Zheng Mahler 2014)

As the collaboration deepened, Royce and Daisy began to critically question their roles in this arrangement: "It also begs the question, how can what we're doing be considered art as such or justified in those terms since we've compromised our autonomy to such an extent. And at a practical level, what we can produce from this in the form of artworks." (Zheng Mahler 2013). While the former question about the ontology of an artwork remained unanswered, an idea for the latter soon took shape when they learned about 'the Bull's' lucrative side business: the trade in abalone – a species of sea snail found in temperate coastal waters worldwide, with notable populations in East Asia and along the Somali coast.

Navigating Currents: Between the Sea, Trade Routes, and the Art World

I live a wayfaring life
Though I seemingly feel like I remain anchored
Carrying pockmarked armour, these heavy annals, a flexing muscle of my
assimilations
From the bedrock I cling
Extending from seabed moonscapes
To sift the surrounds
My eyes breathing and bathing
While tentacles become telescopes
Yet beneath all of my bumps
You'll find a kaleidoscope
Traces
Along temperate currents, collections of residue, of produce traded
Released and absorbed into unknown channels
Catalysts for new assemblies yet to meet
All I know is, I must chart these waters
Sense tells me to keep moving (Zheng Mahler 2014)

In Zheng Mahler's poem, the abalone appears as a sentient actor entangled in ecological precarity and cultural-economic forces. While in Europe, abalo-

ne are primarily valued for the iridescent mother-of-pearl of their shells – used in buttons, inlay, and jewelry – in Japanese and Chinese cuisines, the flesh of certain species, such as the black abalone (*kuro awabi*) found off the coast of Japan, is considered a prized delicacy. However, following the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, which introduced radioactive contamination into the marine food chain, the Chinese market for abalone flesh unraveled abruptly. Japanese abalone – once highly prized in Hong Kong’s luxury seafood markets – were suddenly deemed too dangerous to import.

Yet the ‘ruined landscape’ (Tsing 2015) of Fukushima formed the conditions for the emergence of another kind of multispecies collaboration:⁶ upon learning that one kilo of dried abalone flesh could be worth several hundred dollars in Hong Kong, ‘the Bull’ recalled that in Somalia, abalone were, in contrast, not even regarded as food but rather dismissed as ‘cockroaches of the sea.’ Seizing on the stark disparity in the symbolic and economic valuation of abalone across these geographies, ‘the Bull’ set out to construct a new ‘infrastructure ecology’ linking the Somali coast to East Asia’s luxury seafood market. Central to this emergent actor-network were not only the abundant pink abalone lining Somalia’s coastal reefs, but also Somali fishermen, displaced by the illegal incursion of industrial fishing fleets from Japan and China into Somali waters. For them, the abalone trade became one of the few remaining strategies for survival (others, less fortunate, saw no alternative but to turn to piracy⁷). Yet their participation in the trading network required more than access to the sea – it demanded that they first learn the practice of harvesting abalone.

Since direct exchange with experienced Japanese divers was not an option, the Somali fishermen had to rely on a series of old Japanese VHS tapes that ‘the Bull’ had managed to procure. In other words, they had to acquire the ‘practical knowledge’⁸ of diving not through direct instruction, but by imitating moving images – an indirect mode of learning that inevitably transformed the practice of harvesting itself. Remarkably, the method proved effective: over the course of three years, the fishermen harvested 600 tons of abalone, valued at several million US dollars. Born out of necessity, this transcultural circulation of practical knowledge forged an unexpected connection between the myths and cultural imaginaries surrounding the Japanese tradition of

6 According to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, the “ruined landscape” of capitalism can always become sites of new or transformed forms of life (Tsing 2015). For an ethnographic account of the nuclear disaster’s impact on coastal communities in the Fukushima region, see Takahashi 2023.

7 See Samatar et al. 2010; Negi 2011.

8 Bourdieu’s concept of practical knowledge refers to a tacit, embodied form of understanding that is acquired through repeated participation in social practices, see Bourdieu 1990.



(ميجا)

رقم ١

FLOUR NO. 1 (MEGA)

مكونات: دقيق القمح (75% من الوزن) و 25% من المواد الحافظة
Ingredients: Wheat flour (75% of weight) and 25% preservatives

ama diving – including the erotic woodblock prints of the legendary female apnea divers⁹ – and the contemporary lifeworld of Somali fishermen facing existential precarity.

For the exhibition, Daisy and Royce set out to render this unlikely transnational collaboration perceptible by performatively intervening in and expanding the socio-technical infrastructure that sustained it. To do so, the museum temporarily served as a storage site for two tons of abalone shells that were shipped from Somaliland to Dubai, to Oman and then to Zurich (this detour was necessary, as there were no direct trade relations between Somalia and Switzerland, whereas Switzerland has a free trade agreement with Dubai, fig. 4). The original plan was merely to interrupt the trade flow: after the exhibition, the shells were to be shipped onward to Hong Kong, where they would be sold to buyers in China. There, they would be treated, polished, and refined into mother-of-pearl – only to be sold once again, this time as ornaments for Hong Kong jewelers and Swiss watchmakers.

However, the situation evolved differently: in February 2014, ‘the Bull’ vanished suddenly without a trace. Soon after, various sensational rumors began to circulate in Chungking Mansions. Some claimed that he was working for the Eritrean government; others alleged ties to Al-Shabaab, the Islamist terrorist organization in the southern part of Somalia, or accused him of involvement in various dubious ventures with his father (though he had consistently maintained that his father was dead). Still others speculated that he had traveled to the United States to reunite with a Yemeni lover... A few weeks later, Royce and Daisy received a brief text from him, explaining that he had secretly emigrated to New Zealand to reunite with his family – and that he had enjoyed reading Arthur Rimbaud’s *A Season in Hell* (1873). Royce and Daisy had given him the book, sensing a strange parallel between ‘the Bull’ – who came from a family of poets – and Rimbaud, who, after abandoning his writing at a young age, turned to trading coffee, ivory, and arms in the Horn of Africa.

“How Can What We’re Doing Be Considered Art?”

Faced with an unruly production process in which the artists ceded much of their agency to a shifting assemblage of human and non-human actors, Zheng Mahler rightly questioned the ontological status of art: where, within this heterogenous network, might one locate what is truly artistic? And what remains of art’s claim to autonomy? Taking up Adorno’s concept of art’s double

⁹ See, for example, Talerico 2001.

character (Adorno 2002, 5) – its simultaneous autonomy from and embeddedness in the social world – the aesthetic significance of *A Season in Shell* cannot be understood without considering the socio-material and ecological entanglements that informed its making. Today's world is shaped by global, (post-) colonial, and ecological entanglements of unprecedented complexity: raw materials, plants, viruses, data, capital, artifacts, animals, people, images, and ideas circulate across the planet through a dense web of official and clandestine channels, both visible and invisible. The once euphoric vision of seamless 'global flows' from the 1990s has since given way to a more nuanced understanding. As cultural anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing observes, global movements are neither smooth nor uniform. Rather, every transcultural or interspecies encounter generates 'friction' – moments of resistance that may result in unexpected deviations or convergences (Tsing 2005). While we may speak of global modernity or global capitalism in general terms, it is crucial to examine how these formations materialize within locally specific discourses, socio-material practices, and modes of subjectivation. This also includes the 'ecologies of infrastructure' through which global circulations are made possible: far from being neutral or given, these socio-material assemblages must be continually reproduced and negotiated within specific local contexts (Star/Ruhleder 1996). Globalization, then, is less a 'superstructure' than a latently unstable constellation of countless – and at times unforeseen – linkages between heterogeneous elements and actants. These diverse entanglements systematically transgress the modernist divide between nature and culture (Latour 1993). Not only human actors and technologies, but also ecological conditions and non-human species actively shape the emergence and friction of 'glocal' socio-material formations – a reality that becomes ever more evident in the face of the multiple ecological crises of the Anthropocene (Tsing 2005, 2015; Chakrabarty 2009; Haraway 2016).

Researching these complex relations demands new theoretical and empirical tools. In recent years, scholars across the humanities have been experimenting with analytical frameworks, conceptual vocabularies, and writing styles that challenge the methodological androcentrism and individualism of Western epistemes, while countering universalizing meta-narratives with glocal micro-histories. There has thus been a growing interest in artistic methods within Science and Technology Studies and New Materialism (Tsing et al. 2017; Rogers et al. 2021; Latour/Weibel 2020). The artistic or poetic, as is often argued, can help liberate academic knowledge from the rigid framework of identifying categories (Adorno 1984), making visible and audible those actants, perspectives, and voices that have long been excluded from social analysis and historiography. Conversely, artists are increasingly drawing on research

approaches from the social, cultural, and natural sciences to address the complexities of the global present. This epistemological shift calls into question the very concept of art: contemporary artistic practice can no longer rely on the Western notion of ‘autonomous art’ but must acknowledge the collaborative, processual nature of art-making, as well as the pluriversity of aesthetic practices embedded in everyday life (Escobar 2018). These tendencies are by no means new – the impulse to transcend the boundaries between art and life, or art and science, is as old as the disciplines themselves. What distinguishes the contemporary condition, however, is the political and ecological urgency: only a decidedly relational perspective can offer the tools to grasp the layered complexities and contradictions of today’s global entanglements and to render them intelligible to a broader audience.

A Season in Shell’s artistic exploration of an unlikely transnational and trans-species collaboration can thus be read as an attempt to reveal the locally embedded socio-technological infrastructures and trading practices behind the universalist buzzword of ‘globalization.’ Unlike conventional academic ethnography, however, the two artist-anthropologists step out of their comfort zones. Eschewing a detached analytical gaze, their artistic practice becomes a performative intervention in the very process of network-building. By linking the informal trading circuits of ‘the Bull’ with the institutional ecology of the museum, they generate a productive friction between the ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ ends of globalization.

This mediation, however, would not have been possible without the identification of a viable “boundary object”: the abalone. According to Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer, “boundary objects” are material-discursive entities that facilitate coherent cooperation between disparate groups, even when participants do not share the same definition or conception of the object, nor pursue the same goal:

Boundary objects are objects that are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. These objects may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognisable, a means of translation. (Star/Griesemer 1989, 393)

In this sense, the abalone can be seen as a translator or node that connects divergent, coexisting actor-networks without being fully absorbed by

any of them: it is at once a precious delicacy *and* worthless waste, material for mythical storytelling *and* mere merchandise, the object of both fishing *and* artistic practices, a dynamic living being *and* a museum exhibit.

The Art of Trade

To highlight the abalone's role as a boundary object, the final installation at the Johann Jacobs Museum foregrounded its aesthetic presence and narrative agency. The amorphous mass of shells strewn across the floor produced an unfamiliar image within the orderly world of the Swiss museum. Yet it was the intrusive smell that, in an irresistible and intimate way, made it clear to even the most composed observer that in times of global entanglement, one cannot afford the luxury of retreating into a detached, contemplative stance. This intense sensory experience was complemented by a ten-part prose poem, whose form and title were inspired by Arthur Rimbaud's infamous *A Season in Hell* – a hallucinatory reckoning with alienation that eerily anticipates his later life as a trader in the Horn of Africa.

In a similarly hallucinatory fashion, Zheng Mahler's poem aligns 'the Bull's' opaque activities not only with the fate of the renowned poet-merchant, but also with the elusive, submerged movements of the abalone, suggesting a layered interplay between fiction, economy, and the natural world. In this way, the abalone – struggling with the consequences of overfishing and the material residues of maritime trade – emerges as a 'companion species' (Hara-way 2016) to 'the Bull.' Like the sea creature, the latter, too, had to adapt his performance to the power dynamics, practices, and aesthetic codes of his new social environment in order to stay afloat (fig. 5).

A condition of the Bull's exile in Hong Kong was that he could not work. But if you pick up a phone and call a man from China and order some goods from him, and a man in Dubai pays for them, and then they are shipped to Sudan, have you "worked"? It's late afternoon, and I sit in a luxury hotel with the Bull and an elder Somali businessman whose personal history and situation couldn't be more different from the Bull's. He is where the Bull wants to be. Bespoke suit, a crisp shirt and nursing an espresso, columns of sunlight that fall through the faint scratches of window tinting behind us glint off the Bull's thin, wire rimmed spectacles as he checks his Rolex. He gives himself the impression of a high flyer that detracts from a stifling boredom and everyday sameness of his status and to almost evoke, transform himself with the power of a suit, into that very impression, aspiration, he is cultivating. Behind us a plump Middle Eastern gentlemen in the company of a kowtowing colleague



Fig. 5 Zheng Mahler, *A Season in Shell*, 2014 (© the artist).

is enjoying high tea, small sandwiches, petite cakes that are crumbling easily through his stumpy fingers. We are entangled in conversation about distribution channel moguls for Asian goods flowing into North Africa but I see the Bull prick his ears to listen to the conversation behind us. When the time becomes right, he stands up and walks over and introduces himself. (Zheng Mahler 2014)

The prose poem – oscillating between description, fiction, and surreal passages – was the only textual element in the entire exhibition, offering little more than fragmentary cues for interpreting the messy assemblage of shells, camel-fodder bags, and ethnographic images. As such, the installation prompted visitors to attune themselves to the material-semiotic frictions coalescing around the abalone trade, thereby becoming actor-participants in the very formation of its network. In this way, *A Season in Shell* resonates with contemporary art practices that, following Juliane Rebentisch and Peter Osborne (Rebentisch 2012, 2015; Osborne 2013, 2018) can be described as forms of “post-conceptual installation.” These practices draw on the methodological legacy of conceptualism – such as the transgression of artistic media boundaries, the interpretive flexibility of aesthetic form, and the performative character of knowledge production – but move beyond the self-referential reflec-

tion on art's ontological status. Instead, they mobilize conceptual tools to critically engage with the global present and its multiple genealogies.¹⁰ *A Season in Shell* can similarly be understood as an aesthetic analysis of contemporary social conditions. In the sense of Adorno's concept of the "constellation" (Adorno 2002, 7, 226), the work reassembles the constituent elements of the complex abalone trading network in such a way that the intrinsic instability of its infrastructures, as well as the polyphony of the involved actants, becomes sensually perceptible in the very form of the installation.¹¹

However, whereas most post-conceptual artworks remain confined within the institutional frameworks of the autonomous art field, *A Season in Shell* transcends these boundaries by maintaining an active connection to an existing transnational trading network. The abalone are thus not unequivocally 'identified' as artworks; rather, they retain their ambiguous ontological status as "boundary objects" that mediate between different socio-material ecologies of infrastructure. This ambiguity also affects both the exhibition space and its related practices: the former takes on the role of a storage site, the latter merge with the economic processes of trade.

And that is precisely the point: rather than merely analyzing global entanglement through artistic means, *A Season in Shell* enacts the socio-material practices that (re)produce and sustain the unstable actor-networks of informal Chinese-African trade. Accordingly, it is not the abalone, the poem, or the ethnographic imagery as such that defines the artwork, but the unlikely linkage forged between the practice complexes of the museum, the Chungking Mansions, and the Somali coast. The practice of art-making, in this case, consists precisely in the performative rerouting and recombination of disparate socio-technological and institutional infrastructures – a process made possible only through the mediating role of the abalone as "boundary object." Therefore, under conditions of global entanglement, it is not only the binary oppositions of nature and culture, global and local, or 'the West and the rest' (Hall 2020) that are being destabilized, but also the categorical distinction between art and non-art.

¹⁰ A paradigmatic example of this is Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* (1995), a post-conceptual photographic work that engages with the 'microphysics' of global maritime trade (Sekula et al. 2018). For a cultural sociological interpretation, see Prinz 2023.

¹¹ For a practice-theoretical account of the 'relative autonomy' of the aesthetic constellation, see Prinz 2022.

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***Infrastructures of Production
and Logistics in Transnational
Perspective (2024) / Mobile Studio (2024)***

Lia Perjovschi

structures of Production
nal Perspective, 2024.

Fig. 1 Lia Perjovschi, *Infrastructures of Production and Logistics in Transnational Perspective*, 2024.

Lia Perjovschi's Diagrams: A Visceral Act of Cultural Translation

Luciana Tamas

Anyone familiar with the logic of detection knows that it is a means of extracting, or attempting to extract, the truth from a given situation, mostly by revealing the motives behind individuals' actions. Lia Perjovschi's diagrams, as she declares, turn her into a "detective in universal art and culture" (Perjovschi 2012, 18). And so, like a detective, she extracts details from her surroundings and, through imaginative permutations, introduces elements into them that divide and rewrite the once-familiar image of a concept or group of concepts, power structures and their language games – all in what seems like a visceral act of cultural translation. Because their analyses are not an exact science, detectives may, in extreme cases, resort to various tricks to reveal the 'truth' in ways that might, to an outsider, appear outlandish, illogical, or unnatural. Their goal is not to assert authority, but rather to expose individuals who, contrary to written and unwritten laws, choose to commit various crimes. To achieve this, a detective may circumvent the subject's social advantages, feigning friendship, affection, curiosity, or indifference – without ever believing in any of these emotional maneuvers. For this reason, detectives can be seen as both scriptwriters and actors of their own, more or less fictional, narratives.

One should, by extension, not look for the truth in Lia Perjovschi's diagrams, but rather try to identify the hologram of a self that delights in projecting its scenarios onto the world. Yet although we will not easily find the truth about particular phenomena in her diagrams, we may recognize, in them, forms of translating the world that could help enrich our collective consciousness. The naturalness of these pieces transcends the immediate and reveals realities that we can only approach through intuitive contextualization – because, before discussing infrastructures, Perjovschi's diagrams reveal inner connections to imponderable, often ungraspable, hypotheses.

This brief introduction, however, would be incomplete without illustrating, with a concrete example, the method Lia Perjovschi uses in creating her diagrams. She explains that upon receiving the Call for Papers for this anthology from the editors, she began taking notes to help her grasp the volume's subject.¹ In this process, she simplified the book's overarching narratives and individual chapters with the aid of keywords – which can, upon closer inspection, be identified in the two diagrams (Figs. 1 and 2). Perjovschi's method of intimately examining and internalizing the book's contents results in a visual

¹ Lia Perjovschi: Email to Luciana Tamas, 2 July 2025.

representation of its structure, punctuated by blank spaces that allow for the addition of new ideas and directions from her artistic practice and research, or from other sources.

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Section II

Mobile Studios

The Suitcase as Mobile Studio

Mary Swanzy's Career and Travels, 1917–1923

Cai Lyons

Between 1917 and 1923, Mary Swanzy was a professional “wandering artist”¹ and “landscape painter.”² Painting landscapes afforded the artist a greater degree of social freedom and mobility, allowing her to travel – apparently unchaperoned. These journeys were facilitated by an extensive technical revolution, from railways that now linked most of the major European towns and cities to the emergence of steam technology (Robinson-Tomsett 2013, 26–28). She could choose from more than one mode of transportation within an increasingly interconnected transport and infrastructure network. Consequently, her artmaking was peripatetic and diverse in style and technique, with multiple locations of production, from the windswept Dingle seaside, the sunny Mediterranean and Adriatic coasts, the snow-capped mountains of Czechoslovakia, and the tropical climes of Hawai'i and American Samoa. These artworks also had multiple locations of exhibition, from Dublin to Paris to Honolulu: Swanzy's transnational exhibiting practice was fundamental to her professional career (Lyons 2023). As Burcu Dogramaci argues, the geographies in which an artist moves and works has a profound impact on their professional life (2022, 177). During this peripatetic six-year period, Swanzy had three solo shows in Dublin and participated in group exhibitions at the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) and the Society of Dublin Painters (SDP), exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants (SDI) and the Salon des Beaux-Arts (SNBA) in Paris, and had paintings on show with the National Portrait Society and the Society of Women Painters (SWA) in London.³ These paintings, pro-

1 The identification of Swanzy as a “wandering artist” comes from a poem of the same title, written by an admirer of her paintings from 1922. (Patrick J. Murphy Gift, “The Wandering Artist,” National Gallery of Ireland, May 1922; IE NGI/IA/SWA1/1/3/30). My use of “wandering” aligns with the nomadic and the peripatetic; it is distinct from the visual imagery and metaphors of the “Wandering Jew.” For more information, see Cohen 2008.

2 Swanzy wrote “landscape painter” as her career on the SS Montcalm passenger manifesto in 1923. Ancestry.co.uk. “List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the United States Immigration Officer at Port of Departure,” 10 August 1923. *Ancestry.co.uk*, ancestry.co.uk/search/collecections/2997/records/38632415. Accessed 31 March 2025.

3 For a more detailed account of Swanzy's earlier career and chronology of exhibition history, see Lyons 2023.

duced and exhibited in multiple locations, often concurrently, traversed literal and figurative border-crossings. This chapter asks: how did Swanzy's artworks travel from Dublin to Paris and across continental Europe? Significantly, what can these journeys tell us about the invisible infrastructures of the art world that a woman artist such as Swanzy had to contend with?

How did these artworks travel? In Swanzy's trunks and suitcases, on trains and steamships. Considering the suitcase as the artist's mobile studio reveals both the conventions and constraints of art production on the move, as well as the tangible and intangible infrastructures necessary to maintain a professional career. As this chapter demonstrates, paintings that are easier to transport and less prone to damage can be hung on walls, can fit through the doors of galleries, museums, and homes – and a small board canvas takes up less space if (or when) it is not sold.

The Archive, the Passport, the Missing Suitcase

The National Gallery of Ireland maintains an archive of materials belonging to Mary Swanzy, including several passports. One of these passports is dated from 1915 to 1923 and is the only known document that records the details of her travels, revealing that she spent most of this time away from Dublin.⁴ It is an extremely dense document, layered with visa stamps in different languages, alphabets, and often illegible handwriting. Renewed and extended multiple times, it unfolds accordion-like to reveal four different sides that follow no real chronological order. During this period, Swanzy was a nomadic artist who carried her career – and the tools of her trade – with her: a transportable mobile studio contained within a suitcase. This suitcase, though absent from the archive and only imagined, was crucial for Swanzy's artistic practice. The absence of this mobile studio from the existing narrative underscores the invisible yet vital infrastructures that supported her nomadic, peripatetic career.

As a material object, the suitcase denotes concrete material belongings and the movement of these items away from their original context. The suitcase is a “signifier of mobility, displacement, duality and the overwrought emotional climates in which these circulate” (Rogoff 2000, 36). As a signifier of mobility, the suitcase generates relationships between places. Yet it is also practically and materially a container for personal and professional belongings. The suitcase of a traveling artist could contain palettes, paints, brushes,

⁴ Mary Swanzy Passport 1915. Patrick J. Murphy Gift (National Gallery of Ireland), IE NGI/IA/SWA1/1/5/1.

sketchbooks, and pencils. These professional tools would transform the suitcase into a site of production – and a mobile studio. I take Swanzy's suitcase as a signifier of mobility that combines the personal and the professional, articulating how her perception of and interaction with place was activated by status as a “wandering artist.” Artists traditionally have been obliged to travel in order to learn their craft and produce artworks – visual language is more transportable than verbal language (Nochlin 1996, 318). However, the conditions of exile, expatriation, and travel have especially ambiguous, or even ambivalent, implications for women. Displacement can be productive, as was the case with Swanzy, but women did not often have the same access to their new location, urban or rural, as their male counterparts.

Swanzy's status as an independent traveling and professional woman affected the way she produced and perceived her environment. It also determined the tools and practices she used to give her landscape paintings physical form (Adams/Gruetzner Robins 2000, 3). Canvases painted in Ružomberok, Czechoslovakia crossed oceans and continents to be exhibited in Honolulu, Hawai'i. As noted by a contemporary reviewer in the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*: “Besides her Hawaiian canvases, Miss Swanzy's subjects included graphic Czecho-Slovak scenes, [...] with its rugged snowcaped [sic] mountain peaks, bleak plains and jostled country fairs.”⁵ As I demonstrate in this chapter, however, these views echo the restricted movement of a woman traveling in post-war Europe, of suitcases low-profile and small enough to fit under the berths of trains or in the cabin of a steamer. Swanzy's ability to adapt her artistic practice to her mobile studio underscores the intersection of artistic creativity and practical necessity, highlighting the unique challenges of a “wandering artist.”

From Dingle to Saint-Tropez and Ružomberok

In this section, I explore Swanzy's nomadic mobility and its impact on her work and materials. I argue that this mobility was sustained by the stable commercial appeal of landscape painting as a genre. By contrasting her experiences in the remote Irish countryside during World War I with her post-war travels to Ružomberok, I demonstrate how Swanzy's mobile studio, equipped with pre-prepared canvases, allowed her to paint *en plein air*, capturing specific – and marketable – motifs. Drawing on canvases painted in these loca-

5 “Originality in Hawaiian Scenes by Miss Swanzy.” Patrick J. Murphy Gift (National Gallery of Ireland, 23 February 1924), IE NGI/IA/SWA1/1/8/8.

tions, I examine how her status affected the way she perceived her environment and the paintings she produced.

During 1917 and 1918, Swanzy's movements were confined to Ireland. Her passport records that she returned from a three month stay in Paris on 24 February 1917. It is unclear where she resided in Dublin that year, as the address given with her submission to the 1917 RHA annual exhibition was 28 Merrion Square, her home prior to the death of her father in 1913 (Stewart 1987, 195). Regardless, she did not linger in Dublin. Specific paintings indicate she traveled to the Dingle peninsula in County Kerry, accessing this remote location via the Tralee-Dingle Light Railway (TDLR) (Barry 2010, 117). The painting *View Towards the Dingle Peninsula from Dooks* (c. 1917, oil on board, 18×25.5 cm, private collection) is more study than finished painting, with visible red ground and limited palette. The brushstrokes are loose, with some hues catching and merging, evidence of painting wet on wet, *en plein air*. The compact size of *View Towards the Dingle Peninsula from Dooks* is particularly significant. At 18 by 25.5 cm, it is smaller than a standard A4 paper, highlighting the practical considerations Swanzy had to account for in her mobile studio. This small format allowed her to transport her artworks easily, fitting them into her suitcase and navigating the logistical challenges of travel, particularly on the TDLR.

As a narrow-gauge railway, the TDLR had a lower load-carrying capacity than standard-gauge railways and was designed in part to ease movements of goods, notably fish (Barry 2010, 125). The portability of such canvases enabled Swanzy to work *en plein air*, capturing fleeting moments and motifs directly from nature, which were often more marketable due to the perception of immediate and intimate connection to the landscape. Additionally, the small size of these paintings suggests a strategic approach to her art-making process, where unsold pieces would occupy minimal space, thus reducing storage concerns. This choice underscores the intersection of artistic creativity and practical necessity, reflecting how Swanzy's mobility and professional status influenced her artistic decisions and the physical dimensions of her work. Journeying into the Irish countryside was now a professional and commercial pursuit.

In 1917, 1918, and 1919, Swanzy exhibited portraiture at the RHA. In the two latter years, the exhibition catalogs noted her address as 9 Garville Avenue, Rathgar, County Dublin (Stewart 1987, 195), where she rented a room. She was also renting a studio with fellow artist and friend Clare Marsh at 31 South Anne Street in Dublin (Cullinane 2018, 8). Swanzy's solo exhibition at Mill's Hall in 1919 was reviewed by Sarah Purser, who wrote that the landscapes of Kerry and Donegal presented an Ireland no longer tied to the "mel-



Fig. 1 Mary Swanzy, *Côte de Donegal*, c. 1919, oil on canvas, 43.5×52 cm, private collection (Courtesy of Adam's Auctioneers, Dublin).

ancholy of its past.”⁶ *Côte de Donegal* (fig. 1) is larger than other works discussed in this chapter and is oil on canvas, rather than board or panel. With access to a rented studio, Swanzy’s artworks were larger and less transportable, but more commercial. This landscape references a romanticized view of the Irish landscape, redolent with the “iconography of cottages, cloudy skies and hills” (Nash 1997, 6), which signals her ability to adapt her output to perceived tastes to sustain a commercially viable career that could support her travels.

At Swanzy’s two-person exhibition at the SDP with Marsh in 1920, she displayed a painting of “five fishermen [...] leaning against the sea wall,” which could have been *Boats at Harbour* (undated, oil on panel, 30.5×40.6cm, private collection).⁷ The shape and format of a painting’s surface are intimately related to an artist’s choice of composition and the final artistic effect they wish to achieve (Callan 2000, 15). As such, the proportions of the canvas are crucial. Although larger than *View Towards the Dingle Peninsula from Dooks*, *Boats at Harbour* is similar in that it was painted on a fixed, pre-prepared surface, ideal for easier and safer transportation across the country via train and carriage. Whether laid on panel or board, these canvases had a thinner profile than standard canvases, were more lightweight and compact, and lacked

⁶ Sarah Purser. “Miss Swanzy’s Paintings.” Patrick J. Murphy Gift (National Gallery of Ireland, 31 March 1919), IE NGI/IA/SWA1/1/7/5.

⁷ Anonymous. “Two Lady Artists: Contrasts in Style at Stephen’s Green Gallery,” *Freeman’s Journal* [Dublin, Ireland], 8 October 1920, 3.

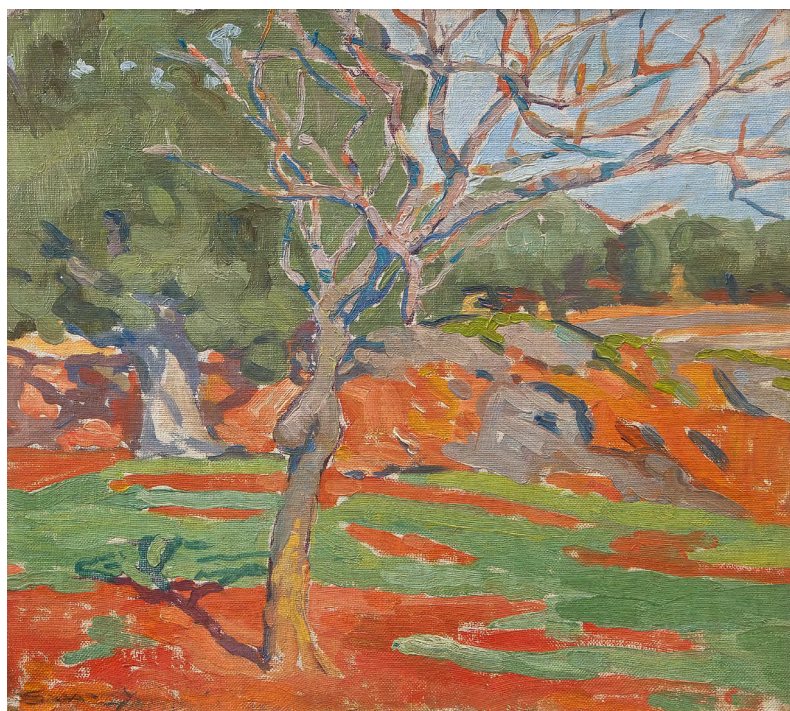


Fig. 2 Mary Swanzy, *Olive Trees, St. Tropez*, 1919, oil on board, 31×35 cm, private collection (Courtesy of Adam's Auctioneers, Dublin).

the smoothly primed surface more commonly found in portraiture. At the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, textured surfaces were associated with the free handling and visible brushwork of landscapes (Callan 2000, 32). Swanzy's practical considerations of transport and transportability, facilitated by her suitcase as a mobile studio, directly informed the subject matter, composition, and painterly technique of her landscape paintings.

Such considerations are also evident in Swanzy's paintings from her journey through the French Riviera in October and November of 1919. *Mont St. Victoire* (1919, oil on board, 19×29 cm, private collection), for example, is diminutive, a study only slightly larger than *View Towards the Dingle Peninsula from Dooks*. In *Olive Trees, St. Tropez* (fig. 2), Swanzy evokes the experience of being in a sun-drenched landscape by using saturated yellows, oranges, and reds. *Mont St. Victoire* and *Olive Trees, St. Tropez* are painted on canvas laid on board, exemplifying her practical approach to artmaking. The choice of canvas laid on board not only facilitated easier transportation across continents but also allowed Swanzy to capture a sensation of immediacy and vibrancy – the size of the canvas facilitates the perception of a snapshot in time. Significantly, the perspective of the landscape in *Olive Trees, St. Tropez* indicates that the artist could move freely and unrestricted in the post-war French countryside (Swanzy was fluent in French and had spent several years studying in

Paris). These portable and durable materials were essential for an artist constantly on the move, ensuring that her works could be safely transported and displayed in various locations.

The murder of Swanzy's cousin, Detective Inspector (DI) Oswald Swanzy, by the Irish Republican Army in August 1920 led to the 'Swanzy riots' in Lisburn, County Antrim. Both the murder and the riots were covered extensively in national and international press. According to Christopher Magill, DI Swanzy "personified Britain's colonial presence in Ireland" while the Swanzy family "represented an Irish identity and tradition that could not be reconciled with [that of republicans]" (2020, 6). Caleb Wood Richardson points out that, after 1922, "southern Protestants were not, it seemed, authentically Irish," facing the "stark choice [of] exodus or alienation" (2019, 3). With the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, Ireland plunged into a civil war and Swanzy could no longer journey freely into the Irish countryside. She went elsewhere to find her subject matter. Rather than returning to France, she went further afield, following her older sister St. Clair to Czechoslovakia as part of Lady Muriel Paget's Relief Mission in December 1920, seemingly choosing exodus over alienation.

Czechoslovakia became an independent state in October 1918, comprising the historical Czech lands (Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia) and Slovakia (Eberhardt 2015, 100). With the Bolshevik uprising in Slovakia in April 1919, escalating starvation, and a plea for relief from the Head of the Czecho-Slovak Red Cross, Lady Muriel Paget formed her Mission and began to appeal for funds to buy food and clothing.⁸ St. Clair Swanzy joined the Mission to Czechoslovakia as a social worker in 1919.⁹ By December 1919, St. Clair was managing the relief efforts in Ružomberok District, which is where Swanzy spent the winter of 1920/21, apparently painting from the balcony of her sister's accommodation.¹⁰ The landscapes produced in Ružomberok gesture towards a more regulated mobility, with stamps on her passport indicating she was a volunteer to the Mission and giving permissions to cross borders. Unfamiliar with the environment, the language, or culture, Swanzy's movement was constrained. This restricted mobility is reflected in her choice of materials and the dimensions of her paintings.

⁸ Save the Children Fund. "General Report on Condition of Czecho-Slovakia: March to September 1920." Save the Children Fund Archive (University of Birmingham, 1920), SCF Reel 22 EJ 89.

⁹ Save the Children Fund. "Lady Muriel Paget's Mission to Czechoslovakia: Report 3," p. 1. Save the Children Fund Archive (University of Birmingham, November 1920), SCF Reel 22 EJ 89.

¹⁰ Save the Children Fund. "Lady Muriel Paget's Mission to Czechoslovakia: Staff at Present in Slovakia." Save the Children Fund Archive (University of Birmingham, 18 July 1921), SCF Reel 22 EJ 90.

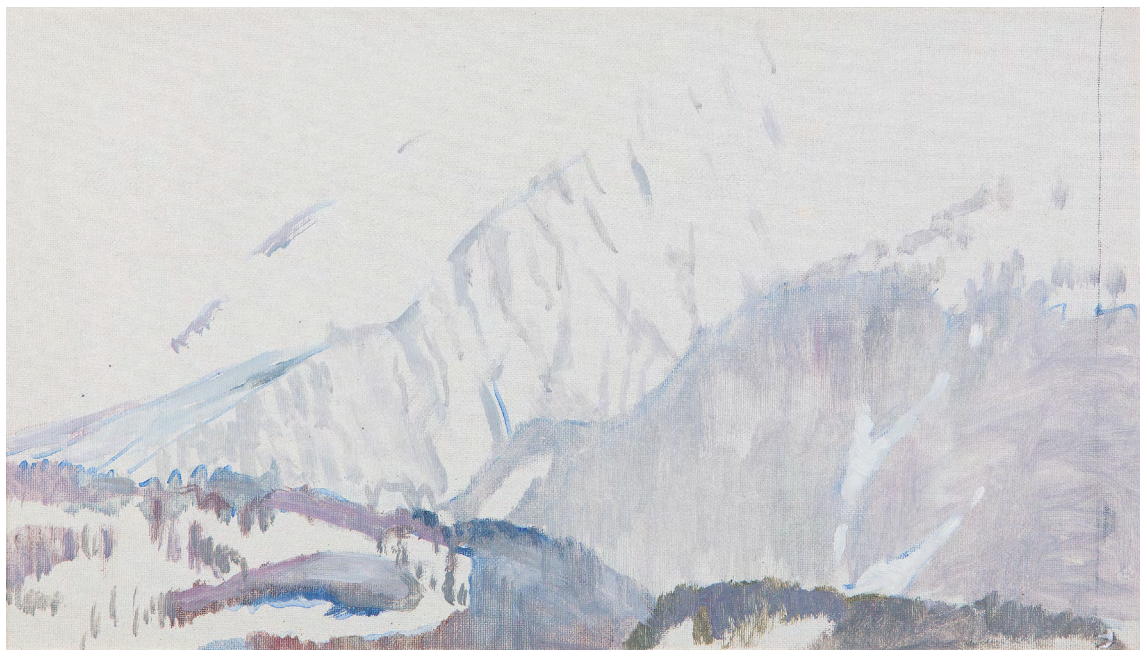


Fig. 3 Mary Swanzy, *Winter Landscape*, c. 1920, oil on artist's board, 27.5×48 cm, private collection (Courtesy of Adam's Auctioneers, Dublin).

In *Winter Landscape* (fig. 3), Swanzy depicts a quiet, desolate snow scene. The steep mountain face rises out of the canvas as if to tower over the viewer, evoking a sense of isolation and claustrophobia. Her palette is restricted and predominantly cool in hue, the paint thinned and applied like watercolor across the canvas. Large swathes of the white ground are exposed to indicate fallen snow. Such techniques suggest that the work was painted *en plein air*, but the rooftops positioned along the bottom edge serve to frame the view as a landscape while simultaneously excluding the viewer from it. Swanzy too was removed, working from an upper window or balcony. This elevated viewpoint is repeated in other paintings, such as *A Czechoslovakian Mountain Town* (c. 1920, oil on canvas, 31.6×42.5cm, private collection). Once again, the palette is limited and Swanzy had applied the paint thinly, but in this painting, the canvas surface is rougher with a visibly thicker weave. More burlap than cotton, Swanzy used only a light coat of primer, resulting in it retaining its brown color. Swanzy used this to her advantage to emphasize the contrasts between warm and cool hues, juxtaposing the purple, blue, and green-toned grey of the sky and mountains against the brown of the exposed hills behind the village.

Swanzy's limited palette, rougher canvas, and smaller dimensions suggest that she did not have access to the same materials and tools as in Ireland. Later in life, the artist stated that she made her own canvases during this pe-

riod (Murphy 2012, 127). In Ireland, Swanzy journeyed into the countryside as a professional artist, with pre-prepared canvas boards, and transformed sites into landscapes for exhibition and sale. In Ružomberok, she was a volunteer on a visa with restricted mobility: this restriction is reflected in her canvas materials and the landscape views from balconies. However, the dimensions and materials of these paintings meant that they were easily transported to Dublin, stacked safely in her suitcase, ready for exhibition. As a mobile studio, her suitcase was crucial in ensuring that her works could be moved across borders, allowing her to continue her artistic practice despite the limitations imposed by her circumstances.

Circulating Artworks in Paris

This chapter turns to the circulation of Swanzy's artworks in and through exhibitions in Paris. As noted in the introduction, the artist had four solo shows and participated in twenty-three group exhibitions during this peripatetic six-year period, often with works on display in one location while she was traveling in a different country or continent. The circulation of Swanzy's artworks involved various logistical considerations, including shipping, postage, and storage. What enabled this circulation, and what infrastructures can be discovered by analyzing it? In answering this, I analyze the artist's exhibiting practice in Paris and her relationship with Lefebvre-Foinet, alongside her listed addresses and known traveling location to investigate where she exhibited certain works and how they got there. What emerges is an infrastructure beyond the physical, of networks between artists, dealers, galleries, and salons, where the exhibition was a central nexus.

Swanzy first exhibited at the SDI in 1914 (Lobstein 2003, 1632) and did not display works there until after the war, when she submitted works to the SNBA for the first time in 1919 (Dugnat 2005, np). The artist exhibited at the SDI again in spring 1920, with three works. The two Irish landscapes she submitted, *Arbres Solitaires* and *Sur la Côte d'Irlande* were both for sale, while the third, simply called *Portrait*, was not.¹¹ The titles of the landscape paintings indicate that these were artworks painted the previous year, when Swanzy traveled into the Irish countryside. Her address was noted as St Brendan's, Coolock, the address of her sister, Muriel Swanzy. In November 1920, Swanzy left Ireland and spent the winter with her other sister, St. Clair. Yet, in January 1921,

¹¹ Société des Artistes Indépendants. "Catalogue de la 31e Exposition." 28 January–29 February 1920, 162.

while staying with St. Clair in Ružomberok, she submitted *Côte d'Irlande*, *Les Toits*, and *Bateau de Pêcheurs* to the SDI, and a few months later, *Village en Irlande* to the SNBA. The SDI catalog lists her address as 'Chez M.L. Lefebvre-Foinet, 19, rue Vavin (6e),' yet her address in the SNBA catalog was that of her sister in Ireland.¹² And in 1922, the SDI listed the address in Coolock and Chez M.L. Lefebvre-Foinet. Emphasizing these addresses is important. From 1922 until 1939, Swanzy exclusively used Chez Lefebvre-Foinet as her Parisian contact address (Crespon-Halotier 2003, 500). It was common practice during the interwar period to list the artist's studio or residential address in exhibition catalogs, so that critics or dealers could pay a visit to acquire work or assess potential clients (Greet 2015, 140). The artist did not settle in Paris, and it was evidently impractical for a dealer to visit Ireland or follow the artist across continental Europe so her use of Chez Lefebvre-Foinet, a well-known and popular color merchant, was a way to circumnavigate this. It was also common for British artists to use this, and that of Lefebvre's former business partner Paul Foinet, as a contact address when exhibiting in Paris.¹³ Swanzy also used Chez Lefebvre-Foinet as her supplier of paints, canvases, and other materials, and once commented that Madame Foinet was "one of the most charming people I knew."¹⁴ This relationship was key to Swanzy's long-standing professional exhibiting practice at the SDI. Additionally, having a European contact ensured that the artist did not have to ship artworks from her sister's home in Coolock, Dublin.

The artist continued to exhibit in Paris in 1923 and 1924, even as she was on the other side of the globe, gesturing towards the importance of the Parisian salons as the primary venue to exhibit and sell her work. The paintings displayed at these Parisian salons might have been unsold works from previous submissions, held at Chez Lefebvre-Foinet for the artist. However, the three landscapes exhibited at the SDI in 1923 were different from those exhibited in 1922. At the SNBA in 1923, held a few months later in May and June, the artist exhibited two other landscapes, with her address once again listed as Chez M. Lefebvre-Foinet (Dugnat 2005, np).¹⁵ Swanzy's exhibiting practice reveals a well-organized system enabled her to create and submit artworks from various locations. Canvases on board and panel, smaller and more

¹² Société des Artistes Indépendants. "Catalogue de la 32e Exposition." 23 January-28 February 1921, 151.

¹³ "British Artists' Suppliers, 1650-1950 - F." npg.org.uk, npg.org.uk/collections/research/programmes/directory-of-suppliers/suppliers-f. Accessed 31 March 2025.

¹⁴ Andy O'Mahony. "Interview with Mary Swanzy." RTÉ (RTÉ Library and Archives, 5 May 1977), AA016320.

¹⁵ The artist's name was written as 'Swanzy.'

robust than unsupported canvas, would have been easier and cheaper to ship or post. Her use of multiple addresses, such as her sisters in Ireland and Chez Lefebvre-Foinet in Paris, was crucial to maintain a presence in the Parisian art scene while she was physically elsewhere. It allowed her to list a reliable contact address in exhibition catalogs, facilitating communication with critics, dealers, and potential buyers. Swanzy's mobile studio was thus strategic, where she could produce artworks that could be more easily integrated into distribution systems of the Parisian art world and, if unsold, returned to Dublin. Distribution has a crucial effect on reputations: work that does not fit the distribution infrastructure is not distributed, and therefore does not sell (Becker 2008, 95). The fact that Swanzy created artwork that could be distributed within the constraints of these systems indicates that the artist was, to some extent, reliant on these systems for financial support.

Conclusions

Landscape painting was central to Swanzy's career, serving as a painterly motif and as a means of sustaining her independence. It allowed her to pursue her professional goals while affording her significant social freedom and mobility, enabling her to travel – often unchaperoned – into the Irish countryside and later further afield, along the sunny Mediterranean and Adriatic coasts, and the snow-capped mountains of Slovakia. This chapter argues that Swanzy's mobile studio – embodied by her suitcase – enabled her to produce and exhibit artworks across such diverse locations, despite the challenges posed by her gender and socio-political context. The mobility afforded by this mobile studio profoundly shaped her ability to navigate the physical and logistical infrastructures of the early 20th century – from the tangible infrastructures of transport networks to the more intangible infrastructure of art distribution systems. The mobile studio was also strategic, enabling her to maintain a professional presence in multiple locations and negotiate the logistical challenges of international exhibitions.

The broader implications of Swanzy's experiences underscore the critical role of mobility and infrastructure in the art world during the early 20th century, illustrating how deeply intertwined these two concepts were, are, and will continue to be. Furthermore, an artist's metaphorical suitcase symbolizes an artist's readiness to move, adapt, and engage with diverse environments, reflecting the broader socio-economic and cultural networks that support artistic production and dissemination. Examining Swanzy's mobility reveals the logistical and infrastructural challenges faced by artists of this period, as well as the inventive solutions they devised to navigate these obstacles.

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Lost and Found

Transporting and Producing Art in London Exile

Burcu Dogramaci

“Finally I was in London. Now it was a matter of adapting to the new surroundings.” (Schames 1964) When the artist Samson Schames wrote these words, he was looking back on the year 1939, when he had fled Nazi Germany and saved his life. It was also a moment before his coming internment and later work in British air defense. Throughout this time, Schames maintained his artistic activities. His life and work were shaped by a variety of infrastructures: those that made it possible for him and other emigrants to flee, but also those that enabled him to survive socially and artistically in exile. Infrastructures are particularly important in the context of flight and exile: means of transport and transportation routes allow movement, while borders make this impossible or call for special practices to overcome them. Furthermore, transport infrastructures allow artists in exile to move their artworks and equipment.

Communication infrastructures are integral to arranging one's escape – for the connections between places of origin and destinations of flight. From a historical perspective, communication media such as letters, postcards, telegrams, and telephones not only conveyed information about existing networks for the exile movements of the 1930s and 1940s, but also helped establish new private and professional contacts in exile (Dogramaci 2024, 42). Infrastructures for the exhibition and dissemination of artistic work are constituted not only by cultural institutions such as museums and galleries, publishing houses, and print shops, but also by human interactions, including material support and immaterial forms of care and solidarity, which can be fundamental to the continuation of artistic work in a foreign country. So far, however, the infrastructures that have shaped the conditions of artistic exile during the National Socialist era have received little scholarly attention.

The following case studies are located in exile in London. The exile histories of the sculptor Jussuf Abbo, the painter and sculptor Samson Schames, and art historian Rosa Schapire underscore the importance of an infrastructural perspective on the conditions of artistic production and transport. In the case of Jussuf Abbo, the fatal effects of a caesura caused by exile, com-

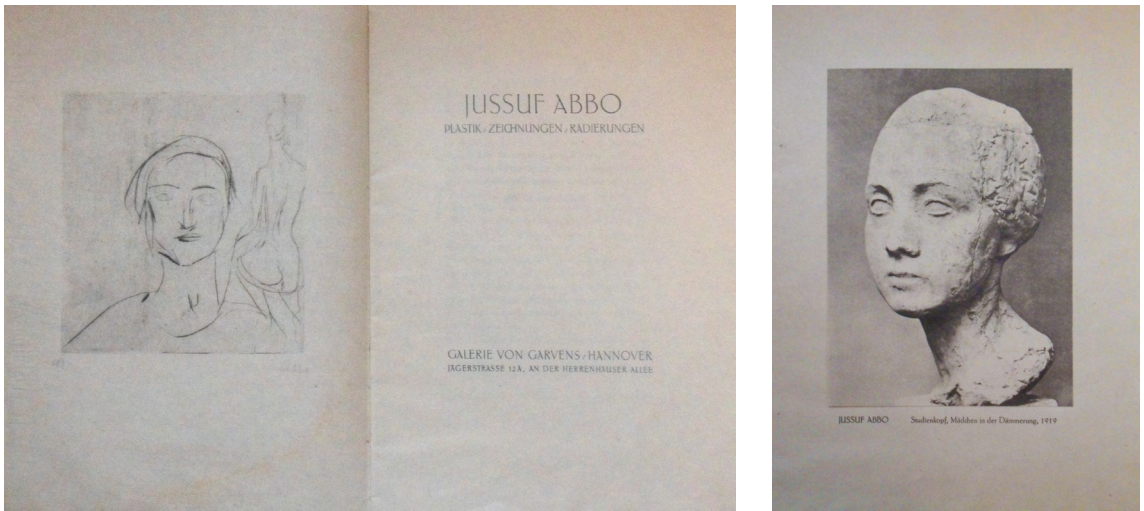


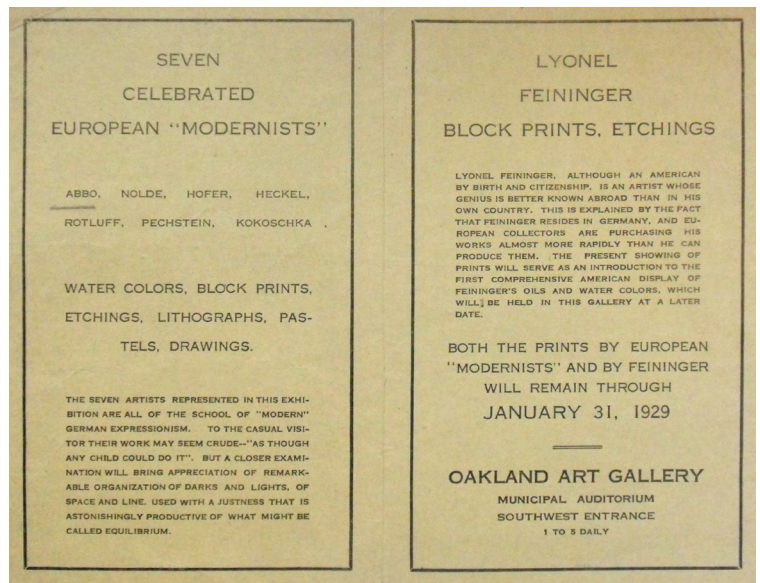
Fig. 1 Catalog of Jussuf Abbo's solo exhibition at the Gallery von Garvens, Hannover, 1921 (Restitution file, Berlin State Office for Civil and Regulatory Affairs, Photo: author's archive, © Estate of Jussuf Abbo).

bined with the (temporary) loss of his own works and tools, are outlined. Samson Schames's work in London, on the other hand, reveals how the artist found new artistic production methods under the conditions of exile and internment as well as the impact of the bombing of London by German Air Force. As a result of the destruction, he partially relocated his artistic production outdoors to a mobile studio. Although Jussuf Abbo, Samson Schames, and Rosa Schapire lived in the same exile city of London, it is not clear whether they knew each other. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that they met at events, had the same acquaintances, or were connected through professional and social networks. Schames and Abbo were both represented by the Modern Art Gallery (see fig. 6). From the perspective of researchers, the same London location can show the extent to which the challenges of production and transport led to different experiences and affected the work and lives of the aforementioned émigrés in various ways.

Lost in Transition: Jussuf Abbo's Practice and Works in Exile

Sculptors in particular faced special logistical challenges as a result of their exile, as their art had to be transported to present their work in their new environment. For many, financial constraints and the enormous effort required to transport sculpture made it difficult to take their works with them into exile. One example of the complicated and challenging artistic experience of exile, especially for sculptors, is the artist Jussuf Abbo, who under-

Fig. 2 Leaflet of the 1929 group exhibition *Seven Celebrated Europeans* in Oakland, California, with works by Jussuf Abbo, Emil Nolde, Max Pechstein, and others (Restitution file, Berlin State Office for Civil and Regulatory Affairs, Photo: author's archive, © Estate of Jussuf Abbo).



went several cross-border relocations in the first half of the 20th century, which took him from Safed/Palestine to Berlin and finally to London. By the 1920s, Abbo was a nationally and internationally exhibited artist (figs. 1 and 2). His forced departure from Germany in 1935 meant the loss of familiarity, professional and private relationships, and the stability of a recognized artistic production. In London, his work received only modest attention. His perceived lack of recognition and the hardships of a precarious life ultimately led him to abandon his artistic work.

As the sculptor destroyed many of the works he created in England, the number of pieces, their aesthetic principles, and the materials used during this period cannot be precisely determined. This leaves many gaps and unanswered questions, which is not uncommon for works produced in exile. Absence, destruction, and loss are thus constitutive elements of a historiography that does not see displacement as an exception, but rather as embedded in modern art history.

For Abbo, beginning a new life after 1933 was connected with the end of the previous one: Abbo closed his studio and tried to assemble works, tools, and potter's wheels, but had to leave behind much of what was still in foundries, galleries, and with art dealers (Abbo 1957, 4). Abbo deposited some of his works and tools in a container in the port of Hamburg to be shipped at a later date. The artist spent a few days at Schloss Eichholz with acquaintances, the von Joest family, whose children he portrayed, while his wife Ruth Schulz found temporary shelter in the artists' colony of Worpsswede (Abbo 1957, 9). An attempt to immigrate to the Netherlands had failed. Abbo, his wife, and

son Hussein were able to leave Germany on a tourist visa on 20 September 1935; they reached England six days later. They arrived in a difficult financial situation and the family took lodgings in a furnished attic apartment in Parliament Hill. The choice of London also seemed to be connected with the opportunity for retrospective exhibitions offered by the Leicester Galleries and the Wildenstein Gallery (*ibid.*, 4 and 10). Abbo was certainly hoping for a successful start in his future country of exile.

Abbo's early years in London were characterized by attempts to build new networks of collectors, museums, and galleries, organize exhibitions, and secure portrait commissions. Correspondence in the artist's estate indicates that shortly after arriving in London, he presented himself at the Victoria and Albert Museum with works (see Maclagan 1935) – presumably reproductions or small sculptures that he was able to take with him when he left. J. B. Manson from the Tate Gallery attested to Abbo's great talent – “You have a sensibility which is quite rare. I think you will have a great success among connoisseurs, artists, and collectors of taste” (Manson 1935).

To develop new professional networks in London and establish himself in exile artistically, it would have been essential to show a sufficient number of quality works. Abbo's tools and many of his works had remained in Germany, so he was unable to work or show his previous production. He waited almost two years for the things he had left in Germany and had only brought small stone sculptures and terracottas with him (Abbo 1957, 12), which made it nearly impossible to adequately fill an exhibition. Nevertheless, Abbo managed to sell a few sculptures, for example to James Bolivar Manson, who was director of the Tate Gallery from 1930–38 (Abbo 1957, 12). Despite this recognition, hardly any further purchases followed. Abbo's artistic beginnings in England initially meant working as a caster for other artists. In 1938, he moved into a small studio in the artists' district of Hampstead, and his family found accommodation very close by (first on Parkhill Road, later on Strathray Gardens). The family's repeated moves within and outside London indicate how challenging it was to coordinate private and professional life under precarious conditions.¹

In 1937, Abbo's works finally arrived from Germany, and yet the artist was still unable to attract public attention with a solo exhibition. Ruth Abbo writes that many of the works were damaged during transit and that Abbo had no financial means to repair them, especially not his signature bronze

¹ Later, Abbo's wife Ruth and their three children moved to a house in Sussex where the family could grow their own food, while the artist rented a furnished room on Byne Road in the badly bombed district of Sydenham (Dogramaci 2024, 150, 155).

works. Furthermore, he did not have time to fix them because he was forced to take on foundry work for other sculptors to make a living (Abbo 1986, 182). Abbo's experiences in a foreign country are indicative of the many problems faced by sculptors when emigrating. As many of them were unable to ship larger works, they had to first produce new ones in order to become visible as artists, which was difficult when lacking tools and materials, as well as the necessary studio space. In most cases, bronze castings were not possible due to the high costs involved.

Unforeseen circumstances – such as the delayed arrival of Abbo's sculptures and the outbreak of the Second World War, including the bombing of London and restrictions on the art world – prevented the artist from gaining a foothold in his London exile. Constant financial difficulties, providing for a growing family of three children in times of crisis, and psychological and physical strain ultimately led to creative stagnation. In Germany, however, the artist's reception was hindered by the loss of his social connections due to persecution and war, the confiscation of his work as part of the 'Degenerate Art' campaign, and his absence from public discourse since 1935. In 1959, the director-general of the former National Museums in Berlin (West), Leopold Reidemeister, stated: "I hereby confirm that I am firmly convinced, knowing the person and work of Yusuf Abbos, that this artist would have enjoyed great success in Germany had circumstances not forced him to emigrate" (Reidemeister 1959). These are, therefore, dis:connective infrastructures – transport routes and connections that exist but have been interrupted or damaged by dictatorship and war. The immaterial infrastructures are similarly dis:connective, marked by absence in discourse due to the confiscation of the works and the sculptor's exile.²

It was not only artists who were affected by the loss of their works along the paths of exile. Scholars and writers also had to deal with the challenge of losing the foundations of their practice. In the case of art historian and patron Rosa Schapire, for example, this included her library, but also furniture, including pieces that expressionist Karl Schmidt-Rottluff had made for her Hamburg apartment in the 1920s. It was only in August 1939, when she was already being persecuted as a Jew, that Schapire managed to flee from Germany to London. In his letter to her dated 16 August 1939, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff writes: "Dear Ro, I hope the sea voyage is well behind you and that it was a smooth journey on which you were also able to recover a little. There will be no lack of new impressions in London, all the more so since this time it is

² On the concept of dis:connectivity and the tension between connectivity and disconnectivity in the context of exile and migration, see Balme et al. 2025.

not just a visit to see art.” (Schmidt-Rottluff 1939) When she emigrated to England, Rosa Schapire was able to take some of Schmidt-Rottluff’s works with her, but her library and furniture was confiscated, looted, or auctioned off (see Schapire 1946). The art historian Leonie Beiersdorf offers a more detailed account of the fate of her collection of Expressionist art, though its full trajectory remains uncertain: the gallery Roland, Browse & Delbanco was presumably involved (Beiersdorf 2009, 262–264). Although the public and museum libraries in London were able to partially compensate for the loss of her own books, German-language literature on Expressionism and other art movements was likely more difficult to obtain. At the same time, there was also an emotional loss. In his book *Geliebte Objekte*, Tilmann Habermas has extensively researched the significance of personal belongings and writes: “What are personal objects? They could also be called favourite things, cherished or well-kept possessions. They are objects that are particularly dear to a person, that they love, to which they are attached and with which they feel connected” (Habermas 1999, 9).

In this respect, infrastructural perspectives – such as those concerning the transport routes of libraries, tools, or sculptures – can also encompass immaterial aspects, particularly in relation to the loss of beloved objects. This immaterial level of loss certainly applied just as much to Rosa Schapire as it did to the sculptor Jussuf Abbo and the artist Samson Schames, who, like the other two, had to leave familiar surroundings behind when fleeing National Socialist persecution.

Found in Destruction: Samson Schames’s Artistic Production in the Blitz

In January 1939, the artist Samson Schames fled to England, leaving most of his works in Frankfurt am Main, which were lost or destroyed. In the Museum of Jewish Antiquities, his works were slashed and destroyed during the November Pogroms (Frowein 1995, 25). In England, Schames was later interned as an enemy alien in the Huyton camp near Liverpool. This internment compelled him to work with new materials:

I tried to continue my painting, and I did take every material which I could find. For instance I did take some unusual material, and made my own colour out of black soot, which I mixed with thick condensed milk. [...] And I used beetroot juice for red. [...] I had no brushes with me, so I cut a piece of my hair, I still have much. I stuck them to a stick and made my own brush and so I started to paint. (Schames 1950)

In his memories, Schames describes how, out of necessity, he used everyday materials and food to continue his artistic work in internment. This is not an unusual occurrence. At the same time, the artist Kurt Schwitters, who was also interned in the Hutchinson Camp on the Isle of Man, worked with porridge and margarine, candy wrappers, and linoleum he tore up from the floor (Powell 2013, 33).

Schames and Schwitters thus built on supply infrastructures to create painting materials by appropriating them for other purposes. Existing research does not only attribute Samson Schames's adoption of everyday materials to a lack of artistic painting materials. Rather, the resulting works are interpreted as being directly linked to the reality of life in the camp (Lauter 1989, 98). Jam, beetroot, toothpaste, and shoe polish can be understood as being closely connected to the body – these are substances that are applied, digested, or excreted. This connection grounds the artworks in the physical and personal experiences of the individual. These materials are thus associated with the semantics of individual creativity, just as biologicistic processes of ingestion, production, and creativity can be referred to in the context of the internment camp.

Even after his release in November 1940, Schames continued to pursue a specifically local artistic exploration. Back in London, he intensively engaged with his place of exile. His cityscapes were shown in contemporary exhibitions, primarily in the émigré community. In the 1944 show *Exhibitions of Drawings, Paintings & Sculptures* organized by the Free German League of Culture, works by Samson Schames and Erwin Weinberg, including *London, 1941* and *Hampstead Heath* were on display (Vinzent 2006, 111–112). The exhibition thus brought together émigré artists' perspectives on the city on the Thames. Artistic engagement with cities of exile is not only visible in this London show, but also in numerous other works created in exile around the world, be they arrival images or series of interactions with neighborhoods in New York (see Roth 2021), London, Istanbul, and elsewhere. This approach to the new environment may have been motivated by artistic curiosity, but it can also serve the purpose of self-assurance, by situating the painting, photographing, or drawing self in its exilic surroundings. For Schames, his perception of the war-torn city London was closely linked to his involvement in air-raid protection as a member of the Civil Defence, which is reflected in titles such as *Blitz*.

This work was shown in the Free German League of Culture's 1944 *Exhibition of Drawings, Paintings & Sculptures*, which, with fifty pieces, offered an impression of the diversity of artistic expression in the German-speaking émigré community. In her analysis of the exhibition, Jutta Vinzent has shown

that some of the works provided personal insight into the experience of war in London, including the aforementioned *Blitz* by Schames or Eugen Hoffmann's *Shelter Scene* (Vinzent 2006, 111). The Blitz, the German air raids on London in 1940/41, made it clear how vulnerable England was as a place of refuge. This also explains why many émigrés decided to leave the island during the war years; many of them went to the United States – including the gallerist Ala Story and the actress Elisabeth Bergner. At the same time, the Blitz and its consequences also provided material for artistic expression. During the Blitz, families had to seek shelter in underground bunkers or spend the night with their children in the London Underground, where temporary overnight accommodation had been set up. Drawings from 1940 by the artist Henry Moore capture the claustrophobic conditions in a tube tunnel.³ In the work of Samson Schames, the bombing of London has been reflected in a very particular way. Drawings and gouaches show destroyed houses, broken shop windows, and debris on city streets and squares. The drawing *Charred Beams* from 1941 (fig. 3) looks through a window frame at a destroyed and burnt building. Schames used gouache and tempera, mixed with sand, to capture the charred beams. The rough texture and dark tones evoke the soot, ash, and acrid smell of burnt wood, making the destruction almost tangible.⁴

As a member of the air-raid protection service, Civil Defence, Schames was active wherever the city was destroyed. In the ruins of heavily damaged buildings, he recovered both damaged and surviving material to incorporate into his artistic work. Schames lists: “[...] there are different materials, for instance, rusty nails, crockery, stones, wire, pieces of all different wood and glass, shrapnel and all the things I found under the debris” (Schames 1950). Through these remnants – which emerged directly from violence and bear its traces – Schames also reflected on the violent events in his country of origin: “One day I read in the newspaper that the Jews have to wear the yellow star in Germany, and I made a yellow star head out of rusty nails and I cut out of the newspaper, put it in there and I said, it’s all in there, and it is fixed in cement” (Schames 1950). Schames’s *Yellow Star* (1941/42, fig. 4) is reminiscent of an icon, and the rusty nails forming the face and beard could be a reference to

3 <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/henry-moore/henry-moore-room-guide/henry-moore-room-guide-room-5>. Accessed 14 December 2023.

4 Further pictures from the period of internment and the war years in London and his second exile in New York after 1950 can be found in the Samson Schames collection at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York and the Jewish Museum in Frankfurt am Main. See <https://www.lbi.org/exhibitions/art-exile/Samson-Schames/>; <https://www.juedischesmuseum.de/besuch/detail/samson-schames-ausstellung/>. Accessed 15 April 2025.

Fig. 3 Samson Schames, *Charred Beams*, 1941, >>>
gouache and tempera with sand on cardboard,
57.2 × 38.9 cm, Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt.





Fig. 4 Samson Schames, *Yellow Star*, c. 1941–42, nails, newspaper clippings, shards of plate, glass, and clay in a lime/cement base, 74 × 58.5 cm (Frowein 1989, 14).

the nails used to crucify Christ. At the same time, there are topical references. Schames made the yellow Star of David, reminiscent of a crown, out of shards of clay, while the cemented newspaper clipping refers to current events.

Although the work's materials are contemporary, it nonetheless builds a bridge to religious pieces and to timeless pain, suffering, and redemption. The ruinous materials found support in a carrier mass of cement, lime, and gypsum plaster (Lauter 1989, 101). A photographic series (fig. 5) captures Schames at work on *Yellow Star*. The cement mass is spread out on a table with nails attached to it. Shards are smashed again, a wooden frame is constructed, and more cement is added. It becomes clear from the photographs that Schames is not working outside, but in the studio. Nevertheless, one can speak of a mobile studio (in reference to the chapter in which this text will be published). Schames's initial ideas for the work may have emerged while collecting material in the landscape of ruins; at the very least, images of what he saw were saved there and 'brought' to the studio. Schames not only depicted the war-torn city, but also incorporated physical remnants from it, making

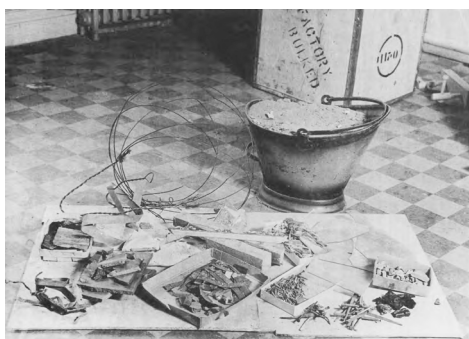


Fig. 5 Samson Schames at work on *Yellow Star*, c. 1942–42 (Frowein 1989, 42–44).

1942
April Exhibition

MOSAICS AND PAINTINGS BY S. SCHAMES

the modern art gallery
12, Baker Street,
Portman Square,
London, W.1.

CATALOGUE.

MOSAICS.

- 1 Outcasts *sold*
- 2 The Mourners *sold*
- 3 Sacrifice
- 4 Crown of Thorns
- 5 Yellow Star *sold*
- 6 The Unknown *sold*
- 7 Time Immortal *sold*
- 8 Sorrow *sold*

OIL PAINTINGS.

- 9 Evacuation
- 10 Balkan Street *sold*
- 11 Steps *sold*
- 12 Corsica *sold*
- 13 Winter Morning *sold*
- 14 Side Street *sold*

PAINTINGS AND COMPOSITIONS.

(Done in Huyton Internment Camp)

- 15 Morning in the Camp *sold*
- 16 Doctor's Waiting-room *sold*
- 17 Grey Awakening *sold*
- 18 Interned Artist
- 19 Interned Musician
- 20 Interned Scientist
- 21 The Wandering Jew *sold*
- 22 "P. T." *sold*
- 23 Home Again *sold*

Prices on Application.

Introduction.

By DENIS MATHEWS.

Simplicity of statement is a common necessity for fine expression in any of the arts. Although great painters of the past have given many examples of this, the temptation often arises to admire the facile hand revelling in virtuosity with no emotion other than an abandoned display of lavish material and commonplace appeal.

Therefore it is refreshing to see the works of Samson Schames where the restrictions of the internment camp have not deprived him of the language to express his emotions—where charcoal and paper stained with vegetable juices speak more eloquently than aureolin on expensive canvas.

In the mosaics this experimental attitude has been developed to a moving emotional effect. Bent nails and concrete—debris from bombed houses—are splendid material for the artist's hands to tell us what is in his mind when his enthusiasm overflows in this decorative fashion.

the modern art gallery

was founded by Jack Bilbo in war-time with the sole aim and purpose of helping art to survive, and of giving the artist and the public a possibility of doing their part in the intellectual fight against dictatorial reactionism.

In the modern art gallery merit alone counts. Some contributors are famous or rising artists, others are entirely unknown. Fame or sales value do not influence the selection of work; a famous artist may be rejected just as easily as an unknown artist accepted.

See separate Catalogues for paintings, drawings and sculpture by the following artists—

ABBO	KOKOSCHKA
BILBO	KOPPEL
BORET	LAURENS
BOYD	LAWSON
CILVE	LEWIS
CUTHBERT	MAYERSON
DE GAS	MODIGLIANI
DE MERIC	OWO
DE BUYS ROESSINGH	PIC
DUFY	PICASSO
GAUGIN	POPZOFF
GHYKA	RODIN
HAPPE	SCHAMES
HART	SCHIELE
HOLLOWAY	SCHWITTERS
JETTEN	VIEYRA
KLEE	

New Exhibition every month.

Fig. 6 *Mosaics and Paintings* by S. Schames, exh. cat., Modern Art Gallery, London, April 1942 (Frowein 1989, 111). In the catalog, Jussuf Abbo is also listed as an artist represented by the gallery.

his work more than mere artistic eyewitness testimony. Rather than recording historical events, he embedded them materially into his images, making their impact physically palpable.⁵

Schames's *Yellow Star* was shown in an exhibition at the Modern Art Gallery in 1942 (fig. 6). His solo exhibition, *Mosaics and Paintings by S. Schames*, consisted of numerous material-based compositions, oil paintings, and gouaches, bringing together works created in the internment camp and others whose material referenced the bombing of London.

In April 1942, the magazine *New Revue* wrote about the artist:

His technique took a queerly novel direction after he had been a few times in the thick of London's blitzes. Several large mosaic panels in the exhibition are composed entirely of odds and ends found in the débris of bombed London buildings. Fragments of teacups, rusty nails, broken glass, bits of washstands, plaster, were embodied into a flat slab of cement. (Anonymous 1942)

The activities of searching, finding, and utilizing are thus activities that are directly incorporated into the creative process; they are preconditions for an artistic production that is anchored in the present through its material. Schames's works are thus characterized by a contemporaneity; rather, they are his contemporaries. His 1944 material picture *Return to the Fatherland* contains melted fragments of glass bottles, ceramic shards, charred wood, nails, wire, and pieces of metal and scrap metal, reattached to a lime and plaster ground.⁶ *Time Immortal* (1941/42, fig. 7), on the other hand, shows a clock composed of rusty nails, screws, pieces of metal and scrap, shards, and wooden ornaments, with the hands pointing to 12:27. It could be a clock that has stopped because of the detonation, showing that it is too late – no longer five to twelve, but long past twelve.⁷ *Time Immortal* was also listed in Schames's 1942 exhibition catalog produced by the Modern Art Gallery.

The Modern Art Gallery, founded by the artist and art dealer Jack Bilbo, who had also emigrated, showed works by émigré artists such as Jakub Bauernfreund (also Jacob Bornfreund, 1942), Hein Heckroth (1943), and Kurt Schwitters (1944). Bilbo provided a public platform for artists who had fled to London, often with little capital and few contacts. In this way, his gallery pro-

⁵ On seeing as eye-witness testimony see Hattendorf 2019, 19.

⁶ Reproduced in Frowein 1989, 46.

⁷ The expression "five to twelve" (or "five minutes to midnight") is a metaphor for a last warning before a catastrophe – implying there is still a narrow window for action. In World War II and postwar discourse, it was often used to denote the brink of disaster or the urgency of intervention before it was too late.



Fig. 7 Samson Schames, *Time Immortal*, c. 1941–42, rusty nails, screws, pieces of metal/scrap, shards, and wooden ornaments in a lime/plaster base (Frowein 1989, 39).

vided a counterweight to the Ben Uri Art Gallery, which showed Jewish artists. Occasionally, artists such as Samson Schames or Kurt Schwitters were represented in both places. Schames, for example, was shown at several group exhibitions at the Ben Uri Art Gallery between 1944 and 1946.⁸

In one of his catalogs, Bilbo explained the selection in 1945 with his personal preferences and his experience as the owner of the Modern Art Gallery:

Not every modern painter and painting can be mentioned in this book. That would take volumes and volumes. So I have mentioned and chosen only those artists and paintings which I as an artist, author and manager of the modern art gallery find most interesting. Fame or obscurity stand the same chance. I

⁸ See <https://www.buru.org.uk>. Accessed 15 April 2025.

have included three of my own paintings in the book because I think they are good. You see, dear reader, I am not modest. (Bilbo 1945a, n.p.)

And he continues:

My friends Schames and Marion Adnams belong likewise to this category of great and warm-hearted painters – with a terrific portion of sensitiveness. They have suffered much in life, like the four mentioned above, but like them, instead of becoming bitter, petty and hateful they have become great painters and great human beings. Graham Sutherland, Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein (his sculpture), Ben Nicholson, Jankel Adler, Edward Burra, Leslie Hurry, Henrik Gotlyb [sic!], Frances Hodgkins, Fred Uhlmann [sic!], Ivon Hitchens, Feliks Topolski, Julian Trevelyan, John Tunnard and Ceri Richards are also artists living in this country who in spite of the negativeness of our time were able to burst the chains and grey walls of their environment, and whose work and personalities I therefore admire. (ibid.)

With this exhibition, Bilbo created a shared space for British and émigré artists, for well-known and prosperous as well as unknown positions, because:

In the modern art gallery merit alone counts. Some contributors are famous or rising artists, others are entirely unknown. Fame or sales value do not influence the selection of work; a famous artist may be rejected just as easily as an unknown artist accepted. (ibid.)

Samson Schames was not only supported and exhibited by the Modern Art Gallery. His works were also shown in the *First Group Exhibition of German, Austrian, Czechoslovakian Painters and Sculptors* alongside those of other emigrants such as Paul Hamann, Oskar Kokoschka, and Dorothea Wüsten (Müller-Härlin 2010, p. 59). Organized by the Free German League of Culture, this first exhibition was on view from 20 June to 3 July 1939 at the Wertheim Gallery in Burlington Gardens, as the League did not yet have its own clubhouse (Müller-Härlin 2010, pp. 58–59, see also Carrington Wertheim 2022, p. 153). The presence of Schames's work within a diverse émigré artistic community warrants further investigation, alongside broader questions of artistic production in exile and processes of artistic arrival.

In Conclusion

In summary, exile, as a forced departure, had a profound impact on artists and their work. This was largely due to experiences of persecution, economic

deprivation, and the loss of established private and professional connections caused by relocating one's home and production location. Rescuing and transporting existing works was a significant challenge, and posed a particular problem for sculptors due to the volume of the works, their fragility and vulnerability, and their sensitivity to temperature fluctuations, wind, and weather. Although transport infrastructure was available, it was characterized by great uncertainties, including the threat of confiscation, war-related delays, customs duties, politically motivated import regulations, or the threat of destruction through vandalism or acts of war. A systematic study of artistic transport infrastructures in exile after 1933 is necessary to learn more about the specific conditions and challenges.

The same applies to the infrastructures of production under conditions of exile and war, as Samson Schames's example shows. His work reveals the extent to which he adapted to the conditions of his new environment and to political events, and how he reacted immediately to the threat and destruction of his city by German aircraft. This engagement with his city of exile was not only a response to its destruction but was also materially embedded in his practice, as he sifted through rubble and ashes to find elements to incorporate in his artworks. Infrastructure was also important for dissemination. Jussuf Abbo and Samson Schames both sought, with varying degrees of success, to participate in contemporary exhibitions and benefited from émigré-established networks – such as the Free German League of Culture and its exhibitions, as well as the activities of émigré Jack Bilbo's Modern Art Gallery. These exhibition and dissemination infrastructures – both material and immaterial – were closely linked to those of production. In the case of Samson Schames, this is evident from the short time between the emergence of his works during the Blitz in 1940/41 and their presentation at his solo exhibition *Mosaics and Paintings by S. Schames* at the Modern Art Gallery in 1942.

In my contribution “Lost and Found: Transporting and Producing Art in London Exile,” exile should not only be understood as a caesura – that is, not just as an experience of displacement, expulsion, and forced new beginning accompanied by existential losses. From an art historical perspective, I also aimed to reflect on the new aesthetics, techniques, and production methods that exile can bring with it – without relativizing the experience of loss. In this way, this text not only argues on the basis of a case study, but also examines the various (im)possibilities of artistic or scholarly production in the context of expulsion, exile and new beginnings by referring to the work and lives of Jussuf Abbo, Samson Schames, and Rosa Schapire.

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Follow the Materials

Tracing Infrastructures of Production, Transport, and Communication in the Work of Alina Szapocznikow – A Case Study

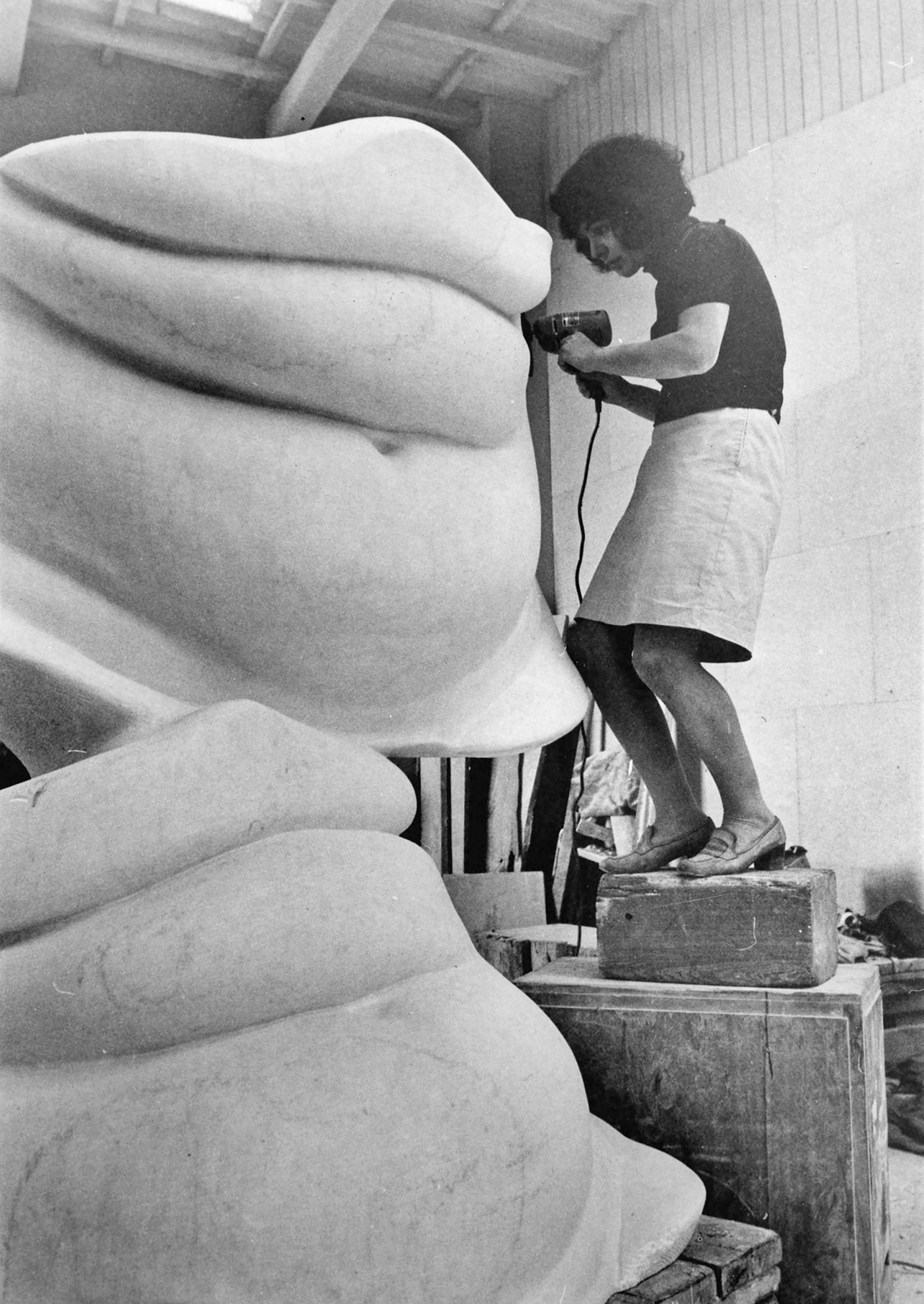
Ursula Ströbele

Introduction

“I feel the need to handle matter; I want to knead and touch everything with my fingers. This physical contact gives me a feeling that I am imparting myself to the sculpture” (Szapocznikow qtd. in Czerni 2004, 29). These words from an interview with Alina Szapocznikow reveal her lifelong interest in different materials, their character, consistency, and, above all, their (not always controllable) inherent behavior. The resulting close relationship between the female sculptor and her material is reminiscent of a statement by the British anthropologist Tim Ingold, who deals with the politics and ecology of materials: “To follow these materials is to enter into a world that is, so to speak, perpetually on the boil. [...] it might be helpful to imagine the world as a huge kitchen, well stocked with ingredients of all sorts” (Ingold 2017, 29).

By resorting to various sculptural techniques – including modeling, chiseling, collaging, casting, and molding – while simultaneously using a diverse range of materials, Szapocznikow’s oeuvre reflects references to the surrounding socio-political world. It deals with the formative traumas of a European post-war society in the East and West, but also with the art-immanent characteristics of her time, whose “kitchen” (Ingold) she critically examines for her own sculptural repertoire. The direct contact with the material from which her artworks were created is emphasized by a large number of photographs showing the female sculptor at work, whether grinding a block of marble, kneading a piece of clay, or pouring liquid polyurethane (fig. 1).

An art history of production is closely linked to an art history of materials, but also to a history of exhibitions and distribution, transportation, and logistics, and this also includes an art history of infrastructures. The production and mediation of art go hand in hand with complex infrastructures and a network of actors in the field of logistics that operate globally. This concerns the procurement of materials, artistic work on site, and the transportation of artworks across national borders, such as between communist Poland and France or Switzerland, while during the Cold War it was much easier to travel



to communist countries than to countries on the other side of the Iron Curtain.¹

Infrastructures thus enable the global mobility of objects. Wars, political (customs) restrictions, or natural disasters disrupt infrastructures, which can also change the flow of materials for artistic production and their transportation. When asked which types of wood she preferred, Barbara Hepworth, for example, replied in an interview in 1946:

I prefer the foreign hardwoods with their great diversity of colour and surface finish. The war stopped all imports of foreign timber, and I have been seasoning my own logs from trees felled in the Cornish woods. [...] after so many years of restriction I long for the excitement of 'blackwood', 'lignum-vitae', 'greenheart', and 'ivory-wood', to mention only a few of the wonderful foreign hardwoods. (Hepworth 1946, 98)

Even if Hepworth had to deal with different political restrictions on mobility than Szapocznikow, the quote reveals the extent to which an artistic practice relates to global trade routes and industrially determined material flows. At the same time, infrastructures often only become visible when their functioning is no longer taken for granted. Brian Larkin summarizes it as follows: "Infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter. Their peculiar ontology lies in the facts that they are things and also the relation between things" (Larkin 2013, 329).

Based on Larkin's definition and Ingold's plea for an ontology "that assigns primacy to processes of formation," I will use the example of Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973) to discuss the different infrastructures that were decisive for her own artistic production, particularly as a woman in the male-dominated field of sculpture of her time. Drawing upon an archive visit and her published letters, an attempt will be made to trace the procurement of materials and transportation of sculptures, and to outline the artistic conditions of produc-

¹ In the Cold War era, Western countries pursued a fairly friendly immigration policy towards emigrants from the so-called Eastern Bloc, also Poland. See e.g., Dariusz Stola. "Das kommunistische Polen als Auswanderungsland," *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, vol. 2, no. 3, 2005, <https://zeithistorische-forschungen.de/3-2005/4720>. Accessed 2 May 2025. And yet the number of people leaving the country in the early 1950s, when Szapocznikow returned to Poland, was rather low due to very strict travel and emigration restrictions. According to Stola, for example, the number of trips abroad on the basis of a passport amounted to 9,360 in 1951, of which 7,380 people traveled to other communist countries and only 1,980 beyond the Iron Curtain. Stalin's death in 1953 led to a temporary easing of the restrictions enforced by the communist regime, the so-called thaw. This led to a change in passport policy, with the first easing of travel restrictions being introduced. The years 1956–1958, when Szapocznikow moved to France, were the time of the most intensive emigration movements.

tion.² Here, various forms of infrastructure can be distinguished: first, the literal transportation routes and procurement of materials, second, infrastructures in the form of her personal, international network, Szapocznikow's travels, notably between Poland and France, as well as her written communication with curators, friends, collectors, gallery owners, suppliers, and members of the press. In addition to correspondence, the consulted documents include transport bills, material invoices, customs certificates, and invitations to exhibitions.

Transportation Costs and the Procurement of Materials

But what information do the surviving sources actually reveal? How do we deal with the methodological challenge of making productive use of desiderata, blind spots, and gaps, i.e., the stories that are not told or must be read between the lines?³ Missing information can also indicate a lack of interest and minor attributions of meaning.

The following section focuses on the infrastructural challenges of procuring materials and transportation costs, which pose a particular difficulty in the field of sculpture. Alina Szapocznikow was involved in a wide variety of international exhibitions, including a number of sculpture symposia and other working practices *in situ*; her travels therefore involved her person, her family, the material and, in some cases, the tools, as will be illustrated by significant archival documents. Production and transportation are closely interwoven.

The chosen material—in this case, references to local stone quarries—is explicitly emphasized in a few letters to the artist. For example, this occurs in the context of the exhibition *Forma Viva*, which took place in 1963 in then-Yugoslavia: Istrian marble (from the vicinity of Portorož) and oak (with a place of work in Kostanjevica) (Vidmar 1963, n.p.). Two years before, she had been invited to participate in the sculpture symposium in St. Margarethen, Austria. After her successful participation, Christa Fruhmänn contacted Szapocznikow

² A big thank you is due to Hervé Loevenbruck, who manages the artist's estate in Paris and looks after it with care. His team, in particular Clara Bonura, has provided valuable assistance in procuring images and archival documents. I would also like to thank Ute Stuffer (director of Kunstmuseum Ravensburg) for the collaborative publication and exhibition project *Alina Szapocznikow: Body Languages* at Kunstmuseum Ravensburg in 2025.

³ Saidiya Hartmann offers a productive possibility of critical fabulation. See Saidiya Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1–14. See also Laura Moisi, "Unmögliche Biografien. Saidiya Hartmanns Gegenerzählungen zur Domination," *Feministisches Spekulieren. Genealogien, Narrationen, Zeitlichkeiten*, edited by Marie-Luise Angerer and Naomie Gramlich, Kadmos, 2020, pp. 209–219.

on 30 September 1965 to address the problem of storing and transporting her work in Burgenland – a problem often associated with the medium of sculpture. At the end of a second exhibition station in Vienna's municipal park, the question arose as to where the heavy marble sculpture should be taken (30 September 1965): “We can try to see if the municipality of Vienna wants to acquire this sculpture, but I’m afraid the chances are not very good – nor would they pay more than 40,000 or 50,000 schillings. Would you agree to that?” (Fruhmann 1965).⁴ Otherwise, according to her fellow sculptor, “the sculpture returns to the quarry” – which often means its end. Due to high transportation costs, this fate might also concern other artists. And yet the sandstone work *Mięszo I* (Flesh I) (1961) is still be found on site today. The then-curator of the MoMA Peter Selz (24 December 1963), who tried to support Szapocznikow with an exhibition in New York, put forward a similar argument:

I called several galleries here but they all worry about the great cost of transporting sculpture and shy away from it for that reason. [...] It would really be much better if you could get a gallery in Paris and have that gallery make contacts with one in New York. (Selz 1963)

However, galleries also often prefer smaller formats such as her tumor sculptures – and this has not necessarily changed today. Carla Pellegrini Rocca from the Galleria Milano, who had actually intended to exhibit *Plage* (1968), remarked, “but transport is going to be really difficult and very expensive” (Pellegrini n.d., n.p.). Only rarely is there information about the type of transport and the necessary infrastructure: Szapocznikow received an invitation to a joint exhibition organized by the Salon de la Jeune Sculpture and the Association des Sculpteurs du Québec, whereby the transport costs from Le Havre – presumably by ship – to Canada were covered by the organizers (Chevalier n.d.).⁵ For its 1970 Festival of Contemporary Art in Yokohama and Morioka, The Japan Art Society also used a ship as a means of transportation (which was common and cheaper at the time) to bring the works back to Europe and the USA: “now it finished its trip to Japan and will be soon on board the ship to Europe and America” (Shibazaki 1970, n.p.).

⁴ All the non-English quotes were translated into English by the author.

⁵ See also Claudine's (Galerie Aurora) letter to Alina Szapocznikow, 3 March 1971, no. 1794, (© The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow/Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris). According to the gallery in Geneva, the artist was responsible for organizing transport; the gallery would be in charge of advertising.

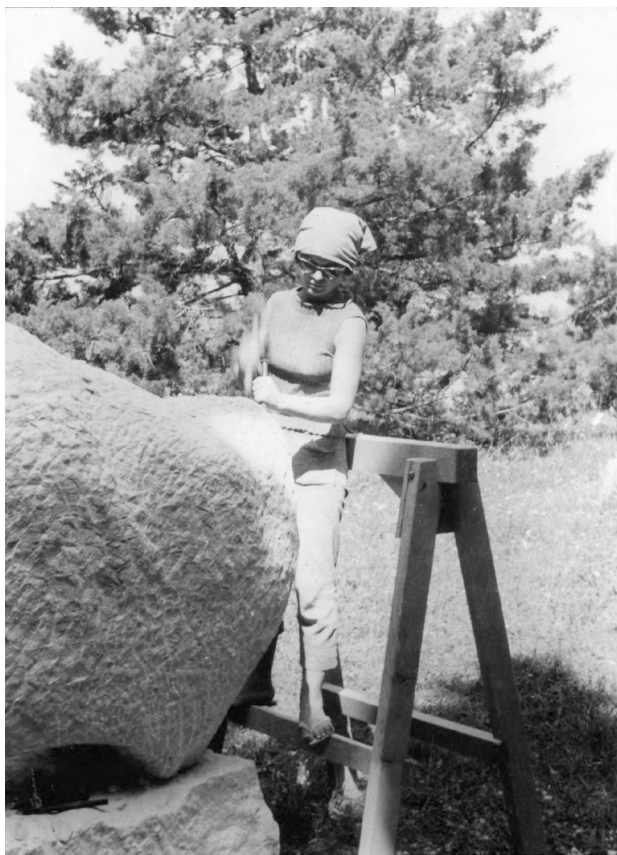


Fig. 2 Unknown photographer, *Alina Szapocznikow near a crane in a stone mine, Vyšné Ružbachy, Slovakia, 1967*, Black-and-white photographic print, 17.9 × 13.0 cm, Alina Szapocznikow Archives, Paris. The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow (Courtesy Loevenbruck, Paris, Inv. No.: ASDOC6269. © ADAGP, Paris, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025).

Unconventional transport solutions were sometimes employed – for instance, on 20 February 1968, when the Swiss trading company Magazine zum Globus arranged for a sculpture to be transported to Zurich by car, driven by an employee: “This way, transportation will be even easier” (Magazine zum Globus 1968, n.p.). Around a month later, the same author confirmed the receipt of the sculpture and the joy of director Peter Kaufmann’s new acquisition for the collection (Rufli 1968).

The transportation of materials posed not only infrastructural (fig. 2) and financial challenges, but the shipping of tools also had to be taken into account when working artistically in situ. The curatorial team of *Forma Viva* explicitly recommended bringing personal tools due to the importance of familiarity: “We advise you to bring your own sculptural tools. [...]” (Vidmar 1963, n.p.). On site, a block of marble is cut to the desired dimensions using a compressor. An assistant stonemason would be assigned to Alina Szapocznikow to ensure that she could complete her work within the agreed time frame. Accompanying family members were welcomed and even encouraged: “for thus we are sure that your stay here will be more agreeable” (ibid.) (fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Unknown photographer, *Alina Szapocznikow with her work Sculpture Biologique I during the Forma Viva International Sculpture Symposium, Portorož, Yugoslavia (now Slovenia), 1963*, Black-and-white photographic print, 9.1 × 6.0 cm, Alina Szapocznikow Archives, Paris. The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow (Courtesy Loevenbruck, Paris, Inv. No.: ASDOC1083. © ADAGP, Paris, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025).



In July 1966, Szapocznikow wrote to her ex-husband Ryszard Stanisławski, with whom she maintained regular correspondence throughout her life, that she was creating an eight-ton marble sculpture at the invitation of the Yugoslav Republic: “my sculpture is just eight tons, so by USSR standards directly proportional” (Szapocznikow, 23 July 1966, 269). She praises the supporting hands of an assistant assigned to her and two other workers – “so the work is moving along quickly in spite of me” – as well as the fact that she obtains material from the quarry, which was also used for the American embassy in Warsaw, “so you must know it, a lovely blue-gray” (ibid., 268). Her interest in different types of stone is also evidenced by other documents, including another letter from 1966 regarding a Czechoslovak sculpture symposium, in which Szapocznikow expressed a clear preference for the Ružbachy quarry over Hořice. Although the curatorial team agreed to her request, their letter explained the different material properties of each location (Anonymous 1966, n.p.). In addition to these favorable conditions, Szapocznikow also chose to participate due to the “grand *rendez-vous* because of AICA” (Szapocznikow, 9 February 1966, 265).

Szapocznikow is an artist who has traveled extensively and was involved in international exhibitions from an early age. She wrote from Carrara in March of the same year: “*sono tante [sic!] felice! [...] Viva Carrara!*” (Szapocznikow, 15 March 1966, 267) – a stay made possible by a patron. Henry Moore bought a small house here and she wanted to do the same. The Henraux company in neighboring Querceta is an important hub for the local sculpture network. The archive contains numerous documents from Szapocznikow’s correspondence, including exchanges with the Italian critic Giuseppe Marchiori, who recommended her there and, in a letter dated 28 June 1968, personally invited her to Querceta to produce two sculptures.⁶ The then-director Erminio Cidonio had already initiated the Musée Henraux de Sculpture, a residency program and a biennial there in 1956. Alina Szapocznikow visited Querceta repeatedly, exhibiting there in 1967 and producing several works, including *Autoportrait I* (1966), *Grands Ventres* (1968), and *Rolls Royce* (1970–1971).

As the Henraux company also produced works for artists, including Szapocznikow, she was asked in a letter dated 21 December 1967 to send the model or to come to Querceta herself, “to choose the most suitable material for both color and material” (Marchiori 1967, n.p.) and to inspect the final stages of production. Henraux’s diverse repertoire of stones was also a valuable resource for other sculptors, such as her Polish colleague Maria Papa Rostkowska (see Ströbele 2023; Conte 2024, 89–94). A delivery bill issued for customs also documents the shipment of marble samples that the company sent to Szapocznikow in Paris free of charge in March 1971 (Henraux 1971, n.p.). Correspondence with Henraux related to her 1968 solo exhibition at Cogeiime Gallery in Brussels reveals the interruption of existing infrastructures: a strike at Marbrerie Henraux (14 October–25 November 1968), and delays in transportation and the truck took longer than planned “it’s not our fault the truck took 11 days to reach its destination” (e.g., Henraux 1969, n.p.).

Alina Szapocznikow, who was highly regarded by the Henraux company, sought to resolve the dispute, as can be seen from the correspondence. However, it was not only the transportation of sculptures that often involves considerable expense, but also sending money, as some banks had strict transfer limits: “As I promised you, to pay for the transport of my sculpture in 1968 to Brussels, I have just sent 1000 FF ca which represents 111,000 L. This is the

⁶ He had already visited her in her Warsaw studio in Królewska Street in 1956. On the recommendation of the critic Giuseppe Marchiori, Szapocznikow received an invitation to Prato in Italy in 1960. Marchiori writes in a letter dated 29 May 1961: “You’re doing very well: with an ever clearer conception of plastic form. And you also have a sense of ‘monument’: the profound idea of space, where sculpture is born and lives. Goodbye, dear friend. I send you my love.”

sum that the French post office accepts without formalities” (Szapocznikow n.d., n.p.). She would then pay the difference on her next visit to Querceta.

Several documents provide evidence of transport damage and complaints, including one from the Felix Landau Gallery in Los Angeles, which apologized on 25 November 1969 for the fact that the sculpture had arrived destroyed and beyond repair. At the same time, the gallery owner complained to the artist about the work’s late arrival and the customs duties to be paid (Landau 1969). Dissatisfied that he had only sold one of her *Flowers*, he suggested ending the collaboration. At the end of January 1970, after the arrival of the last sculpture, an employee requested a “declaration of originality” for the customs authorities (Wilson 1970, n.p.).

Stephanie Mathews invited Szapocznikow to a cross-media festival *Women and the Arts: Multi-Media for Women Artists* in London (The Roundhouse) with the justification “[...] has been my feeling that women in the arts suffer quite a lot” (Mathews 1972, n.p.). She wrote of feeling both the need and the responsibility to promote lesser-known, marginalized women artists. Here, too, the estimated transportation costs and the complexity of acquiring third-party funding influenced the selection of works. Alina Szapocznikow intended to send four works; the curator asked for a cost estimate and assumed in her letter that transporting three sculptures would be realistic, hoping for support from the French embassy. Harald Szeemann (15 May 1970) faced a similar problem when he wanted to show her larger-than-life *Rolls Royce* at Documenta 5, but pointed out that the artist herself was responsible for private funding.

A characteristic of Szapocznikow’s oeuvre, which only spans approximately two decades due to her premature death, is her experimentation with a wide variety of techniques and materials. In 1960, while still in Poland, she began working with polyester, using it in the sculpture *Rozłupany* (Shattered) (1960). After moving to Paris in 1963, she continued this work and added polyurethane. In a critical reply to Georges Boudaille, Szapocznikow emphasized: “Art is undergoing a momentous change: it is moving out of the workshops to confront industrial technique [...]” (Szapocznikow to Boudaille n.d., n.p.). Szapocznikow considered the use of modern technical processes and serial production, which became one of her trademarks, to be the only viable artistic response to the growing mass consumer culture: “[...] by technical means that are absolutely new in the history of art and within our reach. The problem of the unique oeuvre is secondary in relation to the immense possibilities of the series” (ibid.). An essay written for *Gun Press* (author unknown) emphasizes this early fascination with materials and the lack of infrastructure in Poland as one of her reasons for moving to France. The artist:



Fig. 4 Alina Szapocznikow, *Sous la Coupole (La Metamorphose)* (*Under the Cupola [The Metamorphosis]*), 1970, Polyurethane foam and nylon tights, 36 × 73 × 100 cm (Courtesy The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow / Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris / Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Fabrice Gousset. © ADAGP, Paris, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025).

[...] had begun to turn to petroleum-based plastics in Poland – it was unfortunately restricted for research purposes in the Soviet Union, and only grudgingly doled out to artists. In the West, at any rate, Alina finds all the plastic she needs to execute what she calls ‘images in volume’. (Anonymous, Gun Press n.d., n.p.)

According to my knowledge (so far), the correspondence reveals little about material research, material properties, and procurement. In April 1966, the Société industrielle de silicones, Siss Paris, sent out an advertising letter with a special promise of material: SILASTENE RTV, a silicone elastomer that vulcanizes at room temperature, could be used to reproduce even the most complicated objects down to the smallest detail in just a few minutes without special tools (Borel 1966). At the end of the letter, R. Borel offers to send a sample of the material by courier.⁷ This surviving letter is an example of how industrial companies were increasingly tapping into artistic productions as

⁷ See also Valentin Gleyze 2025.

potential sales markets. In addition to marble, bronze, and cement, Alina Szapocznikow also worked with what were then new, industrially produced materials like polyester resin and polyurethane, whose seemingly irrepressible power of expansion greatly fascinated her, for example in *Sous la coupole* (*La métamorphose*) (fig. 4) from 1970: the lava-like substance hardens only upon cooling, giving birth to a form. Imprints and traces of touch are inscribed in the two-part, brown-black structure, which is connected by cream-colored nylon tights. This form may be reminiscent of a previously stretched, upright (flower) stem, which has folded over limply due to the weight bearing down on it. Other characteristic sculptural works that she casts in polyurethane are body casts of erogenous zones, such as lips, breasts, and bellies.

In addition to the lively communication with Henraux, there is also an exchange of letters with the Société chimique de la Courneuve, which has specialized in the wholesale of chemical products since 1954, as well as with Meceler to optimize the cables for her so-called sculpture lamps. In December 1970, Monsieur Defude, the head of polyester manufacturing, visited the studio to develop a prototype (see also Diaz 1970).

Szapocznikow was also in contact with the Marseille company Charbrières & Cie in 1969–1970 in order to find technical and material-based solutions for her planned lamp series. After an initial visit to the sculptor's studio, Paul M. Chabrières asked her to send information to the two branches in Paris and Marseille in order to further develop the production of the planned mouth lamps, stools, and belly cushions (Chabrières 1969). Szapocznikow constantly strove to acquire the latest material knowledge for her sculptures in the expanded field, to circumvent any weaknesses, and to keep up with the times technologically.

The Personal Network: Infrastructures of Communication

Szapocznikow's personal network opened up her own infrastructures of communication. As surviving correspondence clearly documents, this entailed both proactively establishing contact with curators, collectors, and other artists as well as maintaining these exchanges. Personal infrastructures in the sense of so-called kinship played a decisive role in her professional career.⁸ According to Donna Haraway this web of social (interspecies) relationships goes beyond family ties. Haraway extends “kinship” to all kinds of “critters” and unexpected collaborations, which would also include Szapocznikow's personal network.

⁸ See e.g., Haraway 2016.

As early as 25 June 1958, she wrote effusively to Ryszard Stanislawski from Paris about her network and the generous support from her artist colleague César:

I was received by (completely fortuitously, in fact) César. He's got a huge car, a bunch of contacts etc. He arranged with his contacts (the owner of the metallurgical factory [Matériel Malma in Villetaneuse] where he does his sculpture) a great apartment on rue Soufflot. [...] I automatically entered tout Paris. [...] There are offers and more offers! And also everyone's expression changes quand je dis que je suis logée par César. (Szapocznikow 1958, 222)

Between the lines, the company name is also revealed, offering a clue to César's site of production for his metal objects. In the 1960s, international correspondence served as an inexpensive means of maintaining continuous exchange with her family. Her letters convey the impression of a communicative, self-confident, multilingual, and network-oriented artist who, together with her second partner Roman Cieślewicz and her adopted son Piotr, moved to Paris in 1963, where she primarily lived until her untimely death in 1973. Escaping the hustle and bustle of the French capital's art scene, she wrote in May 1965: "[...] in Warsaw I will be able to work more peacefully" (Szapocznikow/Cieślewicz 1965, 257). Even if the great, longed-for success in her new adopted home of France only came posthumously and she did not receive recognized commissions, Szapocznikow cultivated a wide network of contacts and exhibited internationally. She invited people to her studio – "I had a demonstration at my workshop" (Szapocznikow, 3 May 1964, 235) – and made professional recommendations for others, such as tapestry artist Robert Wogensky, who had strong ties in Aubusson and wanted to travel to Poland for the Warsaw Biennale to meet Magdalena Abakanowicz. It is clear from Szapocznikow's correspondence that she must have been very keen for him to receive at least a pro forma invitation to travel to Poland, as she in turn expected further support from him and his Parisian network: "[...] he could do a lot around Paris in terms of spreading the word" (Szapocznikow 22 December 1965, 258).

In April 1964, Szapocznikow contacted Peter Selz from Paris. His reply, which is preserved in the archive, states that he was "tremendously impressed" by her latest work; she had sent him photos – a crucial form of 'self-marketing' in times before digital communication infrastructures, even if the photos only provided limited information about the textures of the material, surface finish, and the spatial dimension. Recognizing her difficult (financial) situation, Selz took immediate action: he contacted two foundations

and suggested that Szapocznikow get in touch with Marcel Duchamp and sent her the current address by “air mail” (11 May 1964):

Please tell M. Duchamp that you have been recommended by Mr. William S. Lieberman (also from The Museum of Modern Art) and myself to apply for a grant from the Copley Foundation. I would suggest that you take photographs of your work to M. Duchamp and hope that he will recommend you directly for this grant. I am also sending a copy of this letter to M. Duchamp.⁹ (Selz 1964)

In Selz, she had found an (influential) patron who continuously followed her work, even from the USA, as the existing correspondence documents.¹⁰ Airmail was a reliable and swift means of communication, particularly beyond Europe. An interruption or disruption to this infrastructure of transnational correspondence was (even then) caused by political restrictions and territorial demarcations, particularly in the era of the Iron Curtain. On 25 January 1966, Szapocznikow reported to Stanisławski that she had won the Copley Prize (Szapocznikow 25 January 1966, 260f.).¹¹ She suspected that [A. James, U.S.] Speyer had helped her, his sister had a salon in Paris.¹² Szapocznikow had once complained to her about her financial situation, “[...] and then I got a little note from Duchamp that on the behalf of the Copley Fund he would like to visit my studio, and he also liked it, hence our friendship with M.D., which continues” (Szapocznikow 9/10 February 1966, 264).¹³ She continued and described the postal detour: “[...] in December I was very depressed that I had lost. Meanwhile the letter had gone on December 15th to Warsaw, and then returned to Paris on January 25th, and it was only then that I found out and collected almost 1 million AFS = 9,760 NF” (ibid., 265).

A few postcards and letters from Duchamp have survived, emphasizing his mediation work and support (fig. 5). It was probably also helpful in this case

⁹ See also his support concerning a check for \$300 from the Alfred Jurzykowski Foundation, Inc (Selz 1964).

¹⁰ In his new position at the university in Berkeley, he also tried to support her and find her a position as a visiting professor, but this was unsuccessful (Selz 1970).

¹¹ See also a letter sent by Cieśliewicz to Stanisławski, 9/10 February 1966, 262–265, here 264: “The grant is \$2,000 (no reason to spread that around), and you’ll have Chablis and steak or truffles (your choice) – to celebrate.”

¹² Darthea Speyer founded her eponymous gallery at 6, Rue Jacques Callot, Paris. Speyer’s brother, A. James Speyer, planned the construction of the gallery. The gallery was known for showing American paintings and sculptures in France until it closed in 2010 (<https://ais-dka.gnm.de/solr-archivalien/1472741>. Accessed 19 March 2025).

¹³ Giuseppe Marchiori also repeatedly proposed them in commissions: “[...] this year I won’t be on the Bronzetto committee. But I’ve mentioned your name to my friend Apollonio, who will be President of the Bronzetto, and I’m sure you’ll accept the invitation.” Marchiori 1963).

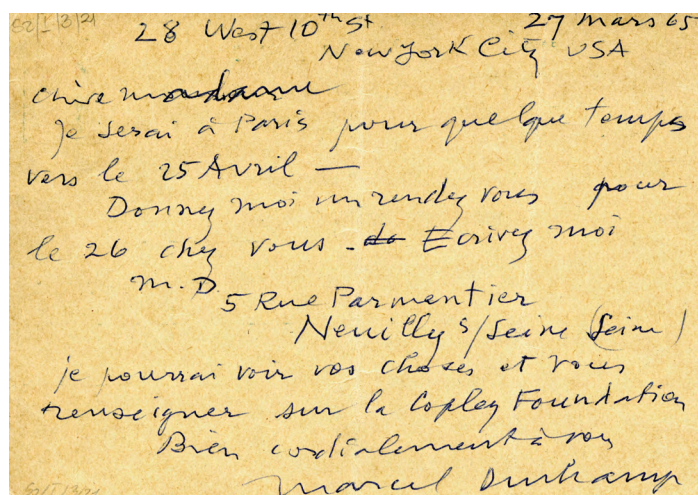


Fig. 5 Marcel Duchamp, Postcard to Alina Szapocznikow (recto and verso), New York, March 27, 1965, 10.0 × 14.0 cm, Alina Szapocznikow Archives, Paris. The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow (Courtesy Loevenbruck, Paris, Inv. No.: ASDOC174243. © ADAGP, Paris).

that he regularly traveled back and forth between the USA and Paris, making him well connected on both continents. A letter from Pierre Restany, who curated Szapocznikow's first solo exhibition (1967, Galerie Florence Houston Brown in Paris) and also promoted her outside France, contains praise for the new communication media – in this case telecommunications – in light of his planned exhibition (1970) on European Conceptual Art at the Alfredo Bonino Gallery in New York: “The current technology of communication tools allows great flexibility in the dissemination of ideas. I suggest you demonstrate this and bring one of your ideas to New York, by whatever means and in whatever form” (Restany n.d.).¹⁴ Szapocznikow was invited to submit a conceptual work,

¹⁴ He had become aware of her work during the Venice Biennale when she exhibited in the Polish pavilion in 1962.

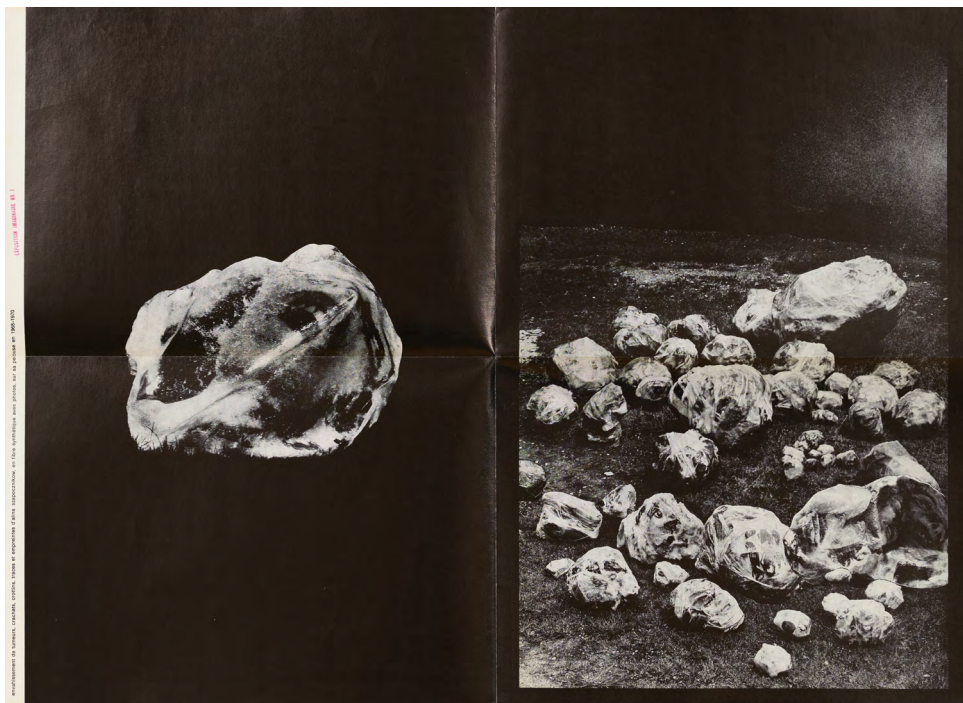


Fig. 6 Alina Szapocznikow, *Envahissement de tumeurs, crachats, crottins, traces et empreintes* [Invasion of tumors, sputum, dung, tracks and footprints], Synthetic fibre with photos on its lawn, 1968–1970, Offset print on paper, 48 × 65 cm, folded on 4; Poster edited by the artist for her *Exposition imaginaire NR I* exhibition; inscribed in black ink: *envahissement de tumeurs, crachats, crottins, traces et empreintes d'alina szapocznikow, en fibre synthétique avec photos, sur sa pelouse en 1968–1970*; stamp in pink ink: *EXPOSITION IMAGINAIRE NR I*; stamp on back in pink ink: *ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW/2, Rue Victor Hugo/92 – MALAKOFF* (Courtesy The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow | Galerie Loevenbruck, Paris | Hauser & Wirth, Inv. No.: AS170103. © ADAGP, Paris. Alina Szapocznikow Archives, Paris. The Estate of Alina Szapocznikow, courtesy Loevenbruck, Paris, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025).

either as a map, text, drawing, telegram, photograph, copy, sound document, or moving image. Finally, it was planned that the works would be transported to Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. She submitted her text *My American Dream* (1970), in which she presented the concept for a marble Rolls Royce at a 1:2 scale.¹⁵ Another conceptual work that refers to infrastructures of communication is *Exposition imaginaire n° 1* (1970) (fig. 6), a poster showing an installation of Szapocznikow's tumors in her garden in Malakoff, which can be sent by post as a work of mail art.

For her own travel activities, the dependence on valid passports is a crucial issue, for example in a letter from Roman Cieślewicz to Szapocznikow's ex-husband dated 13 May 1968, in which he explains her work and vacation

¹⁵ In the summer of the same year, she carved two small models from white Carrara marble and rose-colored Portuguese marble. Her efforts to obtain financial support for the realization of the intended size remained unsuccessful, even though curators such as Harald Szeemann showed great interest, see p. 144.

plans for the summer, with the qualification “though our passports have still not come from Warsaw yet” (Cieślewicz 1968, 280). In 1953, the South African political activist Paul Joseph also wrote to his “comrade Alina” in a pro-European and peace-seeking letter against the political restrictions in his country and the associated disruption and control of state infrastructures (Joseph 1953, n.p.). This note once again illustrates the challenges of traveling in light of the political situation at the time, the associated restrictions and special freedoms, such as the invitation to an exhibition in the national pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1962. Sune Bechmann Petersen and Christian Noack emphasize: Rather than an impenetrable Iron Curtain, the Eastern Bloc erected a “semipermeable membrane,” which permitted select goods, people, and information to pass through (Bechmann Petersen/Noack 2019, 3).

After going to Paris in 1947 to continue her sculpture studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paul Niclausse’s class, Alina Szapocznikow was diagnosed with tuberculosis at the age of 23 and was forced to abandon her studies due to her illness and financial burdens. She returned to communist Poland in 1951. A friend (presumably Max Gerson) commented on her decision from Cannes on 8 February 1951: “you remind me of someone who is absolutely free who goes to the PRISON warden and asks him to let him into the PRISON...”¹⁶ (Gerson 1951, n.p.). In the following years, Szapocznikow took part in state competitions for sculptures in public spaces in Warsaw, received commissions for monuments, and gained recognition and appreciation.

Concluding Remarks

Marina Vishmidt suggests a shift from institutional critique to infrastructural critique “for the need to do infrastructure differently” and as “the move from the institution as a site for false totalizations to an engagement with the thoroughly intertwined objective [...] and subjective [...] conditions necessary for the institution and its critique to exist” (Vishmidt 2017, 267). They usually only become visible when their function is interrupted and their continued existence is at risk. Vishmidt’s approach to infrastructural critique – as an engagement with the entanglements of historical, socio-economic, political, and individual artistic conditions that enable an institution’s existence and its inherent critique – offers a compelling point of departure for art historical analysis, as seen in the case of Alina Szapocznikow. Infrastructures mirror the material and social conditions of possibility “to enable a set of activities”

¹⁶ “[...] tu me rappelle de quelque un qui est absolument libre va a le gardien de la PRISON et le demande de le permer entre a PRISON... [sic!]”

(ibid., 266). The infrastructures outlined in this text primarily relate to transportation costs, procuring materials, the routes and connections of the artist's personal network, and the infrastructures of her private and professional communication. Technological and social infrastructures are inextricably interwoven. An infrastructural approach, I suggest, asks what kinds of agreements, administrative structures, and forms of cooperation enabled her artistic projects within the broader horizon of historical, political, and social conditions. It would be productive to consider an artist's economic, creative, and social alliances – ranging from group exhibitions and educational frameworks to the individuals who contributed to an artist's visibility by organizing transport or managing their studios. Attending to this history of entanglement opens the possibility of queering the canon and bringing (archival) blind spots to the fore.

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The Question of Location

The Makeshift Hotel Room as Site of Production

Simone Wille

The careers of numerous South Asian artists that unfolded during the postcolonial era were characterized by various forms of mobility: travel, flight, and migration. Many of these artists increasingly gained access to scholarship programs, allowing them to study and work in cities like London, Paris, Milan, Rome, Prague, or Warsaw. Unlike most of his peers, Bombay-based artist Akbar Padamsee (1928–2020) traveled to Paris, but did not enroll in any art school. Instead, he rented a hotel room, where he worked intensively, producing paintings and engaging in contemporary intellectual and artistic discourse.

In this short essay, I will engage with questions about the makeshift hotel room as temporary art studio. By mapping out the hotel rooms that Padamsee lived and worked in from 1950 to 1954, I will consider how this temporary abode informed the artist's perception of Paris, Europe, and the world. In reflecting on Svetlana Alpers's account of the artist's studio as "an experimental site" (Alpers 2007), I will turn to the question about Padamsee's location, and its linkage to his struggle to participate in the art world, while simultaneously examining the kind of freedom that the hotel room offered him. In the context of the volume's overarching focus on infrastructures of producing, I therefore consider the makeshift hotel room as the artist's site of production, from which he critically engaged with postwar modernism and its dominant institutions as "critical infrastructures" (Vishmidt 2021). Furthermore, Padamsee's critical distance from established institutions is linked to questions about his mobility and the complex relationship between nation, global art world, and artistic practice in general.¹

On 21 September 1950, Padamsee traveled from India to Europe on board the ship *S. S. Strathmore* with fellow artist Syed Haider Raza.² They were seen

¹ This essay was made possible through funds provided by the Austrian Science Fund FWF Elise Richter Program (V880-G).

² Details about Padamsee's journey to Europe and his stay in Paris are collected by the late artist's wife Bhanu Padamsee. I would like to thank her for sharing this with me.

off in Bombay by his elder brother Nuruddin, artist Tyeb Mehta, and Pratap Singh. On 3 October, artist Ram Kumar welcomed them at Gare du Nord railway station in Paris. Kumar had already set up a temporary base in Paris, arriving there in 1949 (Wille 2020). He joined the Académie André Lhote and attended classes with Fernand Léger (*ibid.*, 204). Raza had received a French government scholarship, with which he set off to enroll in the École des Beaux Arts.

These artists, including Padamsee, had studied art in India, most of them at colonial art schools. In a series of interviews in Mumbai in 2018, Padamsee told me that he preferred not to attend classes at the Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy School of Art (Sir JJ School of Art), where, as he explained, he learned nothing; instead, he pored over books in libraries, studying Chinese landscapes, Indian sculptures, and so forth.³ Artists' frustration with the art training provided at local art academies, along with a desire to connect with the international art world, contributed to what Karin Zitzewitz has called an "exodus westwards" (Zitzewitz 2022, 172).

Upon arrival in Paris, Padamsee stayed for a few days at Hôtel des Grandes Écoles in the Quartier Latin. Soon, he shifted to a nearby hotel on Boulevard Montparnasse, where he spent the next four years, occupying a cheap room in the building's tower.⁴ Due to his introverted personality, other hotel residents referred to him as "Monsieur du tour."⁵ Working and producing art from a hotel room-turned-art studio was not an uncommon practice in Paris at the time (Greet 2018, 35; McPherson 2024, 77). For most artists, living in cheap hotel rooms was both a way of life and an economic necessity. As a result, most artists did not have a kitchen. This is one reason why café culture, and meetings in public places and restaurants, thrived as a lived reality, and contributed significantly to public discourse. In reflecting on the story of the spaces where artists have produced art, Alice Bellony-Rewald and Michael Peppiatt acknowledge that "[s]tudios have been setup up in boats, carriages, churches, tents, hotels and at least one lion's cage" (Bellony-Rewald/Peppiatt 1982, preface). A recent exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, *A Century of the Artist's Studio: 1920–2020* (2022), explored the changing setting of the studio, along with the impact this had on the art created in these spaces (Blazwick 2022, 6). With a focus on art produced in the 20th century, the exhibition highlighted the changing ways that artists worked with the studio as "the first frame" but also "the first limit" (Buren 2012, 89).

³ See Padamsee, Akbar 2018; see also Wille 2020.

⁴ According to Bhanu Padamsee, he most likely stayed at Hotel du Havre, which no longer exists.

⁵ Information collected from Padamsee, Bhanu 2018.

Fig. 1 Marc Vaux, Akbar Padamsee, Francis Newton Souza, Syed Haider Raza, Sadanand Bakre in Padamsee's Paris Hotel Room, early 1950s (© Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn/Fonds Marc Vaux, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025).



While Padamsee chose mobility, he also chose isolation as a first frame. In his hotel room/studio he deliberately turned away from the visible world (Alpers, 58) of Paris, producing paintings while receiving close friends (fig. 1). A photograph by Marc Vaux, who, between the 1930s and 1970s, produced more than 250,000 photographs of both famous and unknown artists and their artwork in Montparnasse,⁶ allows us to zoom in on Padamsee's tower room, in which we see an arrangement of paintings spread across the corner of two walls. We also see art supplies, such as brushes in a container on a table, a drawing pad, and some books, which are stacked on a rack mounted on the wall above the bed. These tools are part of the inventory of a portable studio. Padamsee's three artist friends are sitting on this bed, looking towards the camera. Padamsee is seen half-seated, leaning against the shelf, with a cigarette in his right hand. The Marc Vaux Fonds is an exceptional resource about artists who were active in Paris, their artwork, their workplaces, their studios, and their formal and informal networks. Vaux photographed artists and intellectuals from all walks of life and cultural backgrounds who came to Paris for shorter or longer periods of time, making a significant contribution to better understanding the complexity of the Parisian art scene and its production infrastructure. Because he captured artists and their works not only at exhibitions but also at their studios and often very private and intimate spaces – as shown in the photograph of Padamsee's hotel room studio (fig. 1) – collections like the Marc Vaux Fonds serve as an important testimony to artists'

⁶ About Marc Vaux visit <https://www.villavassilieff.net/?Who-was-Marc-Vaux-texts-and-interviews>. Accessed 28 October, 2024.



Fig. 2 Unknown photographer, *Akbar Padamsee in His Paris Hotel Room with the Works Prophet I*, 1952, oil on board, 92×60 cm (left), and *Prophet*, 1953, oil on canvas, 60×45 cm (right), (Courtesy Bhanumati Padamsee, Akbar Padamsee Archive, Vinayak Aangan, Mumbai, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025).

networks in and beyond Montparnasse and Paris.⁷ Furthermore, photographs like the group of Indian artists in Padamsee's hotel room studio (fig. 1) testify to the significance and inclusiveness of the space of the hotel room, the works it exhibits, and the people associated with it.

In the aforementioned interview with the artist in Mumbai in 2018, Padamsee told me that part of his motivation for going to Paris was to escape the confines of life in an extended family household, and that Paris offered him the freedom to simply exist as an artist (Padamsee, Akbar 2018). Unlike in India, art was part of a broad discourse in Paris. Artmaking was considered to be a significant activity, and the French capital offered an extensive infrastructure for it, including art collections, art galleries, annual salons, formal and less formal art schools and art academies, and numerous art studios. While this type of infrastructure is part of a built environment, according to Marina Vishmidt infrastructure also has a social quality that facilitates the

⁷ See <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/en/ressources/archive/PvAylSg>. Accessed 28 October, 2024.

Fig. 3 Unknown photographer, Akbar Padamsee in his Paris Hotel Room with the Works *Woman with Bird*, 1951, oil on board, 130×74 cm (left) and *Prophet*, 1953 (right), Photograph (Courtesy Bhanumati Padamsee, Akbar Padamsee Archive, Vinayak Aangan, Mumbai, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025).



development of thought (Vishmidt 2017, 265; see also AbdouMaliq 2004, 407–429). The presence of Padamsee’s Indian artist friends (fig. 1), alongside Vaux as photographer, testifies to forms of socializing and suggests that Padamsee cultivated company – albeit selectively. The works that Padamsee produced during this period, some of which have become highly recognizable, key works in his oeuvre and in the canon of post-independence Indian art history, therefore tempt us to examine the artist’s mobility in connection with the freedom of the makeshift hotel room as site of production. Turning to Alpers’s account of the studio, in which she establishes a link between artwork and world, may be useful here. Let us view some of the works that Padamsee produced from his Paris hotel room (figs. 2 and 3).

The *Prophets* series, consisting of half-body portraits, and the almost full-body portrait of *Woman with Bird* (1951, fig. 4), for which he won the third prize in a competition by *Journal d’Art* (Padamsee/Garimella 2010, 345), demonstrate how the artist constructed his figures both formally and conceptually. Art critic Geeta Kapur, therefore, locates Padamsee’s artistic approach within “the four walls of the room,” where, as she claimed, “the ponderously

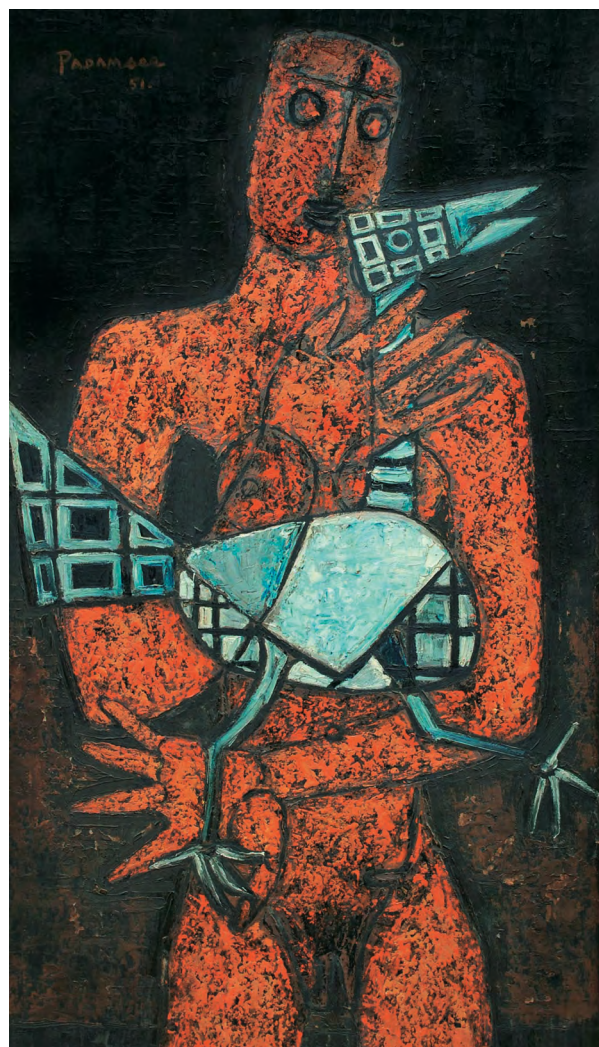


Fig. 4 Akbar Padamsee, *Woman with Bird*, 1951, Oil on board, 130×74 cm (Courtesy Bhanumati Padamsee, Akbar Padamsee Archive, Vinayak Aangan, Mumbai, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025).

large bodies” were contextualized (Kapur 1978, 102f.). She thereby acknowledges the artist’s incorporation of the studio space into his artistic concept, arguing against a spiritualist reading of his work – as proposed, for instance, by cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote (Hoskote 2004, n.p.).

While in Paris, Padamsee engaged deeply with museum collections and libraries. He was particularly fascinated by the collections of African art that he frequently visited, primarily at the Musée de l’Homme, which is reflected in the formal language of his early works. Another striking component of these early works is the design of his figures’ garments, which incorporate brightly colored geometric shapes supported by lines that resonate with his figures’ striking facial features. Lines, shapes, and circles are also the basic formula he applies to paint the bird in *Woman with Bird* (figs. 3 and 4). If we

look again at Vaux's photograph (fig. 1), we notice that the small stretch of wall to Padamsee's left is decorated with a pattern that is either a wallpaper or a painted wall. It is not clear whether this is part of the basic furnishing of the hotel room, or whether the artist himself had a hand in creating it. However, in the context of the makeshift hotel room as a site of production, it tempts us to connect the "four walls of the room" – its limited space, its walls, its location in Paris, in Montparnasse, on the top floor of a building – with the art world outside of it, both near and far.

In contrast to artists such as Constantin Brâncuși, however, whose work and studio form an inseparable relationship (Buren 2012, 89), Padamsee's hotel room was a temporary space – both a residence and shelter. This temporality of the hotel room-turned-studio gave it an extra dimension or layer, lending it an experimental character, while conferring the freedom to practice art at a relative distance from the prevailing trends of his contemporaries in Paris. His decision not to enroll in an art school in Paris amplified this position. Padamsee, I would suggest, thereby positioned himself at a distance from more or less hierarchically organized art infrastructures⁸ like the formal art academy, the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, or even independent art schools like Les Académies Libres, and created an alternative access point to postwar modernism.

The location of Padamsee's hotel room-turned-studio was central in a geographical sense, as it was located in the heart of the Paris art world at Montparnasse. Together with Souza and Raza, he participated in an art exhibition in Paris at Galerie Saint Placide (Padamsee/Garimella 2010, 345), which brought him some recognition and sales, and offered significant discursive momentum, as well as some hope for future opportunities. While living and working in Paris, Padamsee also maintained his connection to India through correspondence and participation in art exhibitions. His solo show at Bombay's Jehangir Art Gallery in 1954, shortly after his return to India, featured primarily figurative paintings – heads, torsos, nudes, and cityscapes – that he had created in his Paris hotel room. While the works were initially well received, celebrated for reflecting his Parisian experience and the exposure of his works there, the exhibition soon led to the artist's arrest. Two paintings depicting a male figure touching a female figure's breast sparked public outrage (Wille 2021). The nine-month court case that followed, when the artist's desire to paint and exhibit freely were at stake, left its mark on him, and compelled him to return to Paris.

⁸ For the hierarchized spatial politics in place between South Asia and British art institutions see Hoek/Sunderason 2019; compare also with Bruchet/Tiampo 2021.

Upon returning in 1955, Padamsee rented a studio in Angetz, about an hour's drive north of Paris, where he created a series of still lifes, including *Yellow Landscape* (1955). The painterly connection between the figurative works made in his hotel room in Montparnasse, and the still lifes he subsequently created in Agnetz, are above all the strong lines with which he outlined the physiognomic features of his figures and their pronounced flatness. This aesthetic basis enabled him to create experimental works in the later stages of his career, such as the project *Syzygy, Program for a film* (1969–1970). This experimental project, based on lines and ideas, but also on connections and oppositions, is considered a milestone in Indian film and art history.

The connection that this allows us to establish with the artist's location, the hotel room-turned-studio in Paris Montparnasse, is therefore palpable. In Alpers's words, it became for Padamsee "an experimental instrument for attending to the world" (Alpers 2007, 4), selectively, as visualized in the animated film *Syzygy*, through calculated movement and dynamic interactions that ultimately generate aesthetic diversity. Alpers's account of the studio allows us to consider the Indian artist's hotel room, and the work that he produced while living there, as the location that connected him to the outside world, both in Paris and India. Padamsee's makeshift hotel room can thus be understood as a multifunctional infrastructure of producing: a place for production and, as such, like a studio; a space for socializing, receiving friends, and at the same time, a "place of solitude and reflection—a room of one's own" (Blazwick 2022, 8). It functioned as a "first frame" for the display of art (fig. 1) and the testing of "limits" (Buren 2012, 89). For Padamsee, the makeshift hotel room in Paris was a place that connected him with a critical distance from the external art world and enabled him to formulate an aesthetic with which he positioned himself in the art world in Paris, in India, and in the world.

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Michael Asher's Utility

Annie Ochmanek

Michael Asher (1943–2012) made his art into an analytical tool for laying bare existing conditions. Continuing Conceptual Art's move away from traditional studio practices and modes of exhibition, Asher sought new means of intervention, often enlisting utilitarian infrastructures and logistical systems as the stuff of his work. This paper examines the significance of those choices, arguing that critical infrastructure studies offers a substantive theoretical framework for understanding Asher's contribution, filling in where commonly used discourses based in architecture, site-specificity, and institutional critique have found limits.

Asher generated each of his artworks in response to a given situation into which he had been invited, calling his method "situational aesthetics." Typically, he did not create art objects but rather displaced, brought to the surface, or infiltrated functional systems and elements at hand. Different projects entailed sandblasting paint layers off of gallery walls, retooling a museum's heating pipes, moving outdoor components of a building inside, redirecting the labor of museum staff, airing footage of a local television station's control room on its own channel, and designing ad campaigns. With such gestures, Asher is said to have furthered 1960s-era investigations into the specificities of art's materials and contexts (Buchloh 1983) and to have unmasked the constructed neutrality of the white cube. His art, it is argued, drew our attention to "specific supporting conditions...that normally remain hidden even as they define the exhibition situation" (Kwon 2008, 160) or carved out experiences wherein participants can reflect on the ways in which the museum or institution positions them as viewing subjects (Peltomäki 2010). Yet the notion that Asher's contribution consists mainly in revealing imbrications of art's institutions that are normally taken for granted is not as convincing an argument for his work's salience today. The discourse on art museums' coloniality and power differentials has progressed further in the last several years, and to many the notion that our institutions are neutral to begin with would seem an obvious falsity. New approaches to Asher's art are needed. This essay proposes the study of infrastructures as one path to follow.

Asher found and used infrastructures in the hard forms of boiler systems or property-lining and art-exhibiting walls, or the 'lighter' forms of paper-work, institutional signage, and letterhead. They became an expedient tool in his pursuit of a critical, readymade idiom that avoided creating an art object available for financial speculation. Infrastructures concretize the way things work, and they had the added appeal, for Asher, of standing in for forms typical of Minimal or Conceptual Art – movements that aestheticized standard industrial things or bureaucratic information. As Benjamin H.D. Buchloh suggested, Asher's works "rematerialized" Conceptual Art (Buchloh 1980). Or as Allan Sekula remarked, Asher united Minimal sculpture with actual structural supports, such as I-beams, and confronted the Duchampian readymade with working infrastructures of waste disposal and plumbing (Sekula 2000). Asher's turn to existing infrastructures and logistical systems as a primary artistic material provided him with an immediate means of extending art historical paradigms of the recent past while foregrounding processes undergirding art's exhibition contexts and the larger systems in which they are embedded.

Thus far, however, Asher's work has been thought not through an infrastructural lens but predominantly through an architectural framework, or positioned in the lineage of modernist sculpture and its relation to place. This is partially due to the overdetermination of Asher's oeuvre by his early interventions into the built environment, which developed not only on the heels of Minimal and Conceptual Art, but also out of an engagement with the Light and Space installations of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Such works by Asher are chronicled in depth in his most substantial monograph (Asher/Buchloh 1983). The locational emphasis in the literature on Asher has led to limitations structuring the discourses of site-specificity and institutional critique, two art historical categories within which he ranks as a foundational figure. A site-specificity understood as rooted primarily in place, rather than in the economic and social relations that produced that space, runs into contradictions in a globalized art world (Kwon 2002). And a critique of institutions that is fixated on the architectural container leads to a sense of claustrophobia and an easy dismissal of the tautological nature of such a practice. Further, the scope of Asher's interventions begins to narrow when they are understood within a primarily sculptural or architectural paradigm. His tendency toward removing or appropriating existing architectural materials has been described as art reaching an asymptotic conclusion, performing the scant possibilities remaining for artistic production in the face of the culture industry (Buchloh 1983). His "situational aesthetics" have been read as art in a bind – unable to escape the "socially codified culture" of high art and its institutions yet gesturing toward an outside (Gintz 1993).

An infrastructural lens can instead capture how Asher was expanding, not contracting, the critical capacities and reach of his practice. The quality of stretching between inside and outside, particular and general, is a characteristic of infrastructures, which serve to link together disparate places or outlets under their logic, creating a network for circulation. As physical, economic, or bureaucratic systems or organizing schema, infrastructures span detail and whole, present locality and implied totality, a thing and its existence as a social product. Asher was calling on these complex qualities when enlisting such material in his work.

Anthropologist Brian Larkin argued for the importance of infrastructure studies in his field, arguing that they possess a particular ontology, which he describes as having a “dual” quality:

Infrastructures are matter that enable the movement of other matter....As things they are present to the senses, yet they are also displaced in the focus on the matter they move around....[T]he duality of infrastructures indicates that when they operate systematically they cannot be theorized in terms of the object alone. (Larkin 2013, 329)

I would argue that, in Asher’s work, we see this particular complexity of infrastructures, which Larkin terms its politics and its poetics, compellingly put to use as artistic material. Infrastructures, per Larkin, are both static and relational, and they function in manners both technical and semiotic. Larkin notes that historically, logistical infrastructures from railways to electrical grids have not only physically circulated goods, resources, and people but also figuratively delivered notions of progress, freedom, and potential that are embedded in liberal beliefs in free movement and free markets (Larkin 2013, 332; Mattelart 1996, 2000). Mobilized as both utilitarian and symbolic armatures, therefore, infrastructures can be a governmental tool; they can be a means of delineating and directing not only access to resources, but even to life itself.

In the period in which Asher was developing his work, changes in the global economy were taking place that raised the stakes of infrastructural logistics. This historical context sharpens the significance of his decision to work with such materials. In the 1970s, large firms began to adopt leaner production models based in international supply chains. This was largely a response to, or a result of, overcapacity and falling rates of profit after American-led expansion in manufacturing in the 1950s and 1960s, and the drag of those plants’ stores of fixed capital (Brenner 2006). By the anti-globalization movements of the 1990s and in the following decades, debates surrounding

this deepening world market concerned to what degree the potential for intervention or stoppage had shifted from the factory floor to nodes within logistical systems, from striking work to interrupting flows (Invisible Committee 2007; Toscano 2014; Clover 2016; Shane Boyle 2024). Logistics, and the pervasive yet “backstage” world of infrastructures they rely on, emerged as a locus of strategies of resistance to contemporary capitalism and a key language in the political project of elucidating the “social forms beneath materials and technical processes” (Toscano 2014). Together with the broader infrastructural turn that took place in the social sciences in the 2000s, such theoretical developments evidenced the ways in which infrastructures harbor a tangible and at times tactical capacity for the cognitive mapping of economic and geopolitical relations. They participate in but also formally echo the subjection of aspects of life to laws of capital and management.

Recently, the topic of infrastructures has become a prominent means of politicizing contemporary art. Earlier generations of institutional critique have been acknowledged as influences on these developments yet are also seen as remote from them. Artists and protest movements within the art world have engaged the built environment and funding structures to acknowledge crises within and outside of art’s institutions, targeting the financial and military imbrications of the museum, racialized politics of urban space, accessibility, and other urgencies (Considine 2022). Marina Vishmidt advanced the term “infrastructural critique” to set apart activist strains in art and culture (ones that take aim at capital or at patriarchal white supremacy) from what has been referred to within mainstream art histories as institutional critique, which she saw as speaking from the “comfort zone of reflexivity” and limited to non-transversal gestures that remain within the realm of art (Vishmidt 2024). Vishmidt, in keeping with the leading architectural read of Asher’s work, saw Asher’s art as closer to the latter categorization, that of mainstream institutional critique. She characterizes Asher’s initiative as rooted in “the materiality of the art institution,” wherein “the disturbance of the architectural layers would be a means of exposing other social and symbolic parameters of its existence” (Vishmidt 2017). The present study contends that Asher’s embedded infrastructural approach opened onto much more, and questioned, at each juncture in which he staged a project, conditions of possibility that brought that context into being.

Critics might point out that such a practice assumed a privileged view from the inside. Asher’s context-dependent approach relied on gallerists and curators asking him to make his projects in the first place. And his biography

did provide him with advantaged access to such opportunities.¹ But we can understand this as a given prompt, not necessarily a limit, of Asher's critique. The terms he set meant that his work took place only on the grounds that he was invited, and this was itself a means of articulating the exclusionary nature of the field of contemporary art. From an embedded point of view, Asher drew attention to the working gears and conditions of possibility within and beyond his industry.

In this essay, I will focus on three instances from the latter half of Asher's career to demonstrate the extra-mural extent of his undertaking and its function as infrastructural analysis. In these three examples, Asher enlisted waste disposal, central heating, social-work networks, and power, water, and gas supply lines as critical tools not simply for addressing the processes of idealization and valorization that undergird art's institutions, or revealing the inextricability of art from various apparatuses, but also for tracing commodified relations and their determinant role in capitalist society. Further, I recognize in Asher's infrastructural approach an artistic practice in line with what Walter Benjamin termed the "author as producer," whose work alters the scope of his or her field by working critically, from within, on its relations of production, and inviting its public to do the same.

This essay takes its cue from the recent survey exhibition *Michael Asher* at Artists Space in New York, the first of its kind and thus an invitation to re-evaluate Asher's oeuvre anew.² It had previously been held that, due to the integrated and context-dependent nature of Asher's projects, the re-exhibition of his work was an impossibility (Fraser 2008). Artists Space's exhibition, which opened in November 2024, therefore expanded the capacities of his practice beyond a notion bound inextricably to a physical site or time and place. The show reignited as a topic for discussion the staying power of this artist's work – its literal, material persistence, and its contemporary relevance. Curators Jay Sanders and Stella Cilman carefully consulted Asher's writings and archival materials, and considered precedents set by the artist on how his work could be exhibited, in order to conceive the Artists Space show. I joined Sanders and Cilman to co-author the exhibition guide. The following case studies were developed from that work.

1 By this I mean not only that Asher was white and male but also that he had family connections in the art world. His mother, Betty Asher, had worked her way up from administrative assistant to a curatorial role at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and became a gallerist and well-respected art collector.

2 My thanks go to Artists Space's Jay Sanders and Stella Cilman for sharing their research and for our conversations, which shaped the present essay. I would also like to thank the Michael Asher Foundation.



Fig. 1 Michael Asher, postcards for Kunstverein Hamburg, Hamburg, West Germany, *D&S Ausstellung*, October 13–November 26, 1989. Photographs showing garbage trucks transporting household waste, slag, and other materials from West Germany to East Germany. Photographs by André Lützen. Michael Asher Archive, © Michael Asher Foundation.

D&S Ausstellung, Kunstverein in Hamburg, 1989

For a project done in the fall of 1989, Asher pictured logistics of waste management, linking this repressed material to the topic of border passage. This was his contribution to a group exhibition titled *D&S Ausstellung* held at the Kunstverein in Hamburg in 1989. Asher sold a set of eight postcards in local bookstores. Each featured a different dumpster truck poised at the border between West and East Germany (fig. 1). Since the late 1970s Hamburg had been shipping much of its waste to the GDR. The trucks reproduced on his postcards were heading for the landfills just across the border, bringing cast-offs from a steel ship building company, from trash incineration plants, and from other undisclosed sources in Hamburg to Schöneburg, whose cheap waste disposal lured Western European business. The GDR welcomed the foreign currency payments in exchange, even at the cost of taking in the West's toxic materials. The back of each postcard recorded the truck's make and model, as well as its origin and destination.

Borderlines between inside and outside often feature in institution-critical art wherein the architectural container of the museum or gallery space is dramatized as an exclusionary boundary, one subject to the return of the repressed or vulnerable to its outsides (Deutsche 2022). Here the focus of Asher's work, instead of a museum wall, is the Berlin Wall, a national borderline and one separating the crumbling Eastern Bloc from the capitalist West. His postcard series shows this border, the so-called Iron Curtain, to be penetrated by capital and, or as, trash. The centralized state economy of the GDR was integrated into a decentralized supply-chain-capitalism that had been reshaping the world economy at least since the 1960s, trailing the cheapest locations available for each link in its chain. The trucks facing forward, poised at the security check, evidence the directive drive of global capital just before its official 'triumph': the Berlin Wall fell one month after Asher published the work.

What his postcards show is a snapshot of circulating systems and extractive operations. As Asher noted in his text describing this work, the landfills to which the trash was being hauled "had resulted from the extraction of natural resources which had then been exported to more powerful industrialized nations" (Asher 1997, 3). To put the dump trucks on postcards was also to implicate the concept of mobility thriving under globalization, casting that idea as a tourist's mirage. In reality, as the now familiar adage has it, under neoliberalism, borders are opened to the free movement of capital, goods, and money but not to all people. Asher's serial postcard format was also a bit of a throw-back, recalling conceptual Mail Art works as a segue into the information era and networked economy that was enabled by communications technologies. In addition, the vehicles' rectilinear metal forms recalled 1960s Minimal sculpture. To depict a series of Donald Judd-like hulls on truck beds was to move Minimalism's aesthetic of industrial production into the era of shipping containers, transnational logistics, and the long downturn resulting from overcapacity and falling profitability rates (Ochmanek 2022).

The stated curatorial premise for the exhibition *D&S Ausstellung* referenced simulacral notions of how images proliferate and circulate in the post-modern age, a theme that had been taken up by artists using appropriation tactics in photography and sculpture in the late 1970s and 1980s. In Asher's preparatory notes for *D&S*, now filed in his archive, he suggests the limits of appropriation as a critical artistic strategy:

The artist that (who) presents, represents and represents is not a producer. / The artist that (who) leaves the viewer in connotation is the artist who restores and maintains power relationships. / If the machine [led] the laborer into deskilling what does the artist do who leads the viewer into connota-

tion? / How can the artist fulfill the function of art for the viewer if they are only presenting? / ... Mere presentation for abstraction does not constitute art production. / Mere representation for viewer abstraction does not constitute production. (Asher n.d.)

When referring to the artist as producer, Asher may well have been thinking of Walter Benjamin's text "The Author as Producer," wherein Benjamin called for socialist cultural production that asserts its politics in technique or form as well as in content, contrasting this position to the bourgeois press that might "assimilate... revolutionary themes" but merely does so without calling itself and the ruling class "seriously into question" (Benjamin 1999, 774). Benjamin's 1934 essay carries the revolutionary fervor of its moment, written in the context of a communist revolution, whereas Asher's piece bears its era's mood of dissolution at the tail end of the Cold War. But the way in which Asher engineered his art in an immanent manner from within circuits of production and exchange (of both art and non-art) was not dissimilar from what Benjamin sought from the author as producer – to alienate their public from habitual conditions and processes of production, by discovering within his or her medium new techniques and thereby new spaces for critical thought.

As Benjamin wrote: "An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no one." He claimed that the author's political impact is not found in content alone, or in the author's personal ethical opinion, but in the work's relation to the processes of production of the time. According to Benjamin: "[The author as producer's] work will never be merely work on products but always at the same time, work on the means of production....and in no way must [the works'] organizational usefulness be confined to their value as propaganda" (Benjamin 1999, 777). The type of embedded critique for which Benjamin argues helps us to understand a peculiar, persistent aspect of Asher's art – while often straight-forward, bare-bones, or overt in nature and in its treatment of materials, Asher's works also rarely spell out an explicit takeaway. Though his projects stop short of being dogmatic in address, as the notes for *D&S Ausstellung* disclose, Asher was attentive in not allowing his works to tip into complacency either.

Asher wrote in *Camera Austria* that his contribution to *D&S Ausstellung* "was a response to the corollary I saw between the exhibition concept's reference to limitless meaning and the potential I saw for limitless waste, both being agents for the colonization of space, whether it be in the mind or in a debt-ridden country." He notes, "I couldn't help but wonder if one outcome in creating a separation between the producer of waste and the recipient of waste wasn't a way of guaranteeing that a disparity in wealth would be main-

tained through this type of truck transport” (Asher 1997, 4). Though the dumping is not necessarily a *cause* of disparity, as Asher surmises it may be, it does capture a dynamic and a symptom of an international division of labor that was reshaping the world. Asher’s printed postcards, a format that he used in other works, also mimicked wasteful production. He noted that they may themselves end up in a landfill one day. But as an artwork, they invited a critical analysis of cross-border logistics while acknowledging art’s participation in such globalized networks.

Le Nouveau Musée, 1991

Two years following the Hamburg exhibition, Asher repurposed hard infrastructures to address a topic appearing elsewhere throughout his oeuvre – real estate, the politics of urban space, and the role of contemporary art within it (Leen 1991; Gintz 1993). Asher was asked to do a project for Lyon’s contemporary art museum Le Nouveau Musée during a period in which its building, a former schoolhouse in the neighborhood of Villeurbanne, was undergoing renovations. Salvaging the large furnaces from the institution’s basement, he had their metal melted down into several hundred small, tapered blocks (figs. 2 and 3). On one side of each block was written (in French): “This object comes from the old furnaces of Le Nouveau Musée at the beginning of its renovation in February 1991. It is to be distributed for free to people of low income who may have housing problems.”

The palm-sized, dense objects were given to social workers in the area for distribution. Their verso listed contact information for local non-profit organizations that aided in the defense of housing rights along with the statement: “Housing is your right! Don’t accept renovation or discrimination.”

Asher had taken a cue from the civil unrest visible on the walls of Lyon. His archive includes his photographs of anti-gentrification flyers and graffiti in the city with slogans such as “RENOVATION = EXPULSION.” Asher’s repurposing of the museum’s former heating infrastructures tied the cultural institution’s renovation to gentrifying processes of so-called renewal. In his catalog text, Asher recognized that the museum’s remodeling was taking place in the absence of any other preservation initiatives in the area (Asher 1991).

The stripping down of buildings, which had been one of the critical strategies in Asher’s own artistic vocabulary since the late 1960s, was now a recognized means of covering up the actual material effects of gentrification: the erasure of the neighborhood’s social history and displacement of its former inhabitants. Aesthetics of removal, exposing brick walls or ceiling beams, in other words, were one weapon in the arsenal of the class conquest that was

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Fig. 3 Heater furnaces from Le Nouveau Musée before they were melted down and re-cast for Michael Asher's 1991 project in Villeurbanne, France. Michael Asher Archive, © Michael Asher Foundation.

the for-profit development of inner-city areas rampant in the 1980s (Smith 2005). Asher's project in Lyon did not halt that process. But the heavy, wedged metal blocks placed coordinates for seeking help into peoples' hands and also served another practical function, which the artist highlighted in his catalog text – that of a doorstep, or window-stop, or paperweight. This modest contribution to holding things in place speaks to the way in which the grassroots aspect of the piece itself was a small countermeasure in the face of methods of upward redistribution of wealth, or processes of accumulation under which all that is solid melts into air. Metamorphosing the outmoded central heating machine into these dispersed mementos formally mirrored the neo-liberal dissolve of institutional responsibility to the collective, and the attendant placing of onus onto the individual.

Outlook, Kunstverein Springhornhof, 2003

A lesser-known work by Asher from 2003 plainly consisted of infrastructural information. He published an edition of cardboard slipcases debossed

«« Fig. 2 Michael Asher, Artists Space, New York, New York, USA, November 22, 2024–February 8, 2025. Detail of cast-iron objects for Le Nouveau Musée, Villeurbanne, France, 1991. Photograph by Carter Seddon. © Michael Asher Foundation.



Fig. 4 Michael Asher, Artists Space, New York, New York, USA, November 22, 2024–February 8, 2025. Detail showing electric utility maps from Neuenkirchen, Germany, 2003, included in Michael Asher's publication, $53^{\circ} 16' N 9^{\circ} 57' O 52^{\circ} 55' N 9^{\circ} 8' O$, for Kunstverein Springhornhof. Photograph by Carter Seddon. © Michael Asher Foundation.

with the coordinates “ $53^{\circ} 16' N 9^{\circ} 57' O 52^{\circ} 55' N 9^{\circ} 8' O$,” each containing seventeen maps of the rural farmland area of Neuenkirchen in the Bundesland, as his contribution to a group exhibition of outdoor works organized by the Kunstverein Springhornhof entitled *Outlook*. The maps were provided to Asher by local utility companies. They were specialized documents, not initially made for the public eye but rather for these companies’ employees to service the water, electricity, and gas lines. Asked to make an artwork in the landscape, Asher responded by offering views of technical apparatuses underground – the network of pipelines, valves, and cables that circulated these essential supplies to residents and businesses, materially and economically tying them together. For each type of utility, he reproduced a series of incremental enlargements, showing the Kunstverein’s building, its neighborhood, and the town or region, implying the possibility of continued scaling up or down (fig. 4). In order to make these maps legible to laypeople, Asher had the curatorial staff create a legend, using color coding and translating the symbols and markings. The box sets were available for purchase at twenty euros, and their contents were also posted publicly on an exterior wall of the Kunstverein for the duration of the show.

The use of such technical diagrams as a means of highlighting social or cultural conditions is not without precedent in Asher's oeuvre. Nearly all of the entries in his publication *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979* are illustrated with a ground plan, elevation drawing, or architectural blueprint. In 1992, at Le Consortium, he reproduced cross-section drawings of furnaces in cultural sites in Dijon on the gallery walls. These forms of representation are meant to clarify, delineate, and communicate select information about a complex machine, enabling its maintenance or assembly, and suggesting x-ray vision to its insides (Rorimer 1991; Leen 1992). Likewise, in Neuenkirchen, Asher presented depictions of the surroundings – which, aboveground, appeared to be sleepy and picturesque – in terms of the functional networks that ran belowground.

In a letter to art historian Frederik Leen, Asher noted: “It was a whole different mindset in Germany than in the US where we are regularly reminded how terrorism will destroy our infrastructure and it must be carefully protected. This was one of my thoughts about the problem when I went in this direction” (Asher 2004). Asher's comment points to the significance of not only unveiling such utilitarian supports within an art context but of putting this type of systemic diagram in the general public's hands. In the early 2000s, the vulnerability of the US's infrastructures was being invoked in the context of heightened security post-9/11 and in the wake of anthrax threats in America. Viewing critical infrastructures and logistics as strategic targets was a topic on the right and on the left, as anti-war and anti-globalization movements sought symbolic and actual sites of struggle against corporate neoliberalism and neocolonial economic policies. Curator and writer Dirck Möllmann's essay in the *Outlook* exhibition catalog acknowledged the specter of breakdown and disturbance raised by Asher's set of maps. But he noted that Asher's interest was not in interrupting the apparatus of supply of either utilities or of art. Möllmann characterized Asher's goal, rather, as revealing the “operative function” of something “while it is still running” (Möllmann 2003).

Walter Benjamin's earlier directives for the “author as producer” echo the value of making such a functional demonstration the stuff of one's art. When determining the political value of someone's work, Benjamin argued, we need to ask not simply “what is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time?” but rather, “what is its position *in* them?” (Benjamin 1999, 770). Asher's “situational aesthetics,” which I have characterized here as a form of infrastructure studies, essentially dramatizes this proposition by embedding his works within the relations of production that undergird art and global capital – by relying on invitations and by deploying existing systems, environments, conducts, or schema as his artistic materials. This extends

deeper and reaches out further than the typical site-specific architectural accounts of his work allow. Asher's art estranged the operating conditions under which it worked, and he turned to infrastructures of art and of daily life in order to do so. When using either walls and windows, the control room and office supplies, or energy and transport systems as the substance of his work, Asher was also drawing on what Brian Larkin termed the "politics and poetics of infrastructure" – the ways in which infrastructures set matter, signification, and economic and political rationalities in motion. The three projects by Asher studied above called upon materials that traverse the local and systemic, static and circulatory, in ways that grasp complexities of global space.

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Section III

**Invisible and Overlooked Structures
of Production and Transport**

“We fly from desk to desk!”

Infrastructural Matters Beyond the Postal Network in Artists’ Ephemera of the 1960s and 1970s

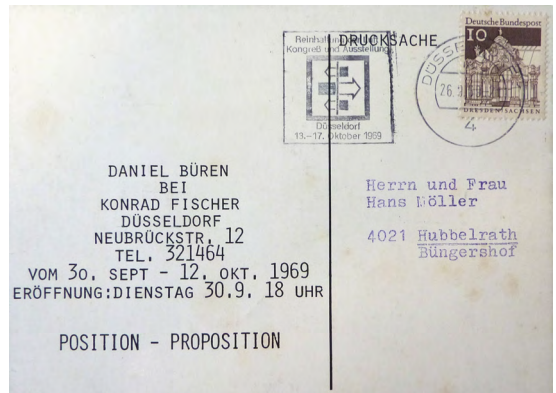
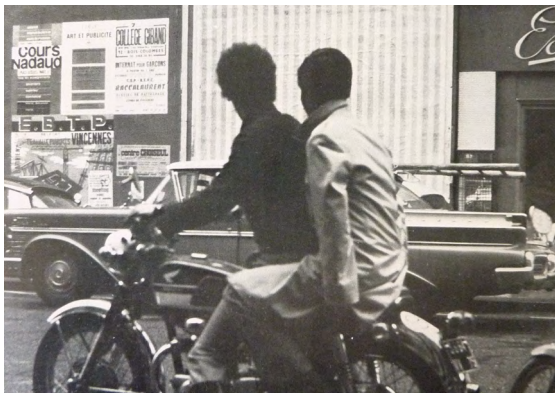
Barbara Preisig

The picture postcard had, in fact, already begun to gather dust. Due to the prevalence of telephones and telegrams, demand in Europe and the United States declined rapidly after World War II (Rogan 2005, 3 and 7). Not so in the art world, where, contrary to this trend, the 1960s and 1970s saw a veritable postcard boom, closely tied to the increasingly transatlantic focus of the exhibition circuit.¹ Since very few artists could afford (intercontinental) air travel, they often coordinated exhibition logistics via postcard. This was significantly cheaper than making phone calls or writing letters (Preisig 2011, n.p.; Antin 2009, n.p.). Not only were postcards inexpensive for personal correspondence, but the production of postcards and other printed matter also became more affordable and accessible in the late 1960s thanks to new phototypesetting methods in offset printing (Black 2024). This allowed even small-budget galleries to provide their audiences with custom invitation cards for their exhibitions. I am referring to galleries such as Konrad Fischer (Düsseldorf), Art & Project (Amsterdam), Yvon Lambert (Paris), Seth Siegelaub (New York City), and MTL (Brussels), which focused on promoting the then-nascent movement of Conceptual Art.²

Today the archives of these very galleries are filled with such printed materials. However, I am mainly interested in a few specific postcards, which are well-hidden among the stacks of paper. Barely distinguishable from other announcements, these postcards reveal themselves – upon closer inspection – as interventions in print form, now commonly referred to as artistic ephemer-

¹ With the emergence of art fairs such as Art Basel (1970) and Art Cologne (1968), along with the growing significance of major exhibitions like the influential *Documenta V* (1972), a vibrant trade and institutional exchange between Europe and the United States established itself in the 1960s.

² In the following text, I will refer to this movement as “early Conceptual Art,” with reference to Euro-American Conceptual Art (Richard 2009). It covers only a small part of the Conceptual Art forms that emerged in various geographical and cultural contexts during the 1960s and 1970s.



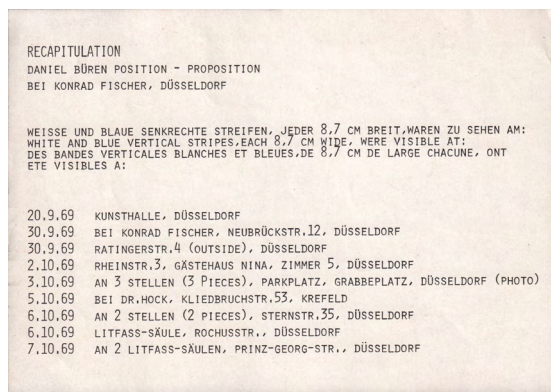
Figs. 1a and 1b Daniel Buren, *Position – Proposition*, 1969, 10.5×14 cm, picture postcard, image and front page, offset print, Konrad Fischer Galerie, Düsseldorf (© DB / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025, Collection SMK).

era.³ Much like the galleries themselves, artists such as Eleanor Antin, Daniel Buren, Jan Dibbets, and Adrian Piper designed postcards and invitation cards in the 1960s and 1970s – and sometimes in close collaboration with them. They printed these cards at the nearest copy shop in runs of up to 1,000 copies and sent them from New York to Cologne or from Amsterdam to Halifax – flying “from desk to desk.”⁴

One such postcard is Daniel Buren’s from 1969. At first glance, it looks no different from a conventional exhibition invitation, were it not for the strikingly unremarkable image on the front (fig. 1a). It shows a city scene with two people riding a motorcycle. Announced on the back is an exhibition by the artist titled *Position – Proposition* at Galerie Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf (fig. 1b). What the card does not reveal is that the exhibition didn’t actually take place in the gallery but consisted of a series of billpostings in Düsseldorf’s city center. Nor does it mention that Daniel Buren’s site-specific interventions consisted, and consist to this day, of his trademark stripe pattern: vertical, alternating white and colored stripes, each 8.7 cm wide. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the artist first applied such stripes – a popular textile pattern in France – to posters, then later to paintings, textiles, and other media. The stripes quickly became Buren’s signature mark. Those already famil-

³ The Greek term *ephemera* (plural of *ephemeron*) means “lasting only a day” and originally referred to plants or insects with a lifespan of no more than a single day. From the late 18th century onward, its meaning expanded to include printed collectible items of short-lived interest: commercial and everyday graphics, such as printed and published pieces of paper (Oxford 2024). I use the term *ephemera* to collectively refer to mass-produced, print-reproduced exhibition announcements, invitations, and advertisements that emerged in early Conceptual Art. These items simultaneously served as artworks, PR tools, and documentation. For a selection of contemporary art ephemera that aligns with this definition, see Leiber/Alden 2001.

⁴ “Wir fliegen von Schreibtisch zu Schreibtisch” (“We fly from desk to desk”) was the official tagline of DHL Germany in 1984.



Figs. 2a and 2b Daniel Buren, *Recapitulation. Daniel Büren Position – Proposition*, 1969, 11×16.4 cm, picture postcard, image and font page, offset print, Konrad Fischer Galerie, Dusseldorf (© DB/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025, Collection Christoph Schifferli, Zurich).

iar with Buren's *affichages sauvages* in 1969 would have noticed the stripe pattern on the billboard in the background of the postcard image.⁵ A second postcard, sent only after the exhibition ended and titled *Recapitulation: Daniel Buren's Position – Proposition* at Konrad Fischer, provides more specific information about Buren's poster campaigns. Listed on the back of this card are various intervention sites in Düsseldorf's city center (figs. 2a and 2b). One of these locations is depicted on the front: Düsseldorf's Grabbeplatz. Here, too, we see Buren's stripes in the background of the parking lot, alternating with advertisements.

Buren's cards, like other ephemera from that era, occupy an ambiguous status because they are many things at once: promotional tools, art objects, and in some cases, substitutes for an exhibition. Fleeting witnesses to a fleeting action, Buren's cards informed the audience that they had already missed the exhibition. Moreover, the cards are also mail items. Unlike 'conventional' artworks, they traveled to their recipients rather than the other way around, and therefore tell us a lot about the infrastructures they are integrated within, which usually remain invisible and overlooked. Ephemera occupy a unique position within both art and the postal systems. Precisely because they diverge from the familiar paths of postal networks and the art world, they offer an intriguing opportunity to explore the relationship between art, infrastructure, and the social connections linking artwork, artist, and recipient. How did artists utilize the postcard, the typographical possibilities, the new geographical basis of exhibiting, and the postal network? And what does 'utilize' really

⁵ Buren carried out his 'wild' poster campaigns in urban public spaces from the late 1960s onwards. A characteristic of these *affichages sauvages* – a term created by the artist – was that the artist chose the locations seemingly at random, revealing views of non-representative cityscapes.

mean in this context? Do infrastructures not, rather, determine, constrain, or even limit artistic actions? Or were infrastructures also appropriated, interpreted, performed, misused, subverted, or repurposed by the artists? More broadly: what can we infer from the workings of infrastructure – in this case, the postal system – about the works that emerged through artistic practice? And conversely, what can we learn about the workings of infrastructure from these cases?

Because infrastructures are constantly available, they remain largely invisible (Star 2017, 422). The same is true in art history, where unexamined assumptions about infrastructure subtly shape the ways that art is described and interpreted. Rarely do we critically examine how infrastructures contribute to our understanding of art. The methodological questions in this regard are complex and far-reaching. When artworks and infrastructures are examined in relation to one another, we must bring in line multiple sites of action and different scales: “On what scale is a particular observation and abstraction made?” What steps are we taking, and skipping, when we move from the detailed analysis of a single work to general statements about infrastructures? (Xiang 2013, 285). What invisible taxonomies creep into this process?

With these questions in mind, I would like to return to the artistic ephemera of the 1960s and 1970s and test and discuss three different perspectives on infrastructure. The first perspective focuses on the postal system as an apparatus, distribution network, technical basis, and organization of mobility.⁶ The second perspective examines the postal network in its theoretical dimension. Although the idea of the network deviates from the conventional understanding of infrastructure, it nevertheless provided a basis for artists to engage with the postal system. The third approach centers on the postcard as a micro-situation and material evidence of artistic activity. Here, I draw on Susan Leigh Star’s notion that individuals possess a “micro-power of definition” in their interactions with infrastructure (Dommann 2017, 440): that they imbue objects with meaning shaped by their life circumstances and that these meanings extend into their engagement with infrastructure (Star 2017, 422f.). Thus, in the third chapter of this essay, the analysis of infrastructure begins with observable social situations (Dommann 2017, 440) linked to the works discussed here.

⁶ This approach employs a concept of infrastructure that emerged in the 19th century from the toolbox of engineers in the context of railway construction (Dommann 2017, 141).

The Postal System

In March 1971, an unusual picture postcard reached nearly 1,000 recipients across the United States, Asia, and Europe via the postal system (fig. 3a). It came from “Eleanor Antin, 201 Pacific Avenue, Solana Beach, California 92075” and featured an image of 100 knee-high black rubber boots (Antin 1999, n.p.). The boots were arranged in a line on a vast sandy beach, positioned to face the Atlantic Ocean (fig. 3b). Over the next two years, Antin sent out another 50 postcards in irregular intervals, the last of which was mailed on July 9, 1973.

100 Boots is a visual travel narrative. The off-the-shelf postcards feature photographic views of locations and landscapes in California and New York City. Each card depicts the same 100 rubber boots arranged in various formations and engaged in different ‘activities,’ as noted on the back of the cards (e.g., *100 Boots at the Bank*, *100 Boots in the Market*).⁷ The story begins with the boots living an ordinary suburban life. They then embark on a kind of road movie through the Californian landscape, taking on different jobs, experiencing a war-like environment, and ultimately setting off on a grand excursion to New York City. The journey concludes with an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in June 1973.

The artist was able to construct the narrative in this way because she herself managed the process of sending postcards on a journey to her audience.⁸ Entrusting the postal service with the distribution and presentation of the work also represented a significant logistical advantage for her. It spared her the arduous and costly travel between her new home in Solana Beach on the California coast and New York City, the center of her professional activities.

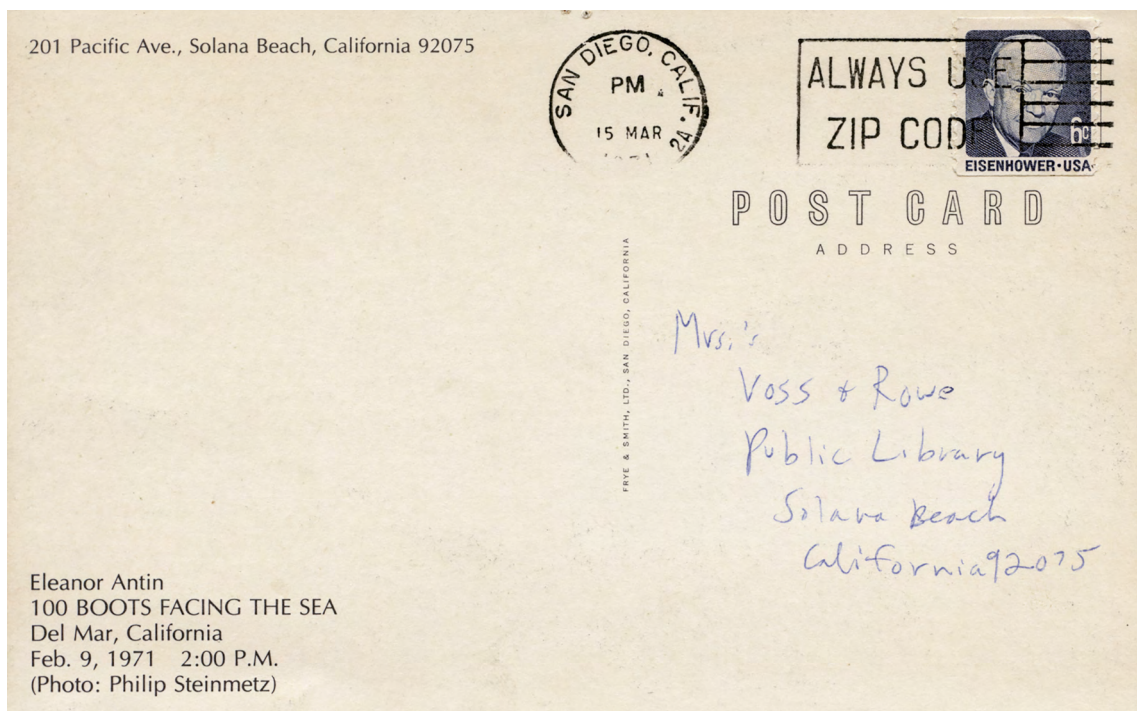
I wanted to do something that lasted longer – something that I wouldn’t have to travel to do – that I could send out without moving from my nice old falling-apart house over the Pacific in California. So I thought of the mails which are an obvious method of distribution that reach everyone with an address. (qtd. in Nemser 1972, 16)⁹

What Antin highlights here is not only fundamental to *100 Boots* but also to a general understanding of the ephemera of early Conceptual Art. The work became mobile and suddenly found its way to the audience independently – through mailboxes and into the living rooms and offices of its recipients. The

⁷ The consistent dating by postmark suggests a chronological-linear reading of the postcards. This is how the series was received by its recipients via mail, and it is also how it is presented today in the picture book-like publication *100 Boots* from 1999 (Antin 1999).

⁸ The time interval between mailings ranged from three days to five weeks.

⁹ A similar quote can be found in Richards 1971, 9; Antin 2009, n.p.



Figs. 3a und 3b Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots Facing the Sea*, 1971, 11.4×17.8 cm, picture postcard, offset print, Del Mar, California (© Eleanor Antin, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York).

postal system thus had profound implications for the work. Production, distribution, and reception began to overlap, causing a shift in the traditional division of labor between artists and art institutions. By directly delivering the work, artists and recipients alike could bypass the need for conventional exhibition spaces. Presentation, promotion, dissemination, and even the protection of the work were no longer solely the domain of museums and galleries. In the case of *100 Boots*, the work's extensive temporal and spatial scope exceeded the possibilities of traditional exhibition venues. This was made possible by the postal distribution system – a network involving post offices and mailboxes rather than (art) centers, accessible to anyone and capable of reaching any recipient with an address.¹⁰

The Network Ideology

Imagine the picture of a network. It lacks a center and it consists of equal nodes defined by their diverse, constantly evolving connections and relationships (Fisher 2007, 335). It is precisely because of these characteristics that the idea of the network gained prominence in management studies and in theories addressing the shift from industrial to post-industrial societies during the 1990s and 2000s (Boltanski/Chiapello 2006, 186–190, 196; Castells 2005, 4).¹¹ The social reorganization along networked lines we see today is often attributed to advances in information and communication technologies, especially the World Wide Web (Boltanski/Chiapello 2006, 194–202). It enables us to connect with like-minded people across geographies, allowing us to communicate globally while maintaining little to no relationship with colleagues in the same office. What in recent years has been described as the ideology of a democratically organized, de-hierarchized network society (ibid.; Castells 2005; Hardt/Negri 2004; Hardt/Negri 2003; Boltanski/Chiapello 2001) already fascinated conceptual artists in the late 1960s. However, their interest in networks was not driven by emerging technologies – the postal system had long been used as a cheap means of communication – but by popular theorizations of network logic. Among early practitioners of Conceptual Art, Marshall McLuhan's writings on the concept of the “Global Village” were as popular as the approaches to systems theory emerging at the time (Preisig

¹⁰ Similarly, the Fluxus and Mail Art movements discovered the postal network as a way to connect and communicate with other artists and with a broader audience (Friedman 1994), but they did not use printed matter as a format for mass-produced communication in collaboration with galleries.

¹¹ Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2006, 186–190) identify network ideology as a distinctive feature of managerial literature from the 1990s.

2018, pp. 45–47; Graham 2013; Siegelau 2010a; Skrebowski 2008; McLuhan 2003; McLuhan/Fiore 1968). Equally significant was Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 1977 philosophical work *Rhizome*. The title refers to a root-like network structure devoid of hierarchies and centers, serving as a metaphor for egalitarian knowledge organization. This idea fueled hopes for an alternative to centralized power structures and dominant hegemonies (Deleuze/Guattari 1987; Deleuze/Guattari 1977).

How are we to interpret the relationship between concept, infrastructure, and artistic practice? While the networked postal distribution system provided the material and organizational foundation for artistic practices, it seems that the significance of the network in early Conceptual Art extended beyond its infrastructural function. The material infrastructure symbolized a decentralized world, structurally democratic and non-hierarchical in organization. I argue that there is a theory surplus here, one best illustrated through the networking practices of the artists themselves. The distinguished recipients of *100 Boots* included prominent museum professionals, influential curators, artists, and collectors who, as part of the relatively small Conceptual Art scene of the time, were connected through a professional network, exchanging information and advancing careers.¹² Antin, who was then relatively unknown, sent her postcard greetings from the periphery to the centers of the art world. The success of her work (and the inseparable networking it involved) is exemplified by the solo exhibition at MoMA, which marked the culmination of the project (Preisig 2018, 25–27). Antin and her artist peers operated as flexible entrepreneurs and mediators, equipped with strong organizational and communication skills. They tapped into the postal network as a field of action for what we would today describe as a network economy (Fisher 2007; Boltanski/Chiapello 2006, 188–204; Castells 2005; Hardt/Negri 2003): work was less about the production and sale of a product and more about the creation of a social network and the exchange of information, which could positively influence future professional opportunities (Preisig 2018, 6–9, chapter 1; Gielen 2013, 23).

As this description suggests, the rules of networking at that time (as today) had nothing to do with a de-hierarchized organizational structure. The network that emerged revealed a few dominant geographic, institutional, and personal power centers.¹³ It was a social and institutional network that one

¹² Antin's extensive address list includes names such as Sol LeWitt, Andy Warhol, John Baldessari, Daniel Buren, Gilbert & George, John Cage, Judy Chicago, Jasper Johns, Marian Goodman, and Lucy Lippard. The list is in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Balch Art Research Library (Antin 1970–1974).

¹³ For an extensive collection of materials on the professional network of early Conceptual Art, see Richard 2009.

first had to gain access to, and one characterized by the massive overrepresentation of male actors. (A side note: Unlike Antin, Buren was already situated within such a center – Konrad Fischer’s gallery – to supply the social network. His poster campaigns were almost invariably connected to the realization of institutional exhibitions.)

The theory surplus lies in the promises (of the theory) that the network might have a democratizing effect on authoritarian social structures. Network ideology needs to be considered as ideological foundation for the artistic choice of the postal system as a medium of distribution. The fact that the network, while technically realized as a de-hierarchized organizational form, is – as has long been recognized – pervaded by asymmetric power hierarchies has done little to alter this ideology (Fisher 2007; Boltanski/Chiapello 2006; Castells 2005; Hardt/Negri 2004; Hardt/Negri 2003). This applies as much to the World Wide Web today as it did to the postal network back then. While the apparatus of infrastructure does provide avenues for action, the way the postal network was utilized by the artists is better understood, it seems, through developments in the history of ideas. Moreover, it highlights the communication standards that were prevalent in the exhibition system of the time and instrumental in organizing group belonging.¹⁴

The Postcard Situation

What had happened thus far: an unspecified group of artists in the 1960s developed an interventionist practice using postcards and the postal system. Their actions appear shaped by a series of sweeping infrastructural, discursive, and institutional trends playing out simultaneously in the background: the international orientation of the Conceptual Art world; the increasingly standardized mass communication through galleries and museums; the new possibilities of offset printing; and the emerging ideological *dispositif* of a service society. The narrative so far has followed the plausible assumption that such large-scale developments shaped the practices of an entire group of artists. I have quite naturally allowed the scale of these phenomena to dictate the hierarchical analytical relationship: the infrastructural superstructure determines the individual cases. Such a top-down analysis doesn’t care much about single artworks. Instead, this approach allows for the construction of a meta-narrative in which early Conceptual Art can speak for all individual cases – a grand narrative (see Lyotard 1984, XXIII–XXV), a voice that claims to

¹⁴ According to Starr, infrastructures shape the conventions of communities of practice but are “simultaneously influenced by them” (Star 2017, 424).

speak from the center of things (Star 2017, 428). This method is common practice in many interpretative sciences, including art history, where artworks often serve as examples of larger groups, movements, or eras.

To contrast the meta-narrative spun thus far, I want to tell another story that focuses on two specific postcard situations already introduced. I will examine how individual works, beyond their function of being an illustration for the meta-narrative, shed light on the relationship between art, infrastructure, and the new social relationships at play here. This third narrative begins with the fine print on Antin's *100 Boots*: the sender. It is the only postcard project from that time I know of where the sender was not a gallery but the artist's private address. The reason for this choice was pragmatic – Antin was not yet represented by a gallery at the time (Antin 2009, n.p.). For her, the networking opportunities offered by ephemera provided different benefits than they did for her male colleagues: they allowed her, as a female artist, to gain public visibility in the first place. The choice of sender had significant consequences. Antin received numerous responses from her postcard correspondents. The resulting collection of feedback on *100 Boots* is unique for its time. Now housed in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Balch Art Research Library (Antin 1970–1974), it offers a rare opportunity to learn about the reception of ephemera in that period.

Most of the feedback consisted of people expressing their gratitude for the unexpected yet reliably recurring mailings from the artist, who had been unknown to them. Some recipients sent their addresses, asking Antin to add them to her mailing list. One person, as a token of thanks, sent Antin six unused stamps. Mailing lists were shared, and art critics requested interview appointments. There was also less friendly feedback: "Remove me from the list." And one person wrote, "How about 100 boots getting thrown out with the rest of the junk mail?" – a reminder that many of Antin's postcards likely went straight into the trash, removed from circulation before they could be recognized as either an artistic project or a postcard greeting. Conversely, some of Antin's correspondents treated the cards as collectible objects and asked her for a complete set. Others responded with postcards of their own that alluded to the story of the 100 boots. For instance, G. Berkowitz sent a postcard depicting a military unit watering their (100?) horses in a river. Sol LeWitt sent a card showing (100?) grazing cows. The boots themselves also became a subject of the responses. Carolee Schneemann sent a postcard from 1895 featuring a similarly large number of boots. And the artist collective General Idea created a series of collages – assemblages of different postcard views from *100 Boots* – and mailed them back to Antin, along with the question, "How many boots are in the picture?" (Antin 1970–1974).

The feedback reveals functional connections for the postcard that extend far beyond the network's predefined roles of corresponding and communicating, such as collecting, discarding, adapting. The subjects of Antin's postcards became topics of exchange through letters. It almost seems as if the collectivity of the boots gave rise to a collectivity of co-authors contributing to the work.

Certainly, Buren's *Position – Proposition* must have elicited reactions as well. Visitors likely wanted to know whether there was still an exhibition taking place in the gallery spaces. Some might have asked the gallerist if there were works available for purchase in addition to the poster installations on site. However, I am unaware of any mailings sent as feedback to the two postcards. Why might this be? Perhaps these postcards, like most others with galleries as senders, resembled mass-produced one-way communications. It's possible the recipients didn't consider it appropriate to respond to the artist via the gallery. Or perhaps the lack of response was tied to the nature of the postcards themselves?

In Antin's *100 Boots*, the boots serve as the protagonists of a visual narrative. In contrast, in Buren's *Position – Proposition*, the protagonist is the artist himself. He stages his interventions as 'crime scenes' that he has already abandoned. The photograph appears as an ephemeral trace of artistic action, applied to the mobile medium of a postcard. The two motorcyclists in Buren's postcards do play a significant role – they evoke a sense of freedom, youthfulness, independence, and urban romanticism, reminiscent of Nouvelle Vague films like Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967) or John Cassavetes's *Shadows* (1959). Buren's striped posters blend seamlessly into the cityscape, promising a casual, unmediated encounter with the artwork. During this time, other artists such as Bas Jan Ader, Hamish Fulton, and Richard Long also created postcards that similarly resonate with the visual language of experimental films of the era, encapsulating a romantic, adventurous spirit (Preisig 2018, 85). This sense of independence is tightly linked to a masculine-coded image of the traveler – someone who ventures into nature, discovering its beauty and wildness. Eleanor Antin offers a critical interpretation of this self-representation by her male contemporaries. She humorously undermines the romanticized image, stripping it of its sense of vitality, by replacing the archetypal male adventurer with rubber boots – an ironic twist that both subverts and reimagines the trope.

The motorcyclists in *Position – Proposition* serve an additional function within the image's dramaturgy. They are incidental passersby whose attention is drawn to the posters and, as such, illustrate the kind of focused observation necessary to locate Buren's striped posters within the 'urban jungle.'

In painting, one can find such figures that guide the viewer's gaze into the image at least since the Renaissance. However, here the motorcyclists' purpose extends beyond providing aid in reading the image; they are eyewitnesses – offering proof of attention – of a dematerialized process, one that becomes tangible only through the act of looking. Buren's search puzzles in the urban environment typically occur in the context of public advertising spaces, sites of high visual traffic. Wherever advertising is placed, reception is ensured. By positioning his works in these spaces, Buren secures public visibility for them. He contextualizes his work within an economically defined space where the fiercely contested currency is attention. Georg Franck has described this phenomenon as the "economy of attention." He argues that in the information society, we are confronted with an overwhelming flood of information. Consequently, it is not information that is scarce but rather our capacity for perception (Franck 1998, 49–52; Schmidt 2000, 5–10).

By using posters and postcards, Buren engages in a "technical reproduction, multiplication, and distribution of stimuli patterns" (Franck 2003, 2), significantly amplifying the visibility of his otherwise ephemeral presentations in urban spaces (Preisig 2018, 88). To date, over 2,000 works on site have reportedly resulted in an estimated 400,000 photographs, which Buren consistently refers to as "photo-souvenirs" and whose use he tightly controls.¹⁵ Buren's photographic practice reminds me of some photo-sharing posts on Instagram – a hotspot in the attention economy. Much like digital postcards, such posts visually document the sender's location and activity. But the photo-sharing function on Instagram is not only about disseminating images but is also curated and managed by account owners as a kind of personal archive (Yenilmez Kacar 2023, 8f.). In Buren's case, photographic documentation similarly serves as an archival record, enacted through the act of photo-sharing. However, here it is the postal service that mobilizes the work – the temporally and spatially limited action – and delivers it to the actors and institutions responsible for its preservation and art-historical documentation.

The distinct postcard scenarios of Buren and Antin demonstrate not only how differently the artists approached the same production conditions, but also how the postcard itself, originally conceived as a means of communication, was assigned new functions and potential futures. Antin's postcards might have been the beginning of a pen pal exchange, become elements of a collage, or complement a collection. On the other hand, they might have al-

¹⁵ Today, the photo-souvenirs are typically found as small illustrations in the artist's catalogs. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the artist also favored producing them as picture postcards (Preisig 2018, 79).

ready ended up in the trash. The postal service, too, found itself taking on unexpected roles: it now provided the infrastructure for presentation, distribution, promotion, and preservation of art works, with significant implications for artistic practice. The boundaries between artistic production and promotion blurred, as did the lines between material and immaterial labor (Lazzarato 1998, 55). Equipped with this new mindset, the artists repurposed the somewhat antiquated postal network in a spirit anticipating the World Wide Web. A mere functional analysis of the postal system could not reveal all these interconnections, because the system was not designed with them in mind. Infrastructure emerges here as a fundamentally relational concept, that is only enacted in relation to organized practices, from which it is continuously renegotiated (Star 2017, 422).

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Star Country Exhibitions

Conceptions, Assemblages, and Event Logistics at Selected Postcolonial Pan-African Festivals (1966–1977)

Gideon Morison

Introduction

On 15 March 1957, Ghana's independence celebration in Accra attracted a large crowd of exuberant citizens, Convention People's Party supporters, foreign dignitaries, colonial officials, ambassadors, and international delegates. The symbolic lowering of the British Union Jack and hoisting of Ghana's new flag, the Black Star – the highlight of a ceremony described as “pure political theatre” (Apter 2008, 8) – signaled the official end of colonial rule in the country and marked a continental milestone. In his independence speech, Kwame Nkrumah framed Ghana's freedom as a broader African struggle, declaring it meaningless without total continental liberation.¹ He envisioned a political-cultural project for pan-African unity and global transformation rooted in cultural renaissance, pan-Africanism, rapid modernization, and the establishment of a “United States of (socialist) Africa” (ibid.). This message resonated across the continent, leading to a wave of decolonization that culminated in 1960 with 17 African nations gaining independence, including Senegal and Nigeria (Talton 2012, 4).

The newly independent nations often celebrated this occasion with elaborate ceremonies that combined national symbolism and cultural performances. These events inspired series of state-sponsored festivals known as ‘African Cultural Olympiads,’ ‘Pan-African Cultural Festivals,’ or ‘Postcolonial African Festivals.’² The significance of these cultural festivals, which took place between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, was more than celebratory; they embodied what Getachew has described as “worldmaking” projects – important political-cultural projects aimed at mobilizing Black solidarity, promoting African cultural heritage, and demonstrating Africa's capacity for self-deter-

1 For a full text of Kwame Nkrumah's Independence Speech, see www.afrikaiswoke.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/Full-Kwame-Nkrumah-Ghana-Independence-Speech.pdf. Accessed 10 September 2024.

2 See Cassirer 1967, 177–184; Murphy 2018; Morison/Rothenburg 2024.

mination (2019, 2). According to Getachew, these projects, including the festivals, extended decolonization beyond the national level to the global cultural and institutional arena (ibid.). The aims of the post-colonial pan-African festivals were thus not only to celebrate the independence of the new nations in Africa, but also to create infrastructures for the global promotion of black/African cultural productions. This type of cultural infrastructure includes physical, organizational, institutional, or digital structures that enable the creative production, distribution, consumption, and flow of cultural activities within and between societies, and often includes ideologies, events, strategies, laws, venues, research, and funding (Strauf/Scherer 2011, 7f.). They provided alternative spaces to counter prevailing racist narratives on cultural hierarchies by foregrounding the exhibition of Black/African art, music, dance, film, and literature. These events were also linked to the concept of African Renaissance,³ which envisioned a post-colonial future characterized by accelerated development and continental unity, and created a transnational network based on shared histories, values, and creative traditions by bringing together artists, scholars, and politicians from the diaspora with Africans from the continent.

An important, albeit inconspicuous, part of these festivals were the *Star Country* exhibitions. These were specially curated exhibitions that ‘showcased’ the culture and art of the country chosen to host the next edition of the festival (Smit/Jansen 2012, 173). They served as cultural ambassadors for the designated host countries and offered a preview of the artistic and organizational vision to justify the country’s selection as host, while building anticipation among international participants and audiences. At the 1966 Festival of Negro Arts (FESMAN) in Dakar, Nigeria was the designated ‘star country’ while Ethiopia played the same role at FESTAC ’77 in preparation for the 1980 edition – which ultimately did not take place due to the political and economic turmoil in the country during the 1980s. The example of Ethiopia illustrates the enormous logistical and financial challenges of organizing post-colonial pan-African festivals. Organizing such events often requires a cultural vision, ideological commitment, institutional coordination, material resources, and strong political will. In *Star Country* exhibitions, this process involved complex processes of conceptualization, planning, and implementation. They also depended on the cooperation and collaboration of various actors, including governments, cultural professionals, artists, private organizations, volunteers, and logistics teams. In addition, logistical factors such as the availabil-

3 For in-depth discussions on the concept of African Renaissance, see Thiong'o 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020.

ity of venues and transport infrastructure, adequate security measures, and media coverage were crucial to the events' success. Despite the importance of postcolonial pan-African festivals and the growing scholarly interest in their staging – particularly within disciplines such as history, cultural studies, performance, and heritage studies – a significant research gap remains, particularly concerning how these events were conceptualized and staged. Existing studies tend to focus on the festivals' ideological and political vectors, often neglecting the organizational frameworks, assemblages, and logistical infrastructures that enabled their staging. This article explores *Star Country* exhibitions as entangled narratives of nationhood and decolonial cultural events by examining their invisible and overlooked production structures in the global discourse on modern art.

Star Country Exhibitions: Conceptions, Assemblages, and Logistics in Postcolonial Pan-African Festivals

The concept of *Star Country* exhibitions is rooted in the visionary scale and diplomatic, cultural, and logistical ties between festival host nations and their successors. Postcolonial pan-African festivals trace their origins to the 1956 Paris and 1959 Rome congresses of Black artists and writers, which promoted African culture as central to colonial liberation and fostered transnational exchange (Ripert 2017, 4; Lock 2022, 3–5; Morison/Rothenburg 2024, 23). Ideas for the institutionalization of postcolonial pan-African festivals emerged from intellectual negotiations at these congresses and, given the central role of the Négritude movement in this process, Senegal accepted the responsibility of hosting the inaugural edition (Murphy 2018, n.p.; Morison/Rothenburg 2024, 36).

As the inaugural host, Senegal shaped postcolonial pan-African festivals by defining the format of the *Star Country* exhibition and setting a precedent through the International Festival Association under Alioune Diop. It established the 'colloquium-exhibition-performance' model and used its curatorial power to determine the festival's theme, title, ideology, and participants (Kulla 1976, 174).⁴

The host nation's role in the festival's planning was described as "omnipotent" (ibid., 169) given the level of control it exerted over all aspects of the event. This encompassed infrastructure, accommodation, transport, and even food (ibid., 170). It was also in charge of curating a pan-African narrative

⁴ For Alioune Diop's contribution to postcolonial pan-African festival and its organizational model, see Morison 2022, 130–138. See also Kulla 1976, 167; Murphy 2016.

and vision for the event based on the ‘host-nation-star country’ partnership, which usually became the de facto curatorial direction of the *Star Country* exhibition. Notably, the organizers of Dakar ’66 acknowledged “language barrier” as the “greatest obstacle” to a broader and deeper mutual understanding between Africans, particularly between Anglophone and Francophone Africa (Fagg 1966, 410). While ideas such as “bilingual balance” – the adoption of English and French “in equal terms” as official languages of the festival – emerged as bridge-building strategies within the IFA to facilitate “free cultural intercourse between the two halves of Africa” (ibid.), the organizers also proposed that:

One country, other than the host country, should be ‘starred’ by being allowed to make a special and more intensive display of its contributions to African culture, in addition to its participation in the exhibitions of art organized by the festival committee of the host country [...] the star country will normally be drawn from the other linguistic ‘half’ of Africa, as a means of furthering the bilingual balance. (ibid., 411)

The exhibition symbolized a cultural transition inaugurating a strategic partnership between the host and the next designated host country. This collaboration shaped the festival’s cultural focus, participation politics, and continuity. Central to this collaboration is the staging of a national exhibition that showcases the future host’s heritage to justify its *Star Country* status and build anticipation for the event by unveiling the scope, curatorial, and artistic direction of the next festival edition. The following section will focus on the internal processes that shaped the staging of these exhibitions; however, it should be noted that although this analysis outlines the infrastructure(s) and logistics behind *Star Country*, it is nonetheless a reconstructed narrative based on limited archival material and may evolve with future research and discoveries.

Exhibiting Nigeria in Dakar 1966

Echoing Senegal’s sophisticated curatorial strategy, Nigeria’s *Star Country* exhibition, published in *Nigeria Magazine* under the title “Our Cultural Heritage including our Art and Crafts” (fig. 1), featured a combination of pre-colonial and contemporary Nigerian artworks and crafts. The exhibition was organized at the Hôtel de Ville under the curatorial direction of the Federal Department of Antiquities led by Kenneth Murray and Ekpo Eyo. It included examples of Nigerian art history – Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, Owo, Benin – and

Fig. 1 Nigeria Magazine, *Our Cultural Heritage including our Art & Crafts*, Dakar 1966 (© UNESCO Archive, Paris).

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NIGERIA TODAY 2



nigeria

WORLD FESTIVAL OF NEGRO ARTS DAKAR 1966

our cultural heritage

INCLUDING
OUR ART
& CRAFTS

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contemporary works by Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Jimo Akolo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and their modernist contemporaries.⁵

John Povey's account of the Dakar festival offers rare primary insight into Nigeria's *Star Country* exhibition, confirming its official status while critiquing its execution. He describes the exhibition as "a dismal thing," criticizing its narrative attempt to convey national progress through uninspired displays like "cans of oil and rubber tyres" (Povey 1966, 104). Povey attributes this to a lack of 'governmental imagination' but contrasts it with praise for the country's collection of classical African art and the artworks by Nigerian individual artists. (ibid., 105) He highlights the captivating performance of Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest* and commends the sophistication of modernist painting by Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko. Although it's unclear whether these pieces featured in the Nigeria exhibition, the contemporary art exhibition, or both, Povey's testimony affirms the artists' presence and significance at the festival, underscoring Nigeria's strong individual contributions despite curatorial shortcomings.⁶

The assemblage of artworks, particularly those representing the pre-colonial Nigerian artistic heritage, was drawn from over 6,000 objects collected, donated, and returned to the Nigerian National Museum (Lagos) through the activism of a group of British expatriates led by Kenneth Murray, as well as newly discovered artworks from archaeological excavations across the country since the 1930s (Basu 2012, 148). As Grout notes, many of these objects were "extremely rare, have not been actively collected before and could not be found in museums outside Nigeria" (2022, 106). For example, while the discovery of 17 brass figurines at Ife in 1938/39 and later the Nok culture at Nok, near Jos, in 1941 generated enormous international interest and marked a turning point in the development of Nigerian museums (Basu 2012, 148), the revered Benin bronzes were the centerpiece of Nigeria's *Star Country* exhibition. These bronzes encompassed several 19th century objects made of brass and bronze, but also ivory, including decorated plaques, commemorative heads, animal and human figures, personal ornaments, royal insignia, and carved elephant tusks, which were made by specialized guilds for the royal court of the Oba of Benin City and stolen by the British in 1897. It was at the *Star Country* exhibition that Nigeria launched a new phase of the campaign for the repatriation of African artifacts held in colonial and foreign

⁵ See Okeke-Agulu, 2015.

⁶ Bruce Onobrakpeya and Erhabor Emokpae were among leading artists who recreated the copy of the Queen Idia mask used at FESTAC '77, after the British Museum refused Nigeria's request to return the stolen original, see Malaquais/Vincent 2019, 53–56.

museums by using the Queen Idia mask, which not only served as the symbolic image for the *Star Country* exhibition, but later also as the logo for FESTAC '77.⁷

Ethiopia's Star Country Exhibition in Lagos

Ethiopia's *Star Country* exhibition was part of more than 10 art exhibitions featured in the cultural program of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC '77).⁸ Although few, if any, archival traces have surfaced to date that would enable a comprehensive reconstruction of this exhibition, it can nonetheless be assumed that its curation and realization were largely in line with Nigeria's curatorial and organizational agendas. It must be noted that although FESTAC '77 was a direct successor to Dakar '66, its organizational framework and focus differed significantly, partly due to the emerging schism within the African political and cultural landscape, as demonstrated by the Casablanca-Monrovia split as well as the Dakar '66 and Algiers '69 festivals (Ratcliff 2014, 172ff.).

FESTAC '77 was thus organized to bridge this ideological divergence in the pan-African cultural sphere. While the organizational model remained the same, the festival's curatorial logic focused on foregrounding continental unity and diaspora integration, while articulating notions of radical education and technological revolution as the pathway to African renaissance.⁹ Scholars, however, have offered alternative readings of the curatorial direction and focus of FESTAC '77, emphasizing Nigeria's attempts to restore its national pride and assert its reputation as the "Giant of Africa" (Ikonne 2017, par. 6). Apter states that FESTAC '77 staged a vision of unity for Black/African people, led by Nigeria, which was supported by oil wealth and included diverse races. It curated a narrative of advancement and progress by connecting traditional values with modern ideas, blending cultures to envision a pan-African society that shared a common history, customs, and aspirations for development (2005, 4f.).

⁷ For in-depth insight on the various phases of the campaign for the reparation of African heritage in both colonial and Western museums, see Savoy 2018; 2022.

⁸ For the full list of artistic exhibitions included in the final iteration of the festival events, see IFC n.d., 13.

⁹ The practical organizational decision that signposted this focus is seen in the addition of the phrase "Black and African" to the title of the festival, granting full participation status to liberation movements, member-nations of the OAU, and diaspora communities. See IFC n.d., n.p.



Fig. 2 IFC, *Star Country Pavilion*
Exterior, Lagos,
1977 (© CBAAC,
Lagos).

This emphasis on progressive development, as suggested by Apter, was also evident in Ethiopia's *Star Country* exhibition, which was sponsored, planned, and organized by the Ethiopian government, albeit with "technical assistance and transportation" from the International Festival Committee (IFC n.d., 20). In the main exhibition hall of the National Theatre Complex, Ethiopia's *Star Country* exhibition (figs. 2 and 3) was assembled in a five-section pavilion, each section showcasing different aspects of Ethiopian culture, history, and heritage, including prehistoric and classical archaeology, the period of the Lalibela rock-hewn churches, the Axumite style, and late 19th century and modernist artworks (ibid.).

Given the extensive impact of the royal court and Ethiopia's Orthodox Church – often described as the "early cradle of the country's only educational system" (Tsegaye 1968, 87) – on the cultural development of its people, as well as on the standardization or formation of the ultimate criteria for "cultural fineness and merits," scholars have claimed that Ethiopia's art is almost "exclusively religious and essentially Christian" (Chojnacki 1997, 44). The church, it has been claimed, retained "a profound interest in functional art" that was often expressed in the "decoration of church walls, in the illumination of manuscripts and in paintings on wood" (ibid.). Among these categories, Chojnacki has stated that church decorations are considered "a very important expression of Ethiopian plastic arts, second only to manuscripts" (1964, 2) and ultimately constitute the 'richest' corpus of Ethiopian art (44).

These works of art, roughly categorized into "two great periods" – the medieval (13th to 15th centuries) and the Gondarine (from the 17th century on-

Fig. 3 IFC, *Star Country Pavilion Interior*, Lagos, 1977 (© CBAAC, Lagos).



wards) – gradually became objects of a “flourishing trade” after exhibitions in Europe between 1972 and 1974, which led to the acquisition of more than 300 icons from the Museum of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies in Addis Ababa (Chojnacki 1997, 22; 44). This collection, described as “the most complete in the field,” included icons, crosses, and manuscript illuminations (Chojnacki 1964, 2).

It is possible to argue that most of the objects on display in Lagos came not only from the collection of this museum, but also from the 1972/74 exhibition tour and was curated by state-appointed cultural officers from the Ethiopian National Museum. This is not far-fetched, considering the importance of Addis Ababa as an important ‘contact zone’ in the political, social, religious, cultural, and artistic life stream of the country, especially as a link between imperial and modern Ethiopia and as an embodiment of what Jansson calls “the power of monopoly” across these spaces (qtd. in Weinerth 2014, 55).

The cosmopolitan character of Addis Ababa fostered a modernist art movement that “deviated from the ecclesiastical canon” (Weinerth 2014, 55f.). In *Modernist Art in Ethiopia*, Giorgis examined Ethiopian modernity through artists like Skunder Boghossian and Gebre Kristos Desta. These artists were central actors in the modernist art movements during decolonization (Okeke-Agulu 2015, 133). As particularly evident in the case of Skunder Boghossian, his connection to pan-African arts movements and organizations (like The Mbari Club) and the internationally acclaimed works of key intellectuals like Aimé Césaire and Cheikh Anta Diop left a lasting impact on the country’s cultural landscape (Giorgis 2019, 143ff.). Works by these artists and their contem-



Fig. 4 IFC, General Yakubu Gowon with Ethiopian Delegation, Lagos 1975 (© CBAAC, Lagos).

poraries likely formed the core of Ethiopia's *Star Country* exhibition, as their work epitomized the dominant aesthetic and creative spirit of the time (ibid., 153).¹⁰

Ahead of FESTAC '77, a cultural revolution occurred in Ethiopia due to severe droughts and famine. This led to the overthrow of the monarchy and established the Derg military government under Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam in 1974. The shift to a socialist state shaped Ethiopia's cultural policy and influenced the curation of its *Star Country* exhibition. Artworks like *Victims of Famine* (painting, 1974) and *Our Struggle* (drama, 1977) reflected the regime's ideological focus, aligning with both Ethiopia's state narrative and Nigeria's curatorial leadership. A 1975 diplomatic visit to FESTAC co-grand patron General Yakubu Gowon (fig. 4) marked a key moment in this process, facilitating curatorial negotiations and agreement on 'technical assistance'

¹⁰ Some of Boghossian's most accomplished works include *Juju Wedding* (1964), *Night Flight of Dread and Delight* (1964), *The Nourisher Series* (1963–64), and *Inferno at Axum* (1975), while Desta's most recognizable artworks are *Golgotha* (1963), *Self Portrait* (1967), *Green Abstract* (1966), *Remembering* (1965), and *Untitled* (1975). See Giorgis 2019, 118–195.

from Nigeria for the exhibition. These developments highlight how Ethiopia's political transformation directly impacted its representation in international cultural spaces like FESTAC '77.

Logistical Considerations behind the 'Star Country' Exhibitions in Postcolonial Pan-African Festivals

In *The Arts of Logistics*, Michael Shane Boyle links art and logistics, arguing that logistics shape not only the circulation but also the production of art. Embedded in global supply chains, logistics determine decisions in large-scale cultural events like postcolonial pan-African festivals, where transportation costs and infrastructure critically determine the hosting and siting of cultural exhibitions (Boyle 2024, 6). As the backbone of cultural events such as festivals, logistical considerations range from venue setup, transport, and accommodation to security and audience management. The transnational nature of these festivals adds complexity to the organizational process, since it often requires coordination across borders like obtaining visas and making customs declarations for cultural artifacts. However, effective planning is crucial to ensure smooth logistical execution while preserving the festival's celebratory atmosphere for the broad spectrum of participants.

The host nation's organizing committee was responsible for the logistics of postcolonial pan-African festivals, operating semi-independently yet in co-operation with governments, participants, and international organizations. These committees were essential to the event's immediate success, its long-term legacy, and the reputation of the host nation. They oversaw programming, infrastructure, and participant coordination, among other responsibilities. To guarantee seamless execution, planning was backed by secretariats, professional committees, and official guidelines.¹¹

From a purely logistical perspective, Nigeria's *Star Country* exhibition at Dakar '66 operated from Dakar Town Hall (Murphy 2016, 25). This special arrangement was enabled by a 'host nation-star country partnership' to streamline the process of preparing and installing the artworks for the exhibition. Due to the poor transport infrastructure in West Africa and border control challenges, studio-built and assembled artworks from Lagos were transported

¹¹ While organizing these festivals, the IFA and IFC oversaw significant construction and infrastructural renovation for these events. In Dakar '66 these included the Musée Dynamique, the Daniel Sorano Theatre, Dakar-Yoff Airport, etc. See Fagg 1966, 411–413; Wofford 2009, 7; Murphy 2016, 21–22. The major infrastructures for FESTAC '77 included Festival villages in Lagos and Kaduna, National Theatre Complex, Durbar Racecourse, Kaduna, and the Durbar Hotel, see IFC n.d., 11.

to Dakar by air and sea, with shipping proving the most viable logistical option (Blake 2011, 52).¹² It is likely that the Nigerian delegation included handling and installation experts for the exhibition who may have worked with those provided by the IFA to ensure a smooth exhibition operation (Ogbechie 2008, 93).

The same also applied in FESTAC '77 albeit on a much larger scale. As shown in the IFC's Participation Guidelines, the process of selecting artworks and artifacts to be exhibited was vested in the participating country. However, this set the following logistical criteria to guide the process of preparing and installing for the exhibition(s):

The coordinator of each zone is the only authority responsible to the International Festival Committee. In this wise he shall before April, 1976 forward to the Director of Exhibitions International Secretariat of the Festival of Arts and Culture P.M.B. 12568, Lagos Nigeria: (i) The Description Form 04; (ii) The biography and photograph, 13 by 18 in Black and White of each artist; (iii) Labelled Black and White photograph or colour slide of submitted art work or artifacts, the zone, (country/community) the name of the artist, and the title of the works of art, the date of its execution and its size [...] (v) Full and precise information and all the instructions about the presentation of the works sent in. The coordinator shall also be present when the exhibition is being dismantled. (IFC n.d., 23)

In addition to the guidelines above, the IFC also specified that artworks assembled for the festival should be "in a form ready for exhibition," stating that the status of their acceptance into the country will be on "temporary admissions" with the IFC assuming responsibility for them during their stay in Nigeria (*ibid.*, 24). Furthermore, the IFC also mandated that every zone/participating countries/community should "insure its works of art to and from Lagos" since the IFC would only assume the responsibility of insurance for these artworks "while these remain in Lagos for the value shown in the assurance covering transportation" (*ibid.*).

Other general logistical arrangements made by the IFC for artistic exhibition at the festival included the appointment of a supervisor for each exhibition to serve as a liaison between the IFC and exhibiting countries as well as the allocation of a lorry, one driver, and one guard to each country/community. According to the IFC, this lorry shall serve as "a mobile warehouse" and

¹² Shipping was not the only means of (art) transportation for the festival, which was largely complemented by air transport. See IFC n.d., 23; Wofford 2009, 1–13.

shall bear the name of the country to which it is allocated (ibid., 15). Like other participating countries, Ethiopian delegates were lodged at the Festival Village – FESTAC ’77 Town in Lagos – which was built not only to accommodate festival participants but also to strategically engender a type of bond “that politics, tribal difference, economies and national jealousies could not break” (Kay 1977, 50).¹³

Apart from the accommodation challenges (Fagg 1966, 424) as well as the student protests and the government’s barricading of certain parts of Dakar to improve the city’s image (Morison/Rothenburg 2024, 38), FESMAN ’66 is often described as “an organizational triumph” (Murphy 2016, 23), in contrast to the “logistical dysfunction” and chaos that plagued the planning and actualization of FESTAC ’77 and FESMAN 2010.¹⁴ Several factors are considered to have been responsible for the chaotic situation that unfolded in FESTAC ’77. These included the unwieldy scope of the event, Nigeria’s postwar infrastructural challenges, late registration of participants, limited financial resources, and competing stakeholder interest (IFC n.d., 35).

Conclusion

This essay examined the *Star Country* exhibition as a form of (inter)national exhibition, focusing on the conceptual strategies, assemblages, and logistical considerations that enabled its realization during selected postcolonial pan-African festivals. It shows that these exhibitions not only reflected the complex histories and identities of the exhibiting countries but also revealed narratives of progress that largely reinforced the curatorial agendas of the host countries. The theory of assemblage clarified the nature of the host-nation star country partnership and how various participants – such as governments, cultural figures, and organizations – collaborated, negotiated, or even contested in a dynamic political-cultural and ideological space about scope, focus, and development visions for the continent’s postcolonial future. While large-scale infrastructure building and logistical coordination played a central role in managing complex international participation, logistical challenges such as inadequate representation, financial constraints, and stakeholder competition proved to be limiting factors that not only restricted the possibilities of these events but also tainted their legacy. The realization of

¹³ For contemporaneous reports on activities at the Festival Village, see Festival News n.d., 4–5; Kay 1977, 50. The guidelines for artistic exhibitions was drawn by Papa Ibra Tall, see CBAAC/FESTAC/IFC/1975/Appendix A, 3.

¹⁴ For contemporaneous accounts of these logistical challenges, see Fuller 1971, 101. For accounts on FESTAC ’77, see Kay 1977, 50.

the events despite the increasing restrictions was hailed as a triumph. This baseline study of the *Star Country* exhibitions therefore provides an opportunity for a close case study of the complex dynamics of the logistics of event management and national exhibitions in post-colonial Africa. Further research may shed more light as more archival material emerges.

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Stretched Between Servers and Services

Artistic and Institutional Strategies Dealing with Evolving Internet Infrastructures

Inge Hinterwaldner

Introduction

We all experience software updates on a weekly – if not daily – basis. And so do online artworks: all of them. I aim to examine this particular socio-techno-ecological environment. If we understand the internet as a multi-layered fabric of protocols, platforms, regulations, policies, software services, technologies, communities, and private commitments, it is not surprising that this complex constellation is constantly changing. In this dynamic field, new standards are regularly created, security holes are closed, and programs are updated. Internet artworks ‘dwell’ amid this volatile infrastructure. For most art historians, these settings and constellations are unknown. If we want to grasp how online art pieces work in this very real technological environment in which they are placed – why and how they change in reaction to their surroundings – we need to open the black box. Doing so not only deepens our understanding of a work’s production logic, but it also helps appreciate the programming artists’ craftsmanship and inventiveness. We also learn what keeps them busy. Oftentimes, it is the support layer. Their works all rely on a fabric of software, hardware, and socio-political factors. Depending on how they are integrated into these coded fabrics – whether plugged-in or added-on – artworks exhibit varying degrees of sensitivity to even the slightest changes. We may be tempted to see art that connects to services as mere ‘add-ons,’ sitting on top of ‘found footage.’ However, this type of ‘found footage’ is either itself equally infrastructure-dependent or part of the infrastructure itself, and therefore paradoxically less stable than in times when this was coined a cinematic technique. It may pursue the ideal of being stable enough, but not unchanging. Developers want to minimize what they term the “ossification risk” (Nottingham 2021). In their view, ‘add-ons’ by artists or privacy advocates (Claburn 2017) might be seen as an indication of a cluttered structure in need of rejuvenation.

Real-world Dependency and Field-specificity

The relatedness to live real-world factors in the information age makes the internet artworks prone to failure. Not only information changes – this might be embraced and is the whole point of fetching data live online – but also how information is formatted, placed, framed, and accessed. Depending on the architecture of a coupling, each tiny change could be fatal. Whenever parts of the web are sourced for information as integral components of an artwork, a certain dependency happens as artists dock onto existing services such as search engines or social media platforms. They can use them in pragmatic terms for whatever theme or intentionally target these services with their action, making them the subject of their work. The services that artists dock to often prove to be more unstable partners than artists can reasonably handle. When a service updates, the artwork may have to adapt as well – and it is usually the artist who must ensure it remains functional. In this contribution, I analyze the solutions artists employ to maintain service-based artworks and explore what these failures reveal about the nature of the internet. I conceive of programmed online artworks as dispersed entities – distributed across servers and services that they must reliably connect to. These artworks scrape information from external sources, feeding it into their system to generate artistic expression. My perspective emphasizes the structural disposition of artworks that enables them to ‘function.’ As performative or generative entities, they can migrate only in limited and assisted ways. This contrasts sharply with their output or derivatives, which can pop up on screens worldwide and be shared as images, sounds, or videos. While these derivatives travel freely, the productive core remains embedded within a framework of functionalities and rules—the infrastructure. This does not mean that the artwork cannot be stored on multiple servers simultaneously. In fact, this is one of the current models used to make artworks more robust.¹

However, this flexibility of where its code is stored will not free it from the need to conserve all its connections, from which it sources the ingredients for its output. It has this ‘conservative’ trait to keep its functionality. The concept of site-specificity, developed in the 1970s, traditionally refers to an artist taking the location of the artwork into account when producing it. To what degree are digital artworks ‘site-specific,’ tailored for this concrete location on the internet? It might be necessary to acknowledge a second term: field. A field is where several parties perform different parts of the calculation, thus embodying a distributed agency. Network computing, for example, interlaces

¹ Cf. For instance The Data Trust is a peer-to-peer, decentralized artist-owned archive for long-term sustainability, <https://transfergallery.com/>. Accessed 12 January 2025.

processes on different computers (cf. Antic/Fuller 2011). As Josephine Berry states: “when one attempts to pin down the nature of site on the Net, it dissolves into a set of processes occurring simultaneously at different points in virtual and geographical space” (Berry 2001, 15). If this constellation turns out to be a relevant factor, ‘site-specificity’ should be further developed into ‘field-specificity.’ This, in turn, would imply that modernist ideas of isolatable (transportable, nomadic) works represent the opposite pole of field-specific works. At the same time, that opposite pole seems to be one of the few paths available for conserving such works. To enable their migration, it may be necessary to sever their ties. However, that is another discussion.

The more spread out the socio-technical infrastructure, the more elements an artwork connects to within the ‘field,’ the more vulnerable it becomes. Being networked is not an inherently stabilizing factor unless redundancy measures are in place. Otherwise, when a work relies on multiple interconnected actors functioning in concert, the loss of each connection is palpable. What can provide some reliability and reassurance is the concept of the network-as-multiplication and network-as-distribution (The Data Trust), as this was the motivation for creating the internet in the first place. However, the network-as-functional-infrastructure, as outlined here, paints another picture. Here, we deal with what the internet infrastructure affords to artists and what stances and strategies they develop for their artworks.

Surprise and High-frequency Repairing

On his website, the British artist Wayne Clements explains his link list of original works (fig. 1), which is split into WORKING in green and SEMI-AND-PERMANENTLY RETIRED in red.

The links in ‘SEMI-AND-PERMANENTLY RETIRED’ will take you to the home-pages. There is info and documentation. But the programs either are not running, may produce an error message, or run in a reduced version. None of this will harm your computer. The reason for the programs developing problems is software entropy. My paper originally published by ‘CHArt’ explains this: Art and Software Entropy. (The CHArt website has, since 2015, itself given in to entropy.) WORKING software can also develop problems sometime in the future. (Clements 2009)

While this timeframe may seem manageable, artists often encounter difficulties after different periods of time – rarely decades, but more commonly years, months, or even weeks.

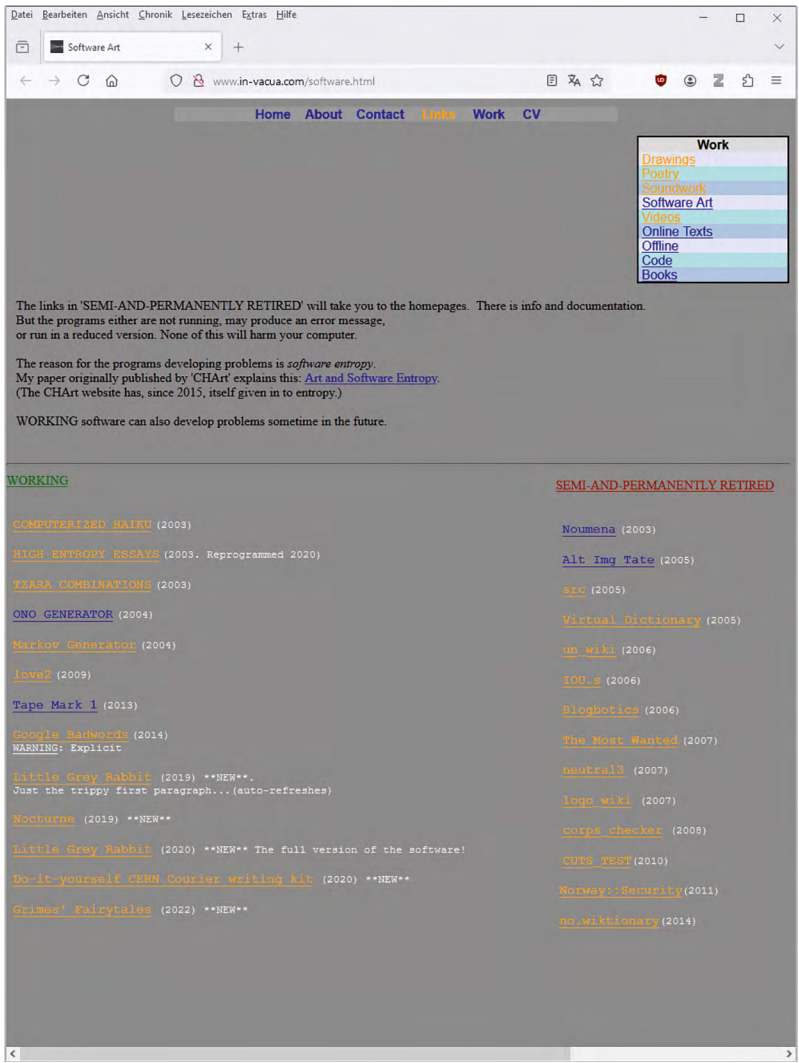


Fig. 1 Wayne Clements, Website <http://www.in-vacua.com/software.htm>. Accessed 11 January 2025 (screenshot: Inge Hinterwaldner, 2025).

The Swiss artist Marc Lee created *OAMOS* (2007–2013) and *Breaking the News – Be A News Jockey* (2007) by scraping news from the web. He faced dysfunction soon after making the works. Lee comments, “My projects always evolve and change; and if something changes constantly, it has to be monitored constantly. And I never imagined that, without doing so, they might not be working anymore after three or four or five years” (Lee 2022). Even so, this life expectancy seems rather long compared to other works.

With their Firefox plug-in *The Real Costs* (2007), the artist Michael Mandiberg created a user service providing the exact amount of CO₂ emissions for any chosen flight on air travel websites such as Orbitz.com, United.com, and Delta.com. To automatically gather, calculate, and deliver this information,

the work needed to be connected to airplane data, but the new value also had to be added to the websites. Mandiberg stated that they have

encountered archival problems quicker than most technology projects, as it is dependent on the airplane websites it runs on, over which I have no control. These sites will inevitably change their HTML/CSS so that the plug-in can no longer decipher which site it is running on and how to calculate the distances and thus the carbon footprint. (Mandiberg n.d.)

The project was tailored to work with a defined set of air travel websites. Such websites are redesigned frequently, and with developers implementing a substantial change every few months, which were likely the moments in which *The Real Costs* broke for that particular website. To insert graphics and text without disrupting the website layout, it is necessary to identify the suitable 'anchor' to insert the bit of code. To do the math, the program needed to find the indication for the mileage between the two airports to put this scraped information into the equation. This means, the artist needed to find the <div> class and id in the HTML code, both to get the information on one spot and to safely insert the new information next to the price tag. Some real-life changes could have ripple effects on the online representation. "Or worse, these sites will cease to exist as companies absorb each other" (ibid.). Having included 10 to 15 websites, Mandiberg continued updating their work for about a year and a half before ultimately abandoning it, as the intensity of the labor showed no prospect of ending and proved unsustainable (Mandiberg 2024). The issues tend to add up on several levels: with establishing HTML5 standard in 2014, the use of <div> started to be recommended only as a hack for exceptions: "Authors are strongly encouraged to view the div element as an element of last resort, for when no other element is suitable" (WHATWG community 2024). If Mandiberg's project could have been maintained longer, it very likely would have witnessed the gradual disappearance of these HTML commands on which the functional architecture of *The Real Costs* relied.

Many aspects of the online world are constantly changing. In 2005, the curator Steve Dietz highlighted this phenomenon. Under the headline "Innovation on Internet Time," he provided a humorous hypothetical description of changes on the internet.

If an artist is going to play in the cutting edge [sic] tech field, the pace is brutal. Not only has Bill Gates's wealth increased $\times$ percent in y minutes, but there is now an updated version of Macromedia Director; two new releases of Real-player; three enhanced versions of Microsoft Internet Explorer; Microsoft has

broken up into four companies: Microsoft Classic, Diet Microsoft, Microsoft Lite, and Internet Microsoft; there are five new video codecs; six American Online (AOL) virus messages in your email; seven competing music formats and matching players; each Microsoft has issued new patches for Windows comprising a total of eight; nine new iMac colors have been introduced; ten new dot coms have announced Initial Public Offerings (IPOs); 11 new memes have circulated, and 12 new artist websites have been announced on Rhizome. (Dietz 2005)

A significant portion of the changes enumerated by Dietz would impact users not because of their news value (wealth, memes, homepages), but because they form part of the online infrastructure (programming languages, players, web browsers, compression codecs, data formats, software patches). He seems to be addressing the sense that these elements are updated almost as frequently as user content is created. Without all the layers of the specific field of the artwork functioning, errors creep in.

Physical and Cultural Entropy

Infrastructures become tangible due to frequent failures. Instead of stating ‘normally the internet infrastructure works well,’ I would suspect it is more adequate to say, normally it is kept ‘in good repair.’ Without enormous multi-lateral caretaking, the default would be an incessant spiraling of disrepair. I adopted this way of thinking from Fernando Domínguez Rubio’s book *Still Life: Ecologies of the Modern Imagination at the Art Museum*. He suggests viewing artworks as temporal configurations that are constantly deteriorating, which requires continuous attention to stabilize the object as much as possible. They are falling apart by the “blind relentlessness of things” (Domínguez Rubio 2020, 17), meaning: physical entropy – but also by neglect or re-evaluation, dynamics he terms “cultural entropy.”² I would like to specify the latter in one direction by introducing the term “regulatory entropy.” This term is not specific to online situations. Laws change, thereby opening and closing windows of opportunity for all – also for artworks. In the 1970s, when Anthony McCall developed his *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), dust and cigarette smoke made the projected light rays visible in the dark room, creating a penetrable

² This notion goes back to the sociologist Terry McDonnell (2016), not to be confounded by the notion ‘Cultural Entropy Score’ which denotes the measure of frustration and dysfunctionality in a company; cf. Bokler 2022.

sculpture. Later, insalubrious air was ruled out for public exhibition venues (cf. Williams 2008, 380). With clean spaces and smoking prohibited, McCall's work lost its taken-for-granted ecosystem and became dysfunctional. This caught the artist by surprise, with the audience already waiting. He vividly narrates how he got ordered out of the room by a museum guard while frantically trying to save the situation and generate smoke with three cigarettes in his mouth (cf. McCall in: McCall/Godfrey 2007). Basically, the same happens to artworks, but in their case, no one is there to say with authority: 'This is the artist' or 'This is art' and 'Let him/it re-join the opening.' A series of changes may get underway to settle the new legal circumstances. As a declared valuable ersatz, fog machines, and hazers were eventually offered and used in McCall's case. However, they came with inevitable sound, odor, a different feel of the fumes, the need to dose the smoke. This introduced rhythm, and sometimes interference issues with the light projector. Comparable challenges appear when one software is supposed to stand in for another one that got retired. Artists often see themselves in a situation where they need to find solutions for the unintended follow-up issues arising from the change in the system.

Artistic Strategies

In most cases, the use of an online service is granted only under certain terms of condition. When these terms change, the service per se is not gone, but some artworks may suddenly find themselves outside of the new ruling. Mechanisms judge all works and handpick those that get banned, removed, or have their access denied. When inspecting this regulatory version of 'cultural entropy,' which agents have a say in judging other entities? It is firewalls, websites, and all services offering an Application Programming Interface (API). API is the software intermediary that "connects computers or pieces of software to each other" (Wikipedia 2024, API) and performs security measures. APIs have specifications defining how to use and implement them. These 'gates' can be redesigned or introduce policy-based limits and quotas on API requests. They may alter the number of queries allowed per hour or day. For instance, Google limits the permitted contingent to 20 queries per second per IP address (20QPS). This is aimed at those who can act more quickly, namely bots. Bots are programs that operate autonomously and play a central role in artworks with a real-time component. Sometimes, they transgress the limits set by an API and are targeted as 'suspicious activity.' APIs experience the artworks based on their requests and they are then judged according to this performance or pattern of action. These artworks become

the subject of surveillance on a machine level. Since exceptions are difficult to negotiate,³ this circumstance is reflected in the artworks by way of various workarounds.

Turning Invisible – Disguising Bot Behavior

Artists venture into all sorts of directions disguising their bots. The FAQ section of a project is often where artists and programmers explain certain unexpected features or errors. The artist Adriana Knouf, for instance, released the following message regarding her *MAICgregator* (2009), which is a browser extension augmenting the news sections of US American universities with information about their sponsors. The user can select different degrees of information, and some include presenting portrait photos of the universities' trustees. One frequently asked question is: "Why are there no trustee images?" Knouf provides three reasons: as it is a research project with an open outcome, they might not have found any trustees from that particular university (yet) or any photos of them (yet). The third reason is infrastructural. Even if theoretically, the search could be accomplished more quickly, the search process might be artificially curbed, resulting in prolonged procedures. This strategy is adopted in cases when the search engines used would ban the bot because it easily exceeds the established request limitations. In Knouf's case, found trustee images are stored one by one, with considerable time passing between two such downloads (cf. Knouf n.d.).

These artificial delays and pacing strategies result in rhythms performed out of necessity, rather than by concept. Such arrhythmic calls are not necessary for a bot to function. Thus, they primarily serve as cover moves so that the bot is not blocked from the requested service. We could think of this behavioral pretending as a time-based key for an API gate. If using an API is vital, this slow-motion dance is a survival strategy. In that sense, certain aspects of how an artwork functions are directed solely toward the infrastructure. A human recipient may be unaware of the internet's largely invisible technical ecosystem and the additional maneuvers artworks must perform to accommodate it. Networked artworks are Janus-faced: one face is oriented towards the user (UI), the other towards another machine or algorithm (API). On both ends, there are expectations to be met and as can be seen from *MAICgregator*, often they are incongruent and the artist steps in to mediate.

³ It is not impossible to negotiate exceptional allowances. Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau met Google personnel at SIGGRAPH conference and could get a deal for their image-heavy work *RidingTheNet* (2000), cf. Sommerer/Mignonneau 2022.

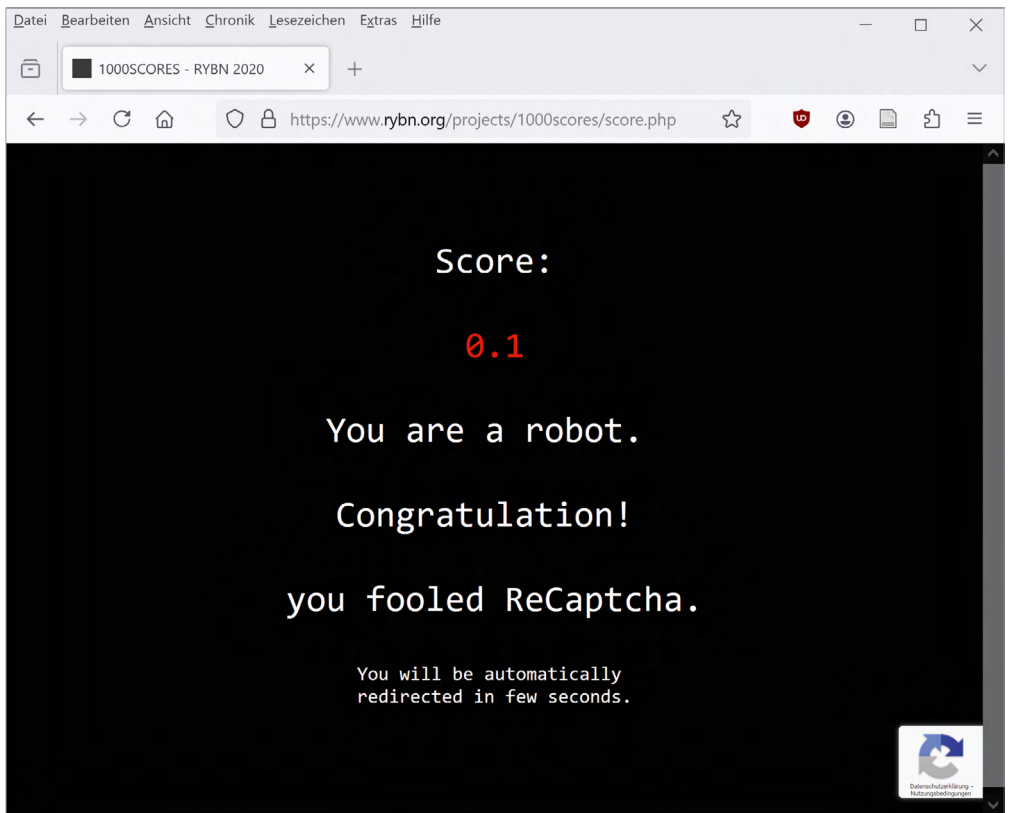


Fig. 2 RYBN, *Double Negative Captchas*, 2020, software. Website with which users can test their browser's user profile online, www.rybn.org/projects/1000scores/score.php. Accessed 16 December 2024 (screen-shot: Inge Hinterwaldner, 2024).

Indirectly, this double-sidedness is made a topic and rendered experienceable by some artworks. They support users in not being detected as humans, as in the browser extension *Refuse to be Human* × (2020–2021). !Medien-gruppe Bitnik suggests testing the effectiveness of the camouflage – that always needs to be performed anew with each user setup – with RYBN's *Double Negative Captchas* (2020, fig. 2). When passing the test with the help of the extension, they can experience the 'grey' web that is presented to search engine bots only. They are passing gates other users are denied. In a fully automated world, this can have both advantages and disadvantages at the same time, as was aptly illustrated by Tomo Kihara and Daniel Coppen in their interactive installation *How (not) to get hit by a self-driving car* (2022). Kihara and Coppen simulate a pedestrian crossing and allow artificial intelligence to analyze what happens on this spot. The audience is encouraged to traverse these meters in a way the AI does not identify them as persons – an understandable human desire and a real-world scenario in times of ubiquitous surveillance. Those who fooled the system triumph after their non-standard movement,



Fig. 3 Tomo Kihara and Daniel Coppen, *How (not) to get hit by a self-driving car*, 2022. A boy performs successfully at Ars Electronica, Linz 2024 (video stills: Inge Hinterwaldner, 2024).

only to learn that they would have been hit by a self-driving car (fig. 3). Being judged one way or the other potentially leads to different consequences. In the best scenario, it lets one explore the web differently, the standard situation is more likely that one encounters an obstacle.

Turning Narrative – Adding the Story of the Struggle

Everything a Google crawler algorithm labels as ‘unsafe’ will be added to Google’s blacklist. This has affected about 10,000 websites every day since 2003. As a consequence, Google, other search engines, and anti-virus companies flag the website as not secure to visit. This blacklisting results in a protective veil put in front of the work – here not protecting the work, but the user. It definitively changes the perception of that website for most of the rest

of the world. There are several reasons why people would think that their site is on a Google blacklist or URL blacklist. “When users see these stark warnings, most will understandably steer clear of your site, immediately and severely impacting your traffic and visibility in Google Search” (Sild 2024).

Some of Constant Dullaart’s Google-based work met that destiny. Dullaart put together a documentation website where he laid out the struggle to get along with Google regarding his series of works animating the search page. His documentation and narration are kept to a minimum and the site is little more than an untitled list of events with chronological entries from 2008 to 2019. It informs viewers why a particular project was blacklisted, the responses this triggered in him or fellow artists, and which of the projects had already gone offline or defunct. We learn that his <http://thedisagreeinginternet.com> (2008) was blocked in 2008 and again in 2018 and according to the artist, even emails mentioning the websites got blocked. As of January 2025, it appears to be whitelisted (Dullaart n.d.). The measures and countermeasures provide the basis for enhancing the artwork with a diary of this fight. By producing a (hi)story, the status of being offline is just one mode of existence into which this work is forced temporarily. With that narrative enters also the additional semantic layer of honoring both the Sisyphus and David versus Goliath myths.

Turning Performative – Showing the Caring

While one might imagine infrastructure as a stable pillar – something one should be able to rely on in the long run – online infrastructure, by contrast, seems to be cooked by the minute. The US-American artist Ben Grosser who constantly fights the updates of the interface (API) to Facebook gives a visceral report. His *Facebook Demetricator* (2012–present) is a browser extension that hides all metrics on Facebook. As soon as these numbers vanish, a lot of competitiveness built into this attention economy service gets undermined. Thus, this work changes one’s attitude and diminishes the urge to check for likes. It provides some calm, but it operates in unsteady waters. “NOTE on January 1, 2021: I am currently rewriting Demetricator for the new Facebook design and will release it ASAP. Check back for updates – or if you already have it installed, you’ll get the update automatically” (Grosser n.d.). Later that year, he transformed this misery into a strategy and an art performance: “NOTE on 28 July, 2021: I will be rewriting Facebook Demetricator during a series of live coding events as part of my upcoming exhibition *Software for Less* at arebyte Gallery, London. The show opens on 20 August, so check back for links to watch and/or get the new version shortly thereafter” (ibid.). The artist connects and stays in contact with his audience. In four weekly ses-

sions, Grosser live-streams his coding on the gallery's YouTube channel. Before the audience can see his debugging techniques, he explains the situation. Due to time running out for the opening of the show, the artist and arebyte Gallery's curator decided to make the recoding of the work part of the exhibition's events program (Grosser 2021). Grosser lays open the routines of detecting problems in the interplay between Facebook's new settings and his source code, finding solutions and typing alterations in his code. Normally, this happens behind closed doors. By publicly performing this maintenance work, he draws attention to its problems, situating himself as a 'maintenance artist' in the tradition of artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles by showing how long the repairs take, educating others about how to do it, and framing this activity as something that is, in principle, remunerable. Here we see a strategy that we can characterize as the evolution from an autonomously performing art piece to a service-providing artistic performance.

Turning Fossilized – Replacing Action with Recordings

Ted Davis's work *youtube.pawgorithm* (2016) was hit by a new regulation in the middle of an exhibition, when the API for YouTube suddenly went from unlimited credits to a few searches per day (Davis 2021). The work depended on sending frequent consecutive requests to the YouTube Search module to function. As a consequence, under the new rule, it was blocked after only a few minutes. Being on show, the artist did not have much leeway. So, Davis recorded several sessions for as long as he could and pieced these recorded snippets together. Although an average visitor might not have noticed the difference phenomenologically, for the artist this emergency solution felt like a bitter compromise. It altered his work's character. An originally interactive live work had turned into a video documentation or demo version of itself. It is dissatisfying to end up with a format that might have been reached much more easily with other methods. In Davis's case, it was particularly disruptive because it catapulted the artist into an emergency that required reacting swiftly. Unpredictability creates distress. Time pressure can turn into a quick temporary fix while another, better solution could have been feasible with more time.

Turning Communicative – Putting Up Intermediate Remedies

As net art is always on view, the real-time effect often does not allow artists time to repair it before a potential visitor detects the ruin. Something not working always looks abandoned in this realm. They become thin, like skele-

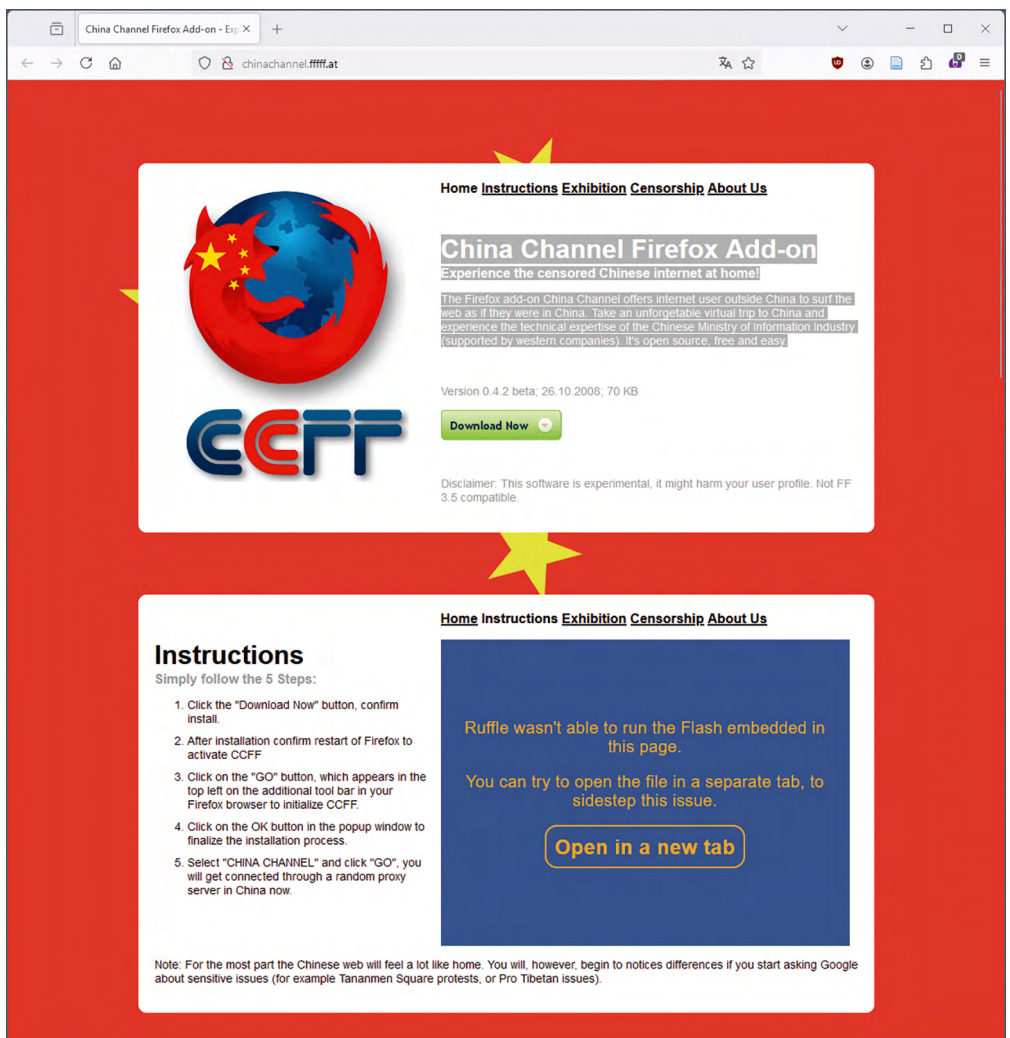


Fig. 4 Tobias Leingruber, Aram Bartholl, Evan Roth, *China Channel Browser*, 2008, <http://chinachannel.fffff.at/> (screenshot: Inge Hinterwaldner, 2025).

tons of broken links and past functionalities, with no flesh and surely no full aesthetic experience. The various messages of brokenness, of unsupportedness, of dead ends are the new face of digital ruins (fig. 4). They remain as written reminders of what once was, of which varying degrees of decay and existence can be perceived. Upon seeing such signs, the user knows that it is not worth devoting further attention, it is often a hopeless case. Sometimes the work is still partially functional, which can be mistaken for the full artistic intention.

The remedy for the change of the infrastructural base is handed down to the artists. When roaming the homepages of internet artists and focusing on hints of dysfunctionality, we find several strategies (fig. 5). They might first

Archival Video

This 2005 work was created to run in browsers using the now-obsolete Flash plug-in. It is archived here as a video.

Got It

temporarily down due to upgraded PHP on webhost...
stay tuned.

Kathack-Extension

Chrome extension that revives [Kathack](#). Originally created by Alex Leone, David Nufer, and David Truong, the original bookmarklet no longer works because web browsers have become picky.

Unfortunately, Google now requires a valid Google Maps API Key in all HTML maps, and Google doesn't seem to think that this map's key is valid. Check your browser's JavaScript console for more details.

Tarot Arcana and Suits

Urban Dictionary

BananaSlug uses the [Google APIs](#), and as such, it's limited to 1000 queries a day (which is happening quickly now!) If we're past the limit, we send you to Google with your search term and seed word.

One more thing... if plain old Google doesn't return many results for your search, BananaSlug's seeded subset won't either.

<http://www.easylife.org/>

(Ignore warning, website exists!)

The site was made in 2002. A lot has changed with browsers and javascript since. The site currently (2021) seems to work as intended in most browsers, but that might change at any time.

This website is being changed to a "secure" website, using the https protocol instead of http. Currently the "secure" version is not working. To see the non-secure site please copy and paste this link into your browser:

<http://jevbratt.com>

Fig. 5 Collage of messages artists put on the websites of temporary defunct artworks. From top downward: William Poundstone, Ted Davis, Constant Dullaart, Nasa203, Aneel Nazareth, Steve Nelson, Alexei Shulglin, and Lisa Jevbratt (screenshots: Inge Hinterwaldner, 2021–2025).

tag their ruins as ‘temporarily out of order’ to say ‘this is not it’ as a measure to minimize damage to their reputation.⁴ Some messages show that they felt the need for social repair. Artists have to revisit their works regularly. The US-American artist Don Relyea decided to explain his updates to his *Real Time Contextual Art Generator* to his audience in 2007, on his website:

Due to some changes with the google images service I needed to fix my data scrape and release a new version immediately to fix a but with the images not showing up. So I have released a slightly less buggy new alpha version with the ability to pull in local files after an initial query has been made. (Relyea 2007a)

In other words, after the difficulties persisted, he produced a variant with an offline mode. We can therefore assume that functionality was attributed a slightly higher priority than the fact that the images need to come from the internet. The second quote reads: “Due to a security update in shockwave the online preview version does not work anymore. Please use the exe. Thanks!” (Relyea 2007b). Relyea explains that the origin of the problem was brought to his piece from outside, and nonetheless, he is not hesitant to actively rewrite his code. Why is the rewriting of the code so virulent in the first place? Because infrastructures such as hardware, software, and policyware fail and change. All this (need for) readiness to change one major defining site of a programmed artwork is rooted in the need to compensate for changes in the supporting structures that do not lay in the artists’ hands.

Who Cares? Mending One’s Own Oeuvre – Not New, Still Unpleasant

The conservator Hanna Hölling wrote that traditionally, “[f]rom the perspective of an artist, doing the job of mending other master’s crumbling sculptures was neither considered artistic nor even as honourable work” (Hölling 2017a, 89–90). However, now – especially in the digital domain – artists are increasingly required to mend their works. To be sure of this, we can also find examples in the past. These situations mainly arise from the use of cheap production materials since the 20th century or with improper use. An early known example for the latter is the copying practice that Federico Barocci’s altar piece *Entombment of Christ* (c. 1579–1582) was submitted to. The commissioners had secured themselves the permission for professionals to copy

⁴ Dragan Espenschied draws a more optimistic picture and is convinced that younger scholars learnt to appreciate the ruins.

the painting. This resulted in other artists placing a thin paper directly onto the painting and tracing its contours. With its popularity rising, this happened so often that the painting soon got in a precarious state. In 1588, an annoyed Barocci agreed to restore his own work, however, that was pricy for the commissioners (cf. Lorch 2013, 13). This example shows how artists in the past also carried out preservation measures to protect their own works that had become worn down without the artists' fault.

In cases where the artworks succumb to software obsolescence, the journey may sometimes be over. Given the entropic tendencies of software-based art, Clements pleads for open-sourcing the code so that the structure of the artwork becomes accessible and interested parties can engage in versioning (Clements 2009, footnote 5). But sometimes somebody cares about the remnants and arranges pathways forward. Elliot Woods from the artist duo Kimchi and Chips wrote in an Instagram post: "10 years ago I got heavily into creative coding with C++. Since then, more than 0.5% of my life is spent getting my own old code to work again with updated libraries. I love openFrameworks, but I can see why other platforms are more attractive to a new generation of artists" (Woods 2021). Artists can quantify how much of their productive time goes into repair, mostly as unpaid labor. If substantial financial support exists, it is likely only for the conservation or revival of an old artwork for a specific purpose, such as an exhibition. What is necessary is a vision for how to carry a work forward, along with the idealism to make it happen. Sustaining a piece of software in any form involves not only a physical transfer but also a conceptual translocation.

Institutional Care

For works fortunate enough to enter a collection, the chances of institutionalized care are better. Then, the developed strategies are thoroughly evaluated by specialist teams, eventually executed, and possibly also published. I will briefly touch on three such case studies.

Cutting the Code – Redrawing the Boundaries

The net art piece *Brandon* (1998–1999) by the artist Shu Lea Cheang was commissioned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and was also in Rhizome's ArtBase.⁵ This double affiliation ensured that it was subject to at least

⁵ Rhizome's ArtBase was established in 1999. It is an archive of born-digital artworks with a focus on net art. The earliest contribution dates back to 1983. In addition to collecting art-

two major reconstructions, in 2006 and 2016–2017. The first collaborative effort was conducted with the support of the artist and led by Francis Hwang, the technical director of Rhizome as well as Caitlin Jones from the Guggenheim Museum. They updated the work from a then seven-years-old PHP 3, however, the complex parts written in Java posed a major problem. Additionally, they could not establish contact with the original programmer. Both led to the decision to “clos[e] off those areas of the site so they wouldn’t be part of the artwork” (Francis Hwang, in: Martin c. 2006).

The strategy to render the piece presentable was to conduct amputations. They excluded from the work all elements deemed to irrecoverable to be restored. Ten years later, the conservator Emma Dickson restored it for the Guggenheim Museum (Guggenheim Museum 2017).

Enveloping and Commenting the Code – ‘Code Resituation’

The mathematician Deena Engel and the senior conservator at the Guggenheim Museum Joanna Phillips propose an alternative to the so-called ‘code migration,’ which is the current practice by computer programmers and

includes the deletion and replacement of non-functional original code. Intended behaviors and discernible output of an artwork would be recreated by means of contemporary programming languages, aiming for the most elegant and efficient programming solutions currently available. (Engel/Phillips 2017–2018)

However, with this radically invasive intervention, several features related to the aesthetics of production (an artist’s way of programming, choice of programming language, and all artistic and expressive idiosyncrasies) are in danger of vanishing for the benefit of ‘behavioral’ surface performance aspects. And with artworks, one looming danger is always the possibility of misinterpreting the intended creative malfunctional and aesthetic behaviors of a programmed piece. The authors call their alternative ‘code resituation,’ which is based on the conservation principle of minimal intervention and transferred to the software-based art (like the Guggenheim initiative ‘Conserving Computer-based Art’). It seeks to keep the original code and add an exoskeleton of a new code to restore functionality, it seems to be more an addition than a replacement. The code and its execution are often dependent on a

works and data about art, they provide an emulation service and operate an own webrecorder platform. Website: https://artbase.rhizome.org/wiki/Main_Page. Accessed 16 March 2025.

specific hardware and software environment. As soon as these environments fail because of technological obsolescence, breakdown, or retirement, the artwork “may require conservation intervention on its code level” (Engel/Phillips 2017–2018).

One concrete example is that some Java applets are no longer supported in a 20-year-old artwork nor is the `<blink>` tag that was once used to make a text flash – a frequent feature of early websites. The solution here could be to keep the command in the original code and to write a Javascript function *outside* of the artist’s code, surrounding it and pointing into it. This commenting, performative second layer of code indicates that the program should retrieve a specific sequence of code and then execute its intended function. It helps navigate and interpret the original code. It is like an exoskeleton.

Rewriting the Code – ‘Generative Preservation’

Martine Neddham created the artistic web project *mouchette.org* (ongoing since 1996). She argues that if something has to be redone – and choices must be made – it should be done in a way that stays truer to the spirit of the work than to its material components, such as code or hardware (Neddham in: Hendricks 2020). Neddham coined the concept of “generative” preservation or conservation, in which the notion of an ‘original’ is set aside in favor of the idea of an ‘origin.’ The former implies a fixed object, whereas the latter serves more a starting point for a process. In this view, “the focus becomes the relation of this point to a multi versioning path” (Black 2020).

As constant evolution and versioning seem to be a feature of the internet infrastructure and culture, this conceptual model makes the artwork fitter. It does not stick to an established status quo but goes with the flow. *Mouchette* has already lived through several software versions and programming updates. Neddham leaves the traces of previous versions, for instance by inserting a small message that says the section ‘Lullaby for a Dead Fly’ of her *mouchette.org* project has moved from Flash to HTML5 (cf. Hendricks 2020). Hölling reports that early conservation theories pursued an object-based approach and took the artist’s intention as the main guideline. In 1963, Cesare Brandi published his book on the theory of restoration (Brandi 1963), which is remarkable due to its anti-positivist stance and its foregrounding of artistic, historical, and aesthetic criteria for restoration. For him, the unity of an artwork was central, and while the look (*aspetto*) needed to be preserved, the structure (*struttura*) could be altered if necessary (cf. Hölling 2017a, 91). When trying to align Brandi’s considerations with the situation of software-based art, it is likely the source code that would figure as ‘structure’ and that ‘can be subject to resto-

ration' (which seems to be the opposite of 'being preserved unaltered'). The freeze-frame paradigm (artwork becoming frozen at the moment of museum purchase) hardly holds true for net art. Referring to Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, the conservator Hölling proposes a temporal logic for conservation theory that recognizes an artwork's life and that its present state conserves also something of its past states (cf. Hölling 2017b, 5).

This seems to resonate with Martine Neddham's stance in her long-term project *Mouchette*. Hölling promotes the idea that custody can be seen as a stewardship that accompanies the life of an artwork, not clinging to a certain status at a specific point in time. If a changeable work is said to conserve something of its former states, it thus accumulates history without losing its lifeline to the past versions.

Confronting this idea with the harsh reality of many online pieces, it remains to ask where we would position the broken state of an artwork. What does a broken piece of software transmit regarding its earlier versions? Or would only functioning states of the works enter their CV? I believe that the broken states of artworks also have something valuable to tell us. The failed connections to servers, services, and software updates are certainly witnesses to a change in the infrastructural field. They can help us date and log (culture-relevant) events that have taken place in the infrastructure. They will have closed – and opened – windows of opportunity.

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Business Infrastructures

Art and Trade Networks in Kate Rich's *Feral Trade*

Christoph Chwatal

Introduction

What if a shipping network were built not on profit and optimization, but on conversation and chance? What if logistics – the invisible engine of global trade – were not streamlined but slow-moving and even unpredictable? *Feral Trade*, a long-term project by the UK-based Australian artist Kate Rich, turns these questions into a working method. Since 2003, Rich has routed groceries like coffee and olive oil not through commercial supply chains, but through informal networks of artists, friends, and art institutions. It exposes the hidden scaffolding of circulation – the supply routes, transactions, and frictions that typically remain unseen. *Feral Trade* constitutes a dual intervention: into the infrastructures of trade and into the systems of art itself.

The concept for *Feral Trade* originated after Rich became involved with the Cube Microplex in Bristol, UK, a cinema complete with a bar and an arts and event program. Unlike corporate gigaplexes, such microplexes function as small, independent ventures. Rich has held a range of positions in the organization during her involvement over the past two decades. A non-profit organization and cooperative, Cube is run by the effort of its members. This is comparable to the post-1968 culture of projects, in which businesses such as bookshops, bars, and cafés played a crucial role (Reichardt 2014, 319–347). These ventures were guided by an anti-capitalist stance, and decades later, this ethos is carried on by the Cube. The cinema's mission statement reflects this legacy, expanding out from the organizational form onto the line of products on offer: "We aim to offer alternatives and make a difference – in our programming and in the way we trade. We don't sell Coca Cola – we make our own recipe cola. We don't serve Nescafé – we ship *Feral Trade* coffee from Central America" (Cube Microplex n.d.).

The decision to trade in alternative products underscores Cube's commitment to doing business differently: to counter mass-marketed products and the infrastructures of their circulation in an era of globalization. Cube Cola came into development in 2004, when Rich and her coworker Kayle Brandon

LG & SML SPATULA
 FUNNEL
 SYRINGES
 JUG
 SCALES
 STORAGE CONTAINER
 ORANGE OIL
 LIME OIL
 LEMON OIL
 CASSIA OIL
 NUTMEG OIL
 CORIANDER OIL
 LAVENDER OIL
 GUM ARABIC
 CARAMEL COLOUR
 CITRIC ACID
 CAFFEINE
 VODKA
 WATER
 GUN GPL
 2 X MORTAR & PESTLE
 MEASURING SPOONS
 POWER DRILL

CUBE COLA ~ 2008

STEP 1: THE EMULSION FORMULA

Use food-grade essential oils only.

- 7.50 ml orange oil
- 7.00 ml lime oil
- 2.00 ml lemon oil
- 0.75 ml cassia oil
- 1.50 ml nutmeg oil
- 0.50 ml coriander oil (12 drops)
- 0.50 ml lavender oil (12 drops)
- 0.50 ml neroli oil (optional highly expensive)

Using a measuring syringe, measure out the oils into a glass or ceramic container. Keep the oils covered to avoid volatile fumes escaping.

20 g food grade freeze dried gum arabic (equivalent to 44ml)
 40 ml water (low calcium / low magnesium)
 1 drop vodka (optional)

Use a pestle and mortar to dissolve the gum arabic into the water, with optional 1 drop vodka which can aid hydrofelicity (the total quantity of vodka will be 0.0003ml per litre of cube-cola).

Place the gum/water mix in a high-sided beaker. Pyrex glass or stainless steel are best. Use a high-power drill (the greater the RPM the better) with a hand kitchen whisk attached; you may need to modify the handle of the whisk so it fits. Whisk the gum mixture at high speed while your colleague droppers the oils mix in steadily with the measuring syringe. Continue to whisk at high speed for several minutes, or until you can see the oils and water emulsify.

STEP 2: THE CONCENTRATE

195 ml double strength caramel colouring (DD Williamson Caramel #050)

Add the caramel colouring to your 65ml emulsion formula.

Then make a caffeine/citric solution:

65 ml citric acid (use a metric measuring spoon to measure)
 100ml water
 18ml caffeine (powder)

In a mortar and pestle, mix the citric acid into the water. This should dissolve easily. When it's clear, use a sieve to add the caffeine. Mix thoroughly, the caffeine will take 5-10 minutes to dissolve. The mixture may behave erratically, turning either white or clear for no apparent reason.

Add the citric/caffeine solution to the emulsion formula, passing it through muslin or jelly bag to remove any anomalies. This is your cola concentrate (total measurement 365ml / equivalent to 117L eventual cola).

To subdivide the concentrate into manageable quantities, please consult the following table. We do so for easy mailout and long-distance production into cola syrup with the local addition of sugar and water.

TABLE OF CUBE-COLA VALUES	
Large	56ml makes 18ltr Cola
Small	28ml makes 9ltr Cola
MINI	14ml makes 4.5ltr Cola

STEP 3: THE COLA SYRUP

750ml water (we tend to use filtered tap water)
 1.5KG granulated sugar (beet sugar if available)
 56ml Cube-Cola concentrate

Make a sugar syrup (mix in a cooking pot on low heat to speed dissolve) with 700ml of the water and all of the sugar.

When the sugar syrup has cooled, mix in the cola concentrate, using the remaining 50ml water to rinse out the concentrate jar to ensure full inclusion. You now have approximately 2.25L Cube-Cola syrup or an eventual 18L Cube-Cola.

STEP 4: THE COLA

As required, make up your cola as a 7:1 mix, 7 parts carbonated water to 1 part cola syrup. We currently use 250 ml syrup in a 2L bottle of sparkly water, the cola can alternatively be composed direct in the drinker's glass.

NOTES:

1 batch of this recipe as written here will produce approximately 117 L cola. You may want to divide all quantities by 1/2 if you do not want to become a small cola producing factory; smaller divisions of the recipe are difficult to handle at the emulsion stage, as the measures of oils and water are already very slight.

STANDING ON THE HANDS OF GIANTS

This cola recipe is released under the GNU GENERAL PUBLIC LICENSE
 Version 2, June 1991 Copyright (C) 1989, 1991 Free Software Foundation, Inc. 59 Temple Place Suite 330, Boston, MA 02111-1307, USA
<http://www.gnu.org>

Cube-Cola is manufactured inhouse at the
 CUBE MICROPLEX, BRISTOL
 4 Princess Row, Bristol BS2 8NQ, UK
 By Kate Rich and Kayle Brandon
<http://sparror.cubecinema.com/cube/cola>
cola@sparror.cubecinema.com

CONCENTRATE JARS
 MODIFIED HAND WHISK
 STIRRING STICKS
 TEA STRAINER
 JELLY BAG
 MINI MEASURING GLASS
 MEASURING BEAKERS
 GLASS MEASURING BEAKERS
 POWER DRILL

CONCENTRATE JARS
 MODIFIED HAND WHISK
 STIRRING STICKS
 TEA STRAINER
 JELLY BAG
 MINI MEASURING GLASS
 MEASURING BEAKERS
 GLASS MEASURING BEAKERS
 POWER DRILL

Images: 1. Nutmeg, 2. Cassia, 3. Drift-Whisk, 4. Gum Arabic, 5. Sugar Beet, 6. Lavender, 7. Lemon in Emulsification - Spokest High st. meet.

Fig. 1 Instructional flyer for Cube Cola, c. 2008 (© Kate Rich).

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Fig. 2 Shipping waybill for *Feral Trade*'s first shipment (screenshot from https://feraltrade.org/cgi-bin/package/2package.pl?action=format_waybill&edit_id=1171).



feral trade coffee Nonualco

Borbonne coffee (Arabica) shadegrown in high-altitude volcanic San Pedro Nonualco, El Salvador, by Cooperativa de Caficultores Nonualcos R.L. (CODECANO). Roasted and packaged by CODECANO on location. Ground or beans. <http://www.feraltrade.org/coffee>. ferally traded since: 24/02/05.

FER-1171

Codecano San Pedro Nonualco, El Salvador to Cube Microplex Bristol, UK
Dispatched 12/06/03 Delivered 18/06/03





coffee Nonualco shipment FER-1171

REMARKS: first test-shipment, coffee from Codecano to Microplex. Shipping by Delta airlines, \$125.43

QTY:	65 units at bag each
FROM:	Codecano in San Pedro Nonualco, El Salvador
TO:	Cube Microplex in Bristol, UK http://microplex.cubecinema.com
SENDER:	Alan Alexander
RECEIVER:	kate rich
REQUESTED:	to ship between 04/03/03 and 04/04/03
INVOICE:	☒ invoice-1171
STATUS:	delivered Cube Microplex 18/06/03
MAP	route map
www.feraltrade.org	

COURIER: ALAN ALEXANDER DELTA AIRLINES KATE RICH

TOTAL ROUTE: Codecano-San Salvador-SAL San Salvador airport-Atlanta airport-LGW-London Heathrow Airport-M4-M32-Cube Microplex

coffee Nonualco Codecano to Cube Microplex 2. cafe a uk 3. airport1 4. radius 5. receiving2 6. test brew2 7. test brew3 8. test brew4 11. bodega de exp

Shipping Facts		
FER-1171 import purchase & freight		
65 x coffee Nonualco bag	gross	per bag
Cooperative Cafecultores Nonualco (CODECANO) for 30kg coffee (USD \$150)		
freight, Delta Airlines (\$66)	£91.45	£1.41
Car transport San Pedro Nonualco - San Salvador airport (\$20)	£40.25	£0.62
Paperwork, El Salvador (\$25)	£12.2	£0.19
	£15.25	£0.23
total	£159.15	£2.45

KATE RICH Ground agent Plane Handling receives shipment at London Gatwick and transfers to Radius Park Heathrow, better proximity to Bristol. Cube Car pickup, drive to the airport 2x as the coffee takes more than a day to clear Customs.

Courier Report FER-1171 DISPATCHED: 12/06/03 DELIVERED: 18/06/03 ALAN ALEXANDER COFFEE SHIPMENT 1. car to airport from San Pedro Nonualco courtesy co-op. air freight with delta airlines via Atlanta Georgia (hub).

freight and handling coffee Nonualco to Cube Microplex sponsored by

FERALTRADE products passed by hand. The word 'feral' describes a process that is deliberately wild, as in pigeon, as opposed to nature wild (wolf). Feral Trade freight operates largely outside commercial channels, using the surplus potential of social, cultural and data networks for the distribution of goods. contact kate@feraltrade.org

started experimenting with open-source cola recipes to create a concentrate for the bar at the Cube. Their recipe and instructional flyer (fig. 1) on how to replicate the formula drew from OpenCola, a 2001 initiative by the now-defunct, eponymous non-profit software firm, which had released the recipe in order to “promote the company” (Heltzel 2001). OpenCola aimed to extend the radical imagination of open-source licensing to commodities and consumer products beyond the digital realm.

By that time, and intricately tied to Cube, Rich’s solo venture *Feral Trade* had taken shape. This was self-described as “an actual grocery business, trading goods along extended art and social routes” (Rich 2022, 16). *Feral Trade*’s inception as an artistic project (note the use of italics for *Feral Trade* in contrast to Cube Cola) was its first shipment: “FER-1171,” a consignment of thirty kilograms of coffee from a cooperative in El Salvador, delivered to the Cube on 18 June, 2003 (fig. 2). Brokered through Rich’s extended network, this order

sourced coffee directly from producers in Central America. The idea emerged from a skepticism of ‘fair trade,’ which emphasizes fair and sustainable production – particularly the working conditions of farmers – while often overlooking the entire trade cycle. Rich, in conversation with community economics scholar Katherine Gibson, stressed that the participants in *Feral Trade* (including herself) are less divided along the lines of producers and consumers. Instead, “all agents” are conceived as “active nodes, capable of sending, receiving or forwarding information – or in this case groceries – although some are more active than others” (Gibson/Rich 2015). Importantly, in *Feral Trade*, Rich is not only a trader but also a manufacturer: Cube Cola, produced by Rich and others, adds to the catalog of ‘feral’ goods, alongside coffee, olive oil, and cheese.

This chapter examines how *Feral Trade* operates as both an artistic project and a trade network – a business organization that mobilizes art as an infrastructure and “as a productive carrier for other activities” (ibid.). I will argue that *Feral Trade* exceeds a *representational* critique of infrastructure, instead offering an *expanded* infrastructural critique precisely due to its double status as an artistic project and a business organization. Furthermore, I will contextualize *Feral Trade* within debates around the limitations of tactical media. This form of DIY media activism emerged in the 1990s and is characterized by temporary, interventionist practices using low-cost or repurposed technologies (Raley 2009). Rich was associated with this movement through the collective Bureau of Inverse Technology.

Feral Logistics

The feraltrade.org-website documents the project, hosts calls for couriers and lists the goods that can be ordered for delivery (fig. 3). This “non-shop” (Rich 2016, 7) is based on personal interaction and discussion, often involving frictions – delayed arrivals, missed encounters, lost packages – all of which are documented in its database. Its front end, the homepage, is complete with maps, shipping information (such as waybills), notes from senders, couriers, and receivers, as well as receipts that disclose the amounts paid for commodities and shipping. To sustain the project and herself, the artist operates as a ‘sole trader’ and takes a commission for her services, likewise listed online. Rich has handled around 1,500 shipments to date. Shipping occurs gradually, often taking circuitous routes through a dispersed web of itinerant contacts and art world-related destinations around the globe. Along the way, shipments are frequently stored in interim locations, such as art institutions, offices, and private homes, with most goods eventually moving through Rich’s private

feral trade (import-export)
trading goods along social networks since 2003

enter a shipping number for tracking
FER- track

now shipping



Swiss alpine cheese



coffee from Mexico



olive oil from Spain



agave from Mexico



bamboo shoots from China



seaweed from Maine



mezcal from Mexico



blue corn from Mexico



feral trade courier track all shipments for go

LATEST COURIER ACTIVITY update 28/09/22	FER-2531 1 COFFEE EL VOLADOR, Bristol, UK to Helsinki, FINLAND	FER-2538 1 COFFEE EL VOLADOR, Bristol, UK to London, UK	FER-2540 5 COFFEE EL VOLADOR, Bristol, UK to Falmouth, UK	FER-2544 3 COFFEE EL VOLADOR, Bristol, UK to Rotterdam, NETHERLANDS	FER-2547 4 COFFEE EL VOLADOR, Bristol, UK to Helsinki, FINLAND	FER-2549 1 COFFEE EL VOLADOR, Bristol, UK to Helsinki, FINLAND	FER-2550 1 COFFEE EL VOLADOR, Brussels, BELGIUM	FER-2551 1 OLIVE OIL RETAMAR, Bristol, UK to Brussels, BELGIUM	FER-2556 1 COFFEE EL VOLADOR, Bristol, UK to Rovereto, ITALY
COURIERS SOUGHT to transport to	contact kate@feraltrade.org to offer carriage on SOME or ALL of this route.								

DEPARTURES

awaiting transit

- FER-2571 1 olive oil Retamar to Bristol
- FER-2566 1 olive oil Retamar to The North, Monmouth
- FER-2566 1 coffee El Volador to Brave New Alps, Rovereto
- FER-2551 1 olive oil Retamar to apass, Brussels
- FER-2550 1 coffee El Volador to apass, Brussels
- FER-2549 1 coffee El Volador to kiraoreilly.com, Helsinki
- FER-2547 4 coffee El Volador to Publics, Helsinki
- FER-2544 3 coffee El Volador to TOFU, Rotterdam
- FER-2540 5 coffee El Volador to blauhaus, Falmouth
- FER-2538 1 coffee El Volador to Highbury Stadium Square, London
- FER-2531 1 coffee El Volador to aa biennial, Helsinki

ARRIVALS

recent deliveries

- FER-2572 1 olive oil Retamar to FoAM Earth, Brussels
- FER-2570 1 olive oil Retamar to Windsworth, Looe
- FER-2569 1 olive oil Retamar to FoAM Earth, Brussels
- FER-2568 1 olive oil Retamar to Windsworth, Looe
- FER-2567 2 olive oil Retamar to York Road, Bristol
- FER-2561 1 olive oil Retamar to Windsworth, Looe
- FER-2565 1 olive oil Retamar to Bristol
- FER-2564 2 olive oil Retamar to 37 Looe Street, Plymouth
- FER-2563 2 olive oil Retamar to The North, Monmouth
- FER-2562 2 olive oil Retamar to York Road, Bristol
- FER-2560 4 olive oil Retamar to Intellect Books, Bristol
- FER-2559 1 coffee El Volador to Pobblebonk, Victoria

29/08/18
FERAL TRADE
SWISS ALPS
CHEESE
SHIPMENT 4,
15KG HAS
ARRIVED!!!

SEARCH the shipping archive

Fig. 3 *Feral Trade* landing page (screenshot from <https://feraltrade.org/cgi-bin/courier/courier.pl>).

apartment. Unlike conventional freight, *Feral Trade* shipments follow the contours of a decentralized and changing network, relying on the momentum of travel within it and often resulting in back-and-forth trajectories. This non-linear approach to logistics, where the shipment's path is contingent on personal mobility, echoes certain idiosyncrasies of standard freight transport.

As much as it provides a map of art and culture-related networks and institutions, the project enacts how the circulation of commodities can be alternatively organized; it is both analytical and prefigurative. In this respect, *Feral Trade* offers an infrastructural critique while subverting the flows of commercial distribution. The relational and situational qualities of exchange are brought into focus in this process, above the rationalization of global supply chains. Thus, *Feral Trade* can be seen as a response to logistics and supply chain management. "Containerization" represents "a material and an informational complex of black box routines, flowcharts, and massive amounts of

material and energy” (Hamilton Faris 2022, 240), where value emerges from the management of their circulation rather than from the goods themselves. Departing from standardized logistics and present-day “supply chain capitalism” (Boyle 2024), *Feral Trade* develops a model of logistics based on intimately scaled, human-oriented networks. Thus, it deploys an alternative economic model that centers concrete social relations rather than abstract market forces. *Feral Trade* challenges the notion that value accrues from optimized flows within a supply chain – capitalist logistics generate value by increasing efficiency and minimizing friction. Rich’s approach, in contrast, emphasizes the encounters, frictions, and mutual dependencies intrinsic to transactions within *Feral Trade*. ‘Value’ is located in these exchanges, often silent and only partially mediated.

Here, the concept of ‘feral’ becomes relevant, informed by both the artist’s use of the term and its articulations within posthumanist debates. One example of ‘feral’ is an animal in a state of de-domestication, wild and untamed, as well as “existing in a wild state” (Anonymous n.d.). Expanding upon this, it is described by the artist as a “wilfully or street-wild (as in pigeon), as opposed to the romantic imagination of a self-sufficient wildness (like the wolf)” (Rich 2022, 17). The concept of ‘ferality,’ as articulated by a group of researchers around Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, refers to entities, typically non-human, that engage with human-made systems in ways unanticipated or undesired by those who designed those systems. In posthumanist approaches, ‘ferality’ signals a state of autonomy and unpredictability, akin to an animal that has “left the farm to live in the forest” (Tsing et al. 2024, 10). *Feral Trade* is grounded in such notions while critiquing economic systems. Global infrastructures – container ship routes and automated data flows – render trade efficient but largely invisible, obscuring its social implications and ecological fallouts. *Feral Trade* rejects these routines by relying on the voluntary and ad hoc participation of individuals who carry goods within personal luggage, effectively dismantling the logistics ‘black box’ and inserting layers of interaction and localized exchanges into each transaction.

This mode of trade both resonates with and advances Jaimey Hamilton Faris’s concept of “infrastructure art.” Instead of an immanent reading focusing on typical art world institutions, an infrastructural perspective examines the interstitial systems linking institutions, along with the tacit routines that structure these links, thus amounting to an “extra- or intra-institutional critique” (Hamilton Faris 2022, 241). Within broader tendencies of institutional critique developing towards “instituent practices” (Raunig 2009) or “institutional liberation” (MTL Collective 2018), the concept of infrastructure has received traction in contemporary discussions. Significant contributions come

from the late Marina Vishmidt, who observed a shift from “an institutional to an infrastructural critique” (Vishmidt 2017, 222). Both are used

in a rather flexible way but chiefly to signal a view of the art institution as a site of resources—material and symbolic—and that calls for an opportunist deployment for the sake of furthering all sorts of projects rather than the loyal criticism attendant on ‘institutional critique’ in its more canonized [...] forms. (ibid.)

Vishmidt later argued that the only means of initiating a critical examination of art’s autonomy is through an organizational approach, and less so through a “thematic appropriation of the labour in art” (Vishmidt 2021, 15). Following Vishmidt, this is achieved by adopting art’s institutionally-backed autonomy across a transversal and potentially heteronomous field. As she continues,

[a]n institution can be a type of infrastructure, but the shift needs to be understood as moving from a standpoint which takes the institution as its horizon, thus accepting the moralised premises that perpetuate it, to one which takes the institution as a historical and contingent nexus of material conditions amenable to re-arrangement through struggle and different forms of inhabitation and dispersal. (ibid., 14)

Both “inhabitation” and “dispersal” are critical to *Feral Trade* as it positions itself within the art world as an intervention. At first, it recalls canonical works like Allan Sekula’s *Fish Story* (1989–1995) and Hito Steyerl’s *Duty Free Art* (2015), which critique containerized global trade and the relation of art institutions to these systems. *Feral Trade*, however, does not remain on the level of representation or institutional critique. While Sekula’s series exposes containerization as emblematic of “capitalist disavowal” (qtd. in Hamilton Faris 2022, 243), *Feral Trade* adds another layer by intervening directly in logistics, operating within a self-defined ‘business’ that maps and infiltrates supply chains, but does not merely replicate them. Instead, *Feral Trade*’s use of non-standard transportation (for example, suitcases instead of ISO containers) resists the homogenization of global trade (fig. 4).

Feral Trade thereby evades the “sweeping optimisations” (Rich 2022, 33) typical of traditional logistics. In contrast to *representational* infrastructure critique, *Feral Trade*’s *expanded* critique retools the infrastructures of trade and art, transforming standardized processes into an assemblage of localized and embodied interactions. *Feral Trade*’s intervention is threefold: Firstly, it



Fig. 4 Kate Rich, *Heath Bunting coffee courier briefcase*, 2013 (© Kate Rich).

intervenes in art world institutions by operationalizing them as logistical nodes and points of exchange – such as storage depots, pickup sites, or venues for the *Feral Trade Café* – within its trading network. Secondly, it extends from the art field to ‘the’ economy by proposing and enacting modes of exchange that depart from dominant market logics. Thirdly, it is not limited to the level of representation – although it makes visible and maps infrastructures (fig. 5) – it is also a practice of occupying and reclaiming said infrastructure. *Feral Trade* ultimately proposes a “re-arrangement” (Vishmidt 2021, 14) or re-attunement (Tsing et al. 2024) of trade and art.

Tactics

Feral Trade marks a shift in Rich’s practice and a departure from earlier media interventions. From 1991 onward, as part of the tactical media duo Bureau of Inverse Technology (B.I.T.), Rich engaged in interventions to disrupt and reframe digital and social environments. B.I.T. mostly operated anonymously, in both an unauthored and an unauthorized fashion. Tactical media groups such as Critical Art Ensemble, RTMark, and B.I.T. often operated under the guise of a group to evade the systems they critiqued, especially in the context of post-9/11 America. As Rita Raley put it, they were “not oriented toward the grand, sweeping revolutionary event” but engaged in “a micropolitics of disruption, intervention, and education” (Raley 2009, 1). B.I.T.’s work involved an interest in technology, specifically data collection and surveil-

Fig. 5 Kate Rich, *Feral Trade* database map showing coffee transports from 2003 to 2022, 2022 (© Kate Rich).



lance. This is demonstrated in the work *Bit Plane* (1997), a model airplane with a live camera that flew over Silicon Valley, the heart of technology and data capitalism. This addressed the nexus of technology and surveillance, as well as serving as a form of counter-surveillance. While still grounded in technology, notably open software and email, we find a sustained engagement with economic infrastructures through projects such as Cube Cola and *Feral Trade*.

There are other identifiable continuities within the project as well: by sharing the recipe and instructions, Cube Cola follows the principles of open software and open source movements and aligns with the “tendency of [...] collectives such as the Bureau of Inverse Technology to provide assembly instructions for their products and projects” (ibid., 8). Akin to open-source code, the recipe is a blueprint for an alternative mode of production. This extends into *Feral Trade*’s reliance on digital infrastructures common to activist and artist networks like email and other forms of networked communication. Both Cube Cola’s distribution model and *Feral Trade*’s operational model subvert conventional hierarchies. In doing so, both draw on open-source strategies that (like the previously mentioned projects by Critical Art Ensemble and B.I.T.) challenge the proprietary enclosures typical of corporate-dominated production.

One precursor for such organizational forms is the Nettime mailing list, founded during a meeting of the Medien Zentral Komitee at the 46th Venice Biennale in 1995. Initially used to publish the proceedings of the meetings, it started to act as an online forum for internet activists, artists, and theoreticians.

cians. Operating according to bottom-up principles and an “anarchistic rather than democratic” (Critical Art Ensemble 2001, 77) model, Nettime did not pertain to a clearly defined structure. The hierarchies within Nettime were based on whether people had time to take over functions and could contribute resources – a “gift economy” (Barbrook 1998) of the early internet. Tactical media’s founding document, “The ABC of Tactical Media,” was circulated via Nettime and stressed the importance of physical and virtual centers and infrastructure for tactical media (Lovink/Garcia 1997). Thus, parallel to working intensively on digital channels, tactical media practitioners worked on physical infrastructure. Similarly, Bristol’s Cube Microplex can be seen as such a space, manifesting the importance of physical location as outlined in the following quotation from “The ABC of Tactical Media”: “As well as castles in the air, we need fortresses of bricks and mortar, to resist a world of unconstrained nomadic capital” (ibid.).

With *Feral Trade*, Rich transitioned into an entrepreneurial mode, reflecting a broader trajectory seen across 21st century activist media practices where artists moved from tactical interventions toward creating lasting structures. This followed critiques of tactical media that emerged during the early 2000s, with theorists like Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter beginning to question its efficacy. Tactical media initially aimed to challenge the dominance of mainstream media and politics through small-scale interventions enabled by consumer electronics and networked communication. However, by the 2000s these had started to mirror capitalism’s transient logic. Without sustainable structures, tactical media risked aligning itself too closely with the capitalist imperatives it sought to critique, instead devolving into a spectacle (Lovink/Rossiter 2018, 37). To grapple with tactical media’s shortcomings, Lovink and Rossiter introduced the concept of “organized networks” (Rossiter 2006). As a critique of both short-term disruption and overly vertical party forms (Dean 2016), organized networks prompt alternatives to party politics, social movements, and nongovernmental organizations by combining on- and offline organization.

Further context for this transition is provided by critiques from figures like Peter Lamborn Wilson, better known by his pen name Hakim Bey. In an early response to “The ABC of Tactical Media,” he argued that autonomy and self-organization are only achievable if practitioners attend to the strategic aspects of intervention (Lamborn Wilson 1997). Developing upon Bey’s argument, McKenzie Wark later argued for an expansion of the tactics-strategy dichotomy into logistics in “Strategies for Tactical Media” (Wark 2010). More recent work from Wark on what she calls the “vectoralist class” highlights how contemporary capitalism functions by not only owning the means of produc-

tion but by controlling production “through patents, copyrights, brands, trademarks, proprietary logistical processes, and the like” (Wark 2019, 115). In *Capital Is Dead*, Wark underscores that corporations today derive much of their value from “vectoral” assets – a shift from traditional ownership toward the control of information and production pathways (ibid., 55). Wark’s analysis also reveals how tactical media’s focus on short-term and DIY resistance can quickly be subsumed by the vectoralist logic underpinning capitalist control.

Economy as Infrastructure

Feral Trade’s model of “repeat transaction” and “endurance” (Rich 2022, 81) not only subverts the supply chain on an economic level but also critiques the vectoralist accumulation of power by introducing informal networks and processes that more easily resist commodification. In summary, *Feral Trade* and its connected initiatives depart from the disruptive, tactical interventions of earlier 1990s and early 2000s media activism. This shift reflects broader theoretical critiques of tactical media. It signals a rethinking of how artists and activists might engage with socio-economic systems, not as antagonistic outsiders but as active participants.

Besides the database, lectures, interviews, and writings by the artist, collective contexts, and the more intimate moments of transport mediated via narratives and photographs on the website, *Feral Trade* has taken form as the *Feral Trade Café*, a vending stand in galleries and at festivals. In 2010, the *Feral Trade Café* was presented as an installation at the Castlefield Gallery in Manchester, and operated for over ten days during Newcastle’s AV Festival. It was also included in *Trade Show*, a group exhibition at R-URBAN, Paris, organized by artist Kathrin Böhm and curator Gavin Wade in 2014. These ‘pop-ups’ emphasize *Feral Trade*’s commitment to reimagining commerce as an embedded and relational practice. This interest in the intersection of art and economy was embraced in 2022, when ruangrupa, the curatorial collective of documenta fifteen, included the *Feral Trade* model into the quinquennial as part of the “lumbung continues” program (fig. 6). The drawing visualizes documenta fifteen’s temporality and infrastructural ambition: beginning with the “100 days” of the exhibition but continuing beyond it through localized networks, physical and digital shops, and a ‘collective pot’ that redistributes resources. *Feral Trade* is integrated here as part of a broader strategy of ‘slow’ distribution and trade. While *Feral Trade* centers personal interaction and informal exchange, its inclusion within documenta fifteen’s schema aligns it with a broader shift toward collectively organized frameworks of alternative art economies.

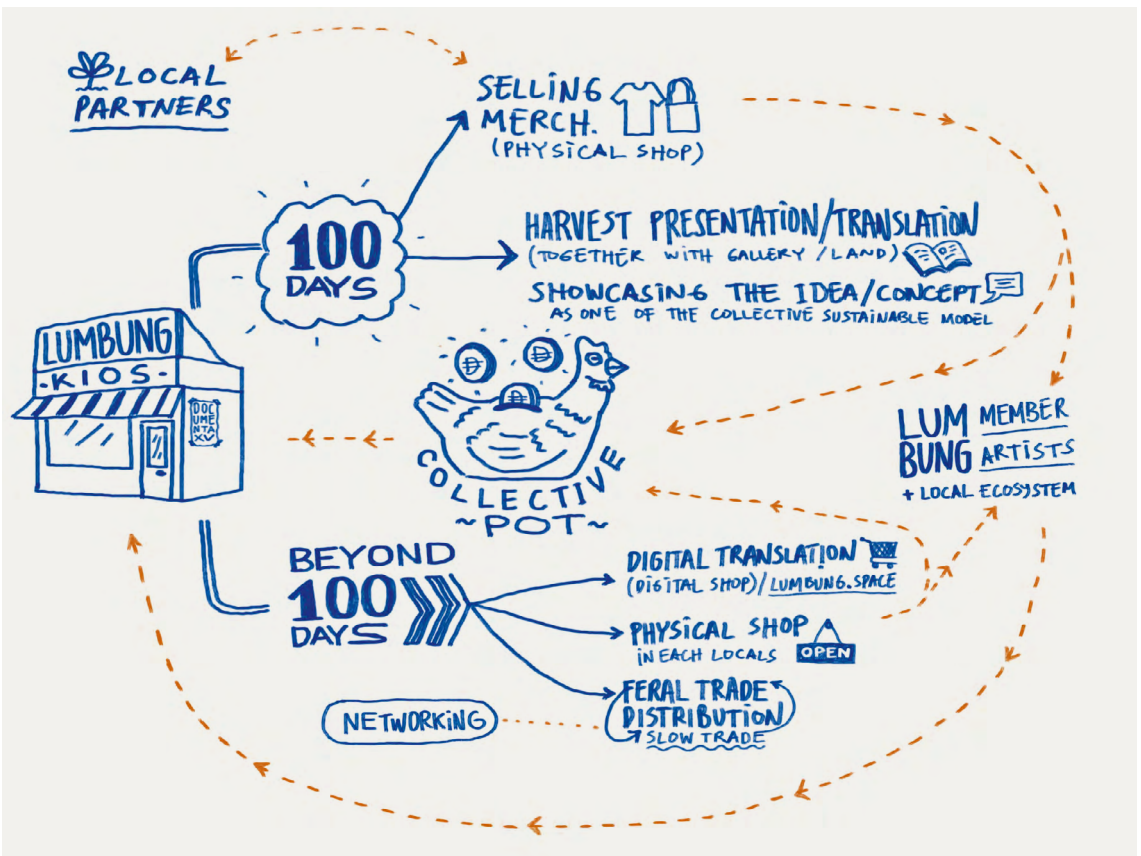


Fig. 6 Angga Cipta, *documenta fifteen: lumbung Kios*, 2022 (© documenta fifteen).

This shift is further reflected in intersecting projects such as *Company Drinks*, a soft drink company that emerged from an artistic project by Kathrin Böhm (Company Drinks). On June 6, 2018, Rich delivered twenty-three units of Cube Cola from Bristol to *Company Drinks* in London. The shipment “FER-2420” was then used to produce “BAD Cola.” *Company Drinks*, a Community Interest Company registered in 2015, is yet another example – albeit on a different scale – of an *expanded* infrastructural critique. As *Company Drinks* is an artwork and a legally recognized enterprise, it simultaneously critiques and transforms the form of the business organization and market transactions. The capitalist enterprise with its disputed status as a legal person – just like market dynamics – is “often portrayed as *naturally operating*, like tides or weather systems” (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013, 85). This naturalization leads to an atomization based on the separation of producers and consumers, an erasure that hinders both sides from knowing about each other. *Feral Trade* addresses this atomization of market transactions as “bleached of human connection” (Gibson/Rich 2015). While adding human connection to these

transactions, it understands that markets can indeed be recuperated as a “way we connect with others to obtain the things we need that we can’t produce for ourselves” (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013, 86).

Similarly, the economic dimensions of *Feral Trade* come into sharper focus when we examine the critique it levies against “capitalocentrism” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 35) – the cultural dominance of capitalist frameworks that ignore non-capitalist economic forms and conceive of them as minor, if not altogether irrelevant. In principle, this means that existing alternatives are perpetually held out of focus, leading to a narrow understanding of a potentially wide field of economies and economic practices. In this respect, *Feral Trade* challenges the persistent notion that no viable alternatives exist to global capitalism. Rich asserts that the values and modes of exchange outside of profit-centric capitalism are increasingly necessary. Market and supply chain logistics are processes of “obscuring the previous step and further disconnecting us from humans and the environment that is providing for us” (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013, 111). How can we trade the indistinctness and “anonymity” (ibid., 99) of global markets and supply chains for a personal connection? *Feral Trade* serves as a site for alternative practices of value creation within the art world and outside – transactions rooted in personal relationships and localized networks rather than economic utility.

Conclusion

It is no coincidence that *Feral Trade* started at a time where the “nomadic movement of the artist” (Kwon 2002, 3), bolstered by globalization and cheap flights, became not only a virtue but increasingly problematic – environmentally, ethically, and economically. As Miwon Kwon sketches in *One Place After Another*, art in the 1980s and 1990s became increasingly “unhinged” from physical sites (ibid.). This corresponded with the emergence of new artistic subjectivities on these global circuits: artists spent much of their time traveling, conducting temporary projects for institutions, and working in residencies across the globe. Globalization, networkedness, and project-bound art became intimately entwined while the role of the artist shifted to one of “cultural-artistic service provider[s]” (ibid., 4). Although operating on a small scale and willingly remaining on this scale, disavowing ‘the’ economy’s imperative of scalability, *Feral Trade* recognizes these globalized relations and the institutional priorities that bolster them while attempting to repurpose them.

An early tagline, “Feral Trade since 2003,” signaled the project’s drive toward longevity, if not institutionalization. Initially conceived as a ten-year endeavor, it has now existed for over two decades. It has only recently been

declared “archived as a project for now” if not “paused indefinitely” (Rich 2024). The latest shipment, “FER-2572,” 150 liters of olive oil from Bristol to Brussels, was delivered on 28 September, 2022. Certain aspects of *Feral Trade* as economic practice have, however, been integrated into Rich’s subsequent projects. These include the Institute for Experiments with Business (IBEX), Radical Administration (RADMIN), and the Feral MBA. The latter is her PhD dissertation, completed in a practice-based program at the Faculty of Arts, Creative Industries and Education of the University of the West of England in 2022. This serves as a documentation-cum-theorization of her practice and outlines a range of new projects (Rich 2022). These later projects build on and expand upon *Feral Trade*’s emphasis on intimate exchanges, ensuing diverse understandings of economy. Like *Feral Trade*, an artistic, logistical, and economic experiment, they offer counterpoints to corporate models, fostering “moments of encounter” (Rich 2024) over the purely transactional and anonymized relationships usually found within commodity relations and business models.

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Section IV

The Accompanied Object

Green Modernism

A Talk on Eco-curating and Climate-friendly Transport

Burcu Dogramaci and Miriam Szwast

Burcu Dogramaci: *In 2022, you curated the exhibition Grüne Moderne. Die neue Sicht auf Pflanzen (Green Modernism: The New View of Plants) at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne. The show was dedicated to the visualization of and artistic engagement with plants in the early 20th century. A pilot project for eco-curating, the exhibition was also intended to be sustainable, conserve resources, emit less CO₂, and adopted an ethos of reusing materials. These issues are of great interest to our publication, which deals with transport and logistics infrastructures within the context of artistic production and curatorial practice. Can you describe the concept of the exhibition Grüne Moderne and its aim?*

Miriam Szwast: It all started with the question of how plants were depicted and imagined in the art of the early 20th century in Germany. At a time that was characterized by mechanization and urbanization, how did artists look at their plant counterparts and which plants interested them? The focus was therefore not on depictions of forests, agriculture, vegetal forms, or nature in an abstract sense, but on specific individual plants. After all, if you look for them specifically, regardless of the medium, you will find countless depictions. The cactus, for example, was a popular motif for painters and photographers alike, as was the rubber tree (fig. 1) – both plants that thrived in the minimalist design of modern living spaces with large windows. Their appeal lay in the fact that they came from far away, as evidenced by advertisements and popular books of the time, such as *Kakteenjagd zwischen Texas und Patagonien* from 1930. Colonization can also be seen in the plant trade.

How is the colonial plant trade connected to producing art?

Aenne Biermann collected cacti and photographed them, as did Albert Renger-Patzsch. Anton Räderscheidt painted them. Karl Hofer portrayed people with potted plants, such as the monstera. Karl Blossfeldt and his gallery owner Karl Nierendorf published the successful photo book *Urformen der Kunst*, which shows enlargements of plant parts arranged and processed in



Fig. 1 Werner Mantz, *Study*, c. 1929/30, Museum Ludwig, Köln (© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025, reproduction: Rheinisches Bildarchiv Köln).

front of the camera. At the same time, with its time-lapse shots of plant growth, the film *Das Blumenwunder* (1926) by director Max Reichmann drew audiences to the cinemas and compared plants such as the South African *Strelitzia reginae* with people, chlorophyll with blood. Photosynthesis was discovered and Jagadish Chandra Bose described the stimulus-response system of plants in popular books that were also translated into German, which discussed how plants breathe, sleep, and experience stress. In the field of horror, discomfort in the face of ‘carnivorous’ plants became a topos, as the Venus flytrap scene in the silent movie *Nosferatu* (1922) by director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau shows.

Are the perspectives you’ve mentioned on plants considered as situated in societal or political contexts of the time?

The depiction of specific plants as something completely different, or even as something related, tells us how people thought about them at the time and

how they related to them. Is it a resource, an exoticized object, or a living being? The exhibition aimed to reflect on how we thought about plants in the past and how these views shape our treatment of them today – as a cultural influence, even a fashion – while recognizing how certain historically evolved ways of thinking continue to impact us. This had to go hand in hand with an attempt to be more sensitive to our treatment of life in and around us in the realization of the exhibition.

How did the idea for the exhibition come about?

It was the return of houseplants to homes, cafés, and social media, particularly the monstera, which made me notice their presence in the early 20th century. This led me to explore the literature and works housed in collection of the Museum Ludwig. We had just received a series of photographs by Karl Blossfeldt. From there, I searched the painting, sculpture, and graphics sections of the collection to discover that there was a lot to be found, such as a hand-painted postcard from Karl Schmidt-Rottluff to Rosa Schapire, welcoming the latter “back to the cactus home.” Schmidt-Rottluff had actually set up a cactus window for Schapire, a kind of greenhouse between two windows. Then there were the numerous portraits of women from the 1920s, in which floral motifs on clothing play a role, or Alfred Eisenstaedt’s portrait of Marlene Dietrich in a dinner jacket with an oversized flower on her lapel (fig. 2). The initial question thus led in different directions, even when looking at our own collection.

Can you elaborate on the different paths you followed?

The depiction of the plant counterpart a hundred years ago touches on world views and shows the extent to which Western Christian ideas characterized the treatment of plants. If the plant is conceived in a hierarchy of all life and subordinate to man, for example in Aristotle, in the Bible, and also in Descartes, this allows it to be utilized, cultivated, transplanted, and eradicated without consequences. At the same time, the influential Swedish plant researcher Carl Linnaeus oversexualizes the plant when he compares pollination to a wedding night, for example. The representation of plants is therefore always the representation of a way of dealing with plants, or more generally speaking: the localization of humans in the living world.





Fig. 3 Installation view of the exhibition *Grüne Moderne*, Museum Ludwig, Köln, 2022 (Photo: Leonie Braun).

How and why were these approaches then connected with a sustainable exhibition approach?

We at the Museum Ludwig had been working on ecological sustainability since 2019 and are a curious museum that seeks to learn. We had a sustainability team, attended training courses, and established networks. It therefore made sense to consciously make this exhibition more sustainable. We worked with the existing exhibition architecture, left the walls white, concentrated on the holdings of our own collection, had wall texts painted directly onto the wall by the sign painter Sebastian Karboviak (fig. 3) – who also painted over the previous façade banner – and we looked for collaborations beyond art. For example, I sought the advice of Suzanne Pierre, an ecologist and founder of the Critical Ecology Lab, whose input I deeply appreciate. We also invited plant scientists from the Cluster of Excellence on Plant Studies (CEPLAS) to report on current plant research and engage in dialogue with visitors about plants and food production. Ultimately, every step in the preparation, realization, and follow-up of the exhibition was reviewed and, where possible, more environmentally friendly alternatives were tried out.

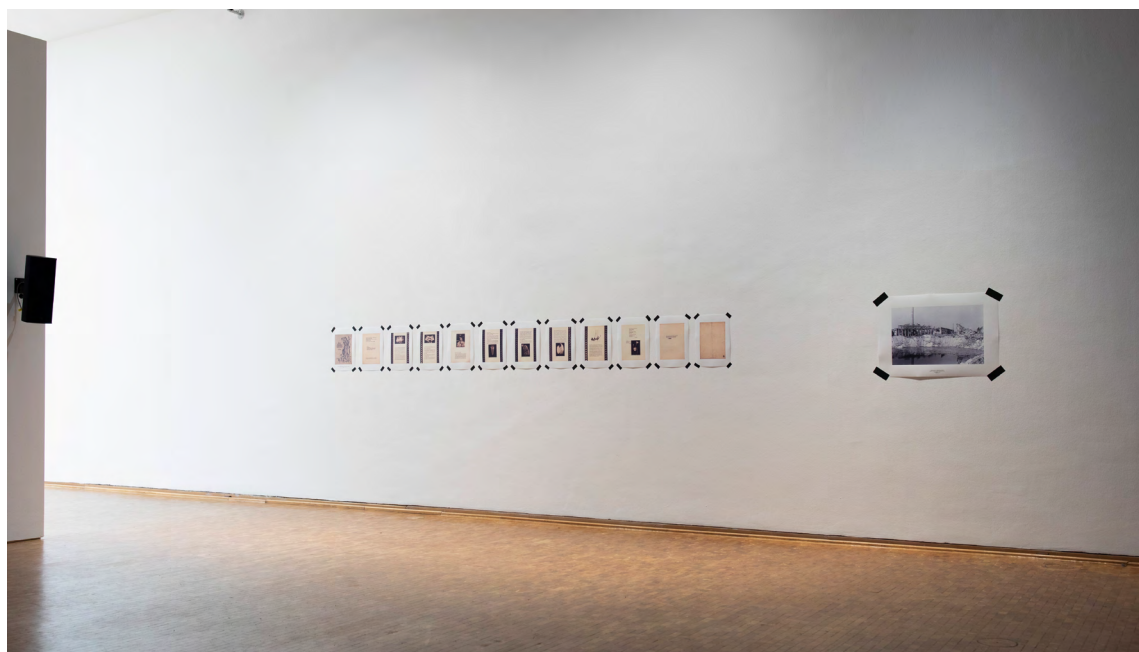


Fig. 4 Installation view of the exhibition *Grüne Moderne*, Museum Ludwig, Köln, 2022 (Photo: Leonie Braun).

How difficult or easy was it to avoid unnecessary transport?

Of course, there were works that I would have liked to show: by Karl Hofer or Marta Astfalck-Vietz, for example, to name just two positions. However, we decided to concentrate on our collection, considering the wealth of material already available in the museum's storage. Many of these works had never been shown before or had not been exhibited for a long time. Others had never been shown within the context of this issue. This was an easier decision to make than to communicate. It is customary for special exhibitions to include loans, even in a museum with its own collection. This is one of the questions we expect from the press, and we always have the answer ready. How many loans are there? And where do they come from? We were curious to find out what would happen when curating a special exhibition from our own collection. Nevertheless, we also included photographic motifs that are not from our collection, namely reproductions in the form of posters produced in Cologne.

How were these reproductions presented?

These were hung directly on the wall with black washi tape (figs. 4 and 5) next to the framed originals. They were intended to serve as a reference for the original work, but to be clearly distinguishable from a historical photo-



Fig. 5 Exhibition opening of *Grüne Moderne*, Museum Ludwig, Köln, 16.9.2022 (Photo: Leonie Braun).

graph. I like to draw a comparison here with the small black and white text illustration in a catalog, which also contains full-page color plates. Not every image was given the same weight in the exhibition, originals were clearly distinguished from reproductions and the originals were still clearly at the center. This allowed us to direct the focus even more, deepen aspects and contextualize works without having to transport them. In the context of this exhibition, this seemed to us to be a worthwhile endeavor.

What were the obstacles in realizing the exhibition?

The additional research and communication it took to find more sustainable products was challenging, but not an obstacle, because the Museum Ludwig team is intrinsically motivated to work more sustainably. The first

major hurdle was our own cognitive dissonance regarding the selection of works: we wanted to produce this exhibition more sustainably and therefore work with works from our own collection, yet we were also worried that people would not come and were therefore initially reluctant to communicate this openly. We were still stuck in the idea that a special exhibition meant showing loans and that people would only come if they could see them. I am glad that we persevered and dared to try anyway, because this fear turned out to be largely unfounded. Visitor numbers were solid.

Was the exhibition well-received overall?

One particularly challenging aspect of the project was the resistance we encountered to switching to more climate-friendly food on the opening evenings or in the museum catering. I was surprised by the occasionally vehement resistance to vegetarian alternatives, even though psychological resistance had been a topic in my training as a transformation manager for sustainable culture. If we want to overcome these and other obstacles, we need good communication skills, knowledge, and patience. We ourselves and our visitors are constantly learning and trying to keep the dialogue open and walk the path together. Because one thing is clear: if we raise our index finger, we get the middle finger. But of course, we want to reach as many people as possible with our program.

How was the catalog designed?

The catalog is only available digitally at www.gruene-moderne.de and can be accessed worldwide, free of charge. Its structure is similar to that of a book, with a table of contents, a foreword, picture sections, and so on. It was important to host the website climate-neutrally, so the digital pages are not white and consume less electricity than light-colored pages. We did not have any actual calculations on the climate friendliness of a digital catalog compared to a print catalog. If you still want to hold a paper catalog in your hands, you can download the individual articles as a well-set PDF in black and white – a personal print-on-demand.

In principle, online publication offers many advantages in terms of easy accessibility and global reception.

It was only during our preparations that we realized that publishing online offered new possibilities, namely the integration of video and audio. Peo-

ple with visual impairments can have the texts read aloud to them using appropriate programs. We are also able to reach more people. This does not mean that we will no longer publish catalogs in future, but it is helpful to be able to better weigh up which form of publication makes the most sense for which project after this experience, because we know the advantages and disadvantages.

You have mentioned many advantages of climate-friendly exhibition making. Nevertheless, can such exhibitions really be realized without loss?

Every change also means loss, of course. Naming it and mourning it is a normal reaction, especially as it is not always possible to predict what we will gain in concrete terms. This is why a more climate-friendly exhibition practice is a field of experimentation that sometimes feels risky. We try out new products and ways of working, and practice taking responsibility in areas that previously required little thought, such as the disposal of materials. However, I am convinced that we can also create 'eco-opulent' exhibitions, that the narrative of sacrifice and loss does not have to be the only one, nor is it beneficial to us. Even the choice of more sustainable materials, the extension of a duration, and changes in how we transport loans improve an exhibition's environmental balance – and these decisions are not even visible to visitors. The fact that we explicitly stated in *Grüne Moderne* that we would not have any works transported and demonstratively hung posters on the wall was one of many ways to exhibit more sustainably.

Is it regrettable to only show reproductions instead of loans? Does this diminish the significance of 'real' objects?

It is very important for me to emphasize once again that the poster is by no means a substitute for the original. In contrast to facsimiles, which are also used in exhibitions, it was clearly recognizable to everyone what it was about. Art remained art and my impression was that the different levels of original, poster, and archive placed the focus even more strongly on the work. To me, this seemed to be an acceptable approach for this exhibition.

It is important to find ways to make art tangible for every exhibition. This undisputably remains one of the core tasks of a museum. But perhaps we can say goodbye to the idea that everything should always be available to us, if I may exaggerate a little. Are the three- to four-month blockbuster exhibitions that require international shipments by plane really the only way to attract visitors? Isn't it our task as museum staff to make new experiences, perspec-



Fig. 6 Exhibition opening of *Grüne Moderne*, Museum Ludwig, Köln, 16.9.2022 (Photo: Leonie Braun).

tives, and contexts tangible, while also finding more sustainable ways to ensure art remains physically accessible and creating socially relevant programs?

How did visitors react to the exhibition? And the professional audience?

Even at the opening, we had the impression that we were welcoming new visitors, namely people who came to us with an interest in nature and climate protection, including many younger people and students – some of whom took up the exhibition in their term papers and final theses. We deliberately organized the opening in such a way that the foyer became a lounge. Everyone was served snacks and people were able to sit together in cozy groups (fig. 6). As a result, people stayed longer than usual and exchanged ideas. Ultimately, 100,000 people visited the exhibition, which is a good success in itself but even more so if you put this figure in relation to the economic and

ecological balance of the exhibition. Although we didn't draw up our own greenhouse gas balance until a later exhibition project, we know that the fact that we didn't use loans and new exhibition architecture, among other things, resulted in considerably less CO2 emissions and costs. At the end of the exhibition, we donated materials in collaboration with the costume department of the municipal theaters, such as frames that were no longer needed. This further improved the GHG balance and in turn attracted people to the museum who did not come primarily for the art.

Was the response entirely positive? In politically heated times, climate neutrality is also viewed as a contentious term.

There were also isolated negative reactions, and these seemed unusually strong to me. One person wrote in the visitors' book that Claudia Roth's patronage was the reason they decided not to visit an exhibition at the Museum Ludwig for the first time. Roth, a politician from the Green Party, was the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media at the time. We also experienced pushback from some of the museum's patrons regarding our use of reproductions, the exhibition's minimalist design, aspects of the project that were critical of colonialism, and our desire to offer vegetarian snacks. These were good lessons, because behind them is the fear of loss, the resistance to voluntary renunciation. And that is understandable, of course. The lesson I draw from this is that, if we want to be effective in raising awareness on climate issues, we need to not 'only' reach young people on climate issues – who perhaps don't consume many resources anyway and are already aware of the dangers – but also conservative, affluent people.

The concern of some that climate protection is synonymous with loss and sacrifice has certainly been reinforced in *Grüne Moderne*, which I regret. We can also realize opulent exhibitions that are more climate-friendly than before. We now need to prove this to overcome the narrative of loss, which is too short-sighted anyway. We will face completely different losses if we don't change course. In contrast, I also experienced great openness and curiosity from the specialist audience, as well as many questions about practical aspects of implementing the exhibition.

Looking back, what would you do differently?

In retrospect, I would offer more explanations in the exhibition: Why posters? Where did the exhibition architecture come from? Why 'only' a digital catalog? Why pay attention to the climate-friendliness of an exhibition

at all? If you hadn't read anything about the exhibition beforehand and had never thought about the role of museums in terms of sustainability, you could be overwhelmed. Today, I would make it more transparent why the exhibition looks the way it does. We did offer videos and a wall text in the entrance area of the exhibition, but neither was enough. Of course, it's a balancing act not to overshadow the exhibition's content, but it would have been good for the reception and my experience is that visitors are very interested in being taken behind the scenes and learning how an exhibition is created. The infrastructural conditions of exhibiting often remain invisible to them. An exhibition doesn't end at the white wall. These walls are permeable, the museum can be compared to an organism that eats, digests and excretes, inhales and exhales. It would have been an opportunity to make this even more visible.

Has the project proved its worth?

Yes, we have learned from it, had many conversations, and have also encouraged others to try out one or two things for themselves. Unfortunately, the success of an exhibition is still measured by how many people came, how large the exhibition space was, and how many items were on loan. It would be better to ask how much time people spent in the exhibition, whether they came several times, whether the visit to the exhibition had any influence on their lives and thinking, and what they learned. At the end of the exhibition, we gave away materials that were no longer needed in return for a donation. A social media post was all it took to find a queue of people outside the museum before it opened. We followed this up in 2024 with the Green Culture Collective Cologne, which I founded, and collected materials from 19 institutions in four buildings. Once again, we made voluntary donations, this time to Zero Waste Köln e.V. and Kölner Tafel e.V., which led to new networks. With Zero Waste Köln e.V., we are now learning how we can avoid even more waste and place a greater focus on recyclable products. This is just one of many examples that show that the exhibition has had a lasting effect.

Has Grüne Moderne permanently changed exhibition planning and practice at the Museum Ludwig?

Yes, we are now paying more attention to reusing exhibition architecture. We are also continuing the practice of listing all individuals involved in the exhibition – from cleaning staff to management – in alphabetical order, as we did for the first time in *Grüne Moderne*. Our wall texts are only rarely realized in adhesive letters and we take care to use paper with the Blue Angel label. In

general, we are thinking more about how we handle our own collection and are continuously deepening our knowledge of what we have collected. It is a process, albeit with detours. Even if we don't always feel that we are making progress quickly enough, we are still on the way to making the Museum Ludwig a more sustainable museum. *Grüne Moderne* was not an isolated project. We have learned from it and are moving forward. This includes talking even more about our visions for the future Museum Ludwig and thinking more long-term.

If climate-friendly exhibitions were taken very seriously, wouldn't that be the end of the museum as we know it today? A museum devours energy costs, travel costs for staff, air conditioning for rooms, transport costs for exhibits, exhibition architecture, etc. Wouldn't the consequence be to close the museums and only show digital exhibitions?

No, on the contrary. We need museums as places for reflection, inspiration, the senses, exchange and learning, tranquillity, and productive restlessness. The need for such places is growing, especially with increasing digitalization. Museums can be places that prepare us for climate change and its consequences, that inspire us to act, educate us, and help us to become effective, to network – but also simply cool us down on a hot day. We can cope better with ecological and climatic crises, recognizing and rethinking them, if we are not alone. That's why we need museums and culture in general.

Why should museums lead the way in the fight for climate neutrality when they only consume a fraction of the resources of large corporations? Is it right that the major ecological issues of our time should lead to self-restraint here when elsewhere, as the United States is currently tragically demonstrating, man-made climate change is being denied by governments and environmental protection is being reduced or even abolished?

As calculations by the British NGO Julie's Bicycle have shown, museums are the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases within the cultural sector. These emissions are mainly caused by cooling and heating systems, lighting, transport, and traveling, including visitors' journeys. Of course, this is not very significant compared to large corporations. But museums not only consume resources and release greenhouse gases, they also release ideas, can set an example, and can help shape the transformation to a (climate) fairer future. As learning institutions, museums can help people to better deal with the changes, prepare for them, and slow them down. This is the true superpower

of museums: their handprint. In contrast to the footprint, the handprint refers to the positive effects that people have on the earth and the climate. To be credible here, we need to reduce our footprint. We do not want to shirk this task for society as a whole. And I am certain that we will not have to do without good exhibitions in favor of the climate. Particularly in times of great uncertainty, art is something in which we can find solace, learn to rethink, and connect with other people. Museums question narratives and develop new perspectives. The narrative of renunciation is one that urgently needs to be countered. Maja Göpel and others repeatedly point out that if we don't change our behavior, we will have to do without much more. Preserving art makes no sense if we destroy the basis of human life on this planet. That's why we need exhibitions and programs that reach as many people as possible, that educate, raise awareness, encourage, and inspire a desire for creativity and self-efficacy.

Biography of the Archive

The Journey of the Foto Sender Archive from Istanbul to Athens

Dilara Ulu

Introduction

Istanbul became home to numerous immigrant artists who left the Russian Empire following the October Revolution (1917) and the subsequent civil war (1918–1922).¹ These immigrants primarily settled in the Pera district, an area already hosting numerous artist studios during the 1920s (Dogramaci/Lee 2019; Aygün 2021, 9). Among these artists was Vladimir Zender (1885–1944), a painter and photographer who settled in the Pera district with his wife Renate and son Valentin in 1918, where he opened a photography studio named Foto Sender. After Zender's death in 1944, the studio continued operations under the management of his son Valentin until the late 1950s. The Foto Sender archive, comprised mainly of urban and architectural photographs taken between 1920 and 1955, migrated with the Zender family to Athens following the studio's closure. While parts of the archive are now scattered across various institutions,² a significant portion is preserved in the National Library of Greece. This article, informed by the journey of the Foto Sender archive from Istanbul to Athens, examines both its physical displacement and its evolution over time. By tracing its trajectory as an accompanied object, this study explores the role of infrastructures – including production decisions, archival displacement, and institutional frameworks – in shaping the archive's biography. It considers not only the social and historical forces that shaped its formation and movement but also the material and institutional conditions that govern its preservation and accessibility today.

In an article titled “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” Igor Kopytoff examines the social life of objects, arguing that the

1 There are studies on immigrants who came to Istanbul following the October Revolution and the subsequent civil war: Deleon 1990; Bakar 2015; Uturgauri 2015; Dogramaci/Aygün 2021; Aygün 2025.

2 Other institutions in Turkey that hold photographs or albums under the name Vladimir Zender or Foto Sender include: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Atatürk Library, Salt Research, Boğaziçi University Aptullah Kuran Library.

existence of objects cannot be fully understood in a single moment but must instead be revealed through their sequential moments of consumption across time and space including their travel routes (Kopytoff 1986, 64f.). Expanding on this perspective, Zeynep Devrim Gürsel defines the biography of a photograph as the process from the moment it was taken to the point at which researchers study it (Gürsel 2022, 113). This article builds upon these approaches by integrating infrastructural factors – photographic production, archival displacement, and the physical transfer of the archive – as essential components of the Foto Sender archive’s biography. Infrastructures remain largely invisible in everyday life, forming the background of other operations (Star 1999, 380). Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star propose the concept of infrastructural inversion, which shifts analytical focus away from the objects and practices facilitated by infrastructure to the infrastructures themselves – uncovering the often-overlooked systems that shape production, circulation, and preservation (Bowker/Star 1999, 34). Applying this framework, Amalie Skovmøller and Mathias Danbolt challenge conventional art historical analyses that treat monuments as static aesthetic objects; instead, they emphasize that monuments are not solely artistic artifacts but dynamic entities shaped by material and ideological infrastructures (Skovmøller/Danbolt 2024, 102). Similarly, this article moves beyond analyzing the Foto Sender archive solely in terms of aesthetic concerns by investigating how its physical movement and material transformations offer insight into broader infrastructural and institutional dynamics.

Infrastructures are not merely technical systems; they are also embedded in social and ideological frameworks, shaping spatial and institutional environments and thereby reproducing and regulating social processes (Larkin 2013, 338). Within this framework, an examination of the Foto Sender archive necessitates an object-based approach to photography, enabling a deeper understanding of how infrastructural processes have influenced the archive’s trajectory. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart argue that an object’s existence can only be fully understood through its ongoing processes of production, exchange, usage, and meaning-making. They contend that objects are not merely passive entities but active participants in social relationships (Edwards/Hart 2004, 4). A material approach to photography facilitates an analysis of often-overlooked infrastructural systems, offering new insights into the contemporary interpretation of the archive. Accordingly, this study first examines the formation of the Foto Sender archive, investigating how Vladimir Zender’s strategic networks as a migrant in Istanbul shaped its structure. It then explores the movement of the archive, discussing the potential of approaching photographic archives as material entities in transit. While it is not

entirely possible to reconstruct the transportation infrastructure of the Foto Sender archive, this study interrogates how an object-based approach can reveal the historical and political dynamics underlying its journey from Istanbul to Athens. Finally, the paper examines the archive's final institutional setting, considering how its classification and accessibility have transformed its meaning and function. Collections are not merely repositories for objects but infrastructures shaped by institutional policies, historical contexts, and cultural narratives (McCarthy et al. 2021, 38f.). This study critically investigates both the conditions that led to the archive's displacement and the institutional structures that shape its interpretation today.

The Emergence of the Foto Sender Archive

While tracing the formation of the Foto Sender archive, which focuses on historical, industrial, and archaeological photography, two critical turning points must be highlighted. First, Vladimir Zender was a migrant artist who settled in Istanbul after leaving the Russian Empire following the October Revolution. Second, after the establishment of the new regime in 1923, Vladimir Zender acquired Turkish citizenship and changed his name to Veli Demir Sender. These pivotal moments shed light on the development, scope, and organization of the Foto Sender archive, while also revealing its relationship with infrastructure systems, including the networks Vladimir Zender established as a migrant in Istanbul and the impact of these connections on his photographs.

Due to the lack of information regarding Vladimir Zender's life in the Russian Empire, it remains unclear precisely when and where he first engaged with photography. Nonetheless, existing records suggest that although Zender often identified himself as a painter – seen in the credits of his photographs – he was primarily known as a photographer in Istanbul. During this period, many Russian artists who had emigrated around the same time took up photography, often purchasing a camera upon their arrival.³ This trend was part of a larger wave of migration, which largely occurred in the 1920s and coincided with Istanbul's Armistice Period (1918–1923). In addition to the difficulties of adapting to a new country, immigrant artists faced various challenges in the occupied city, including issues related to housing, nutrition, health, and unemployment (Dağlar Macar/Macar 2010, 81; Aygün 2021, 10; Olcay 2022, 1327). Amid these conditions, the high demand for photography

³ Some notable artists among them include Jules Kanzler, L. V. Karpov, Mark Savvich Bezugly, and A. Belikoff (Ak 2001, 37; Aygün 2020, 46; Evren 2021, 147).

within Ottoman society⁴ and in Russian-language periodicals⁵ provided a more stable career alternative, encouraging many Russian artists to adopt photography as a profession (Aygün 2020, 47). Although it is uncertain whether Zender brought a camera with him upon migrating, his choice to focus on photography over painting can be interpreted as a practical response to these economic challenges, highlighting a survival strategy influenced by the demands and circumstances of his new environment. Moreover, when considering the concept of infrastructure within the framework of artistic production conditions, it can be argued that Vladimir Zender had to reconstruct or adapt his artistic practice in response to the new circumstances upon his migration to Istanbul.

In the early years after settling in Istanbul, Vladimir Zender worked closely with fellow émigré historians and archaeologists from the Russian Empire, focusing on Byzantine monuments and the architectural heritage of the city – an area of study familiar to him due to his background and the prevalent interest in Byzantine culture in Russia. His work during this period was disseminated in various formats, including souvenir albums, postcards, and notably, the album *Byzantina: Important Antiquities of Constantinople* (Mikhailov/Sender 1925). This album holds a significant place in the Foto Sender archive as it exemplifies Zender's initial steps to establish a professional network through a subject matter that resonated with his cultural heritage (fig. 1). *Byzantina* includes texts on Byzantine monuments and structures, accompanied by Zender's photographs. In the first four volumes, he collaborated with N. Mikhailov, a fellow member of the Academic Group who taught courses on Byzantine art and architecture at the People's University and organized tours on these subjects. For volumes published between 1926 and 1930, the forewords were provided by Sévérien Salaville, a former member of the Russian Archaeological Institute of Istanbul (IRAE), and the texts were authored by David Lathoud and Vitalien Lauren, editors of *Échos d'Orient*, a journal focused on Byzantine studies. Moreover, the album is now housed in university, museum, and archaeological archives across Europe and America, demonstrating that the network Zender established through his early works was not confined to the borders of the country to which he migrated.⁶

⁴ Photography was quickly embraced by the public as a means of Westernization and recording reality, soon becoming an integral part of everyday life; this new technology also became indispensable to the state (Calafato 2021, 46).

⁵ Some of these publications include *Zarnistsy, Put', Naši Dni, and Deržavnaya Rus.*

⁶ In the almanac *Les Russes sur le Bosphore* (Russians on the Bosphorus), the section on Vladimir Zender introduces *Byzantina* as a multi-volume work that attracted subscriptions from numerous universities, museums, archaeological institutes, and other institutions across



Fig. 1 N. Mikhailov and W. Sender (Vladimir Zender), *Byzantina: Important Antiquities of Constantinople*, 1925, Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Trustees for Harvard University, Washington DC.

Over time, the scope of Zender's work, and consequently the relationships he built, diversified. This evolution, which became prominent in the 1930s, is readily discernible within the Foto Sender archive. During this period, Zender began to document public buildings, residences, and factories that symbolized the modern identity of the new Turkish Republic. He prepared commissioned albums for various institutions (fig. 2). From 1935 onward, his archi-

Europe and America (1927). Copies of this album are currently held in several libraries and collections including Dumbarton Oaks, Columbia University, Princeton University, and the Getty Research Institute. Scholars like Jak Deleon and Semavi Eyice also argue that *Byzantina* played a role in establishing Zender's reputation in both America and Europe (Eyice 1973, 896; Deleon 1990, 52).

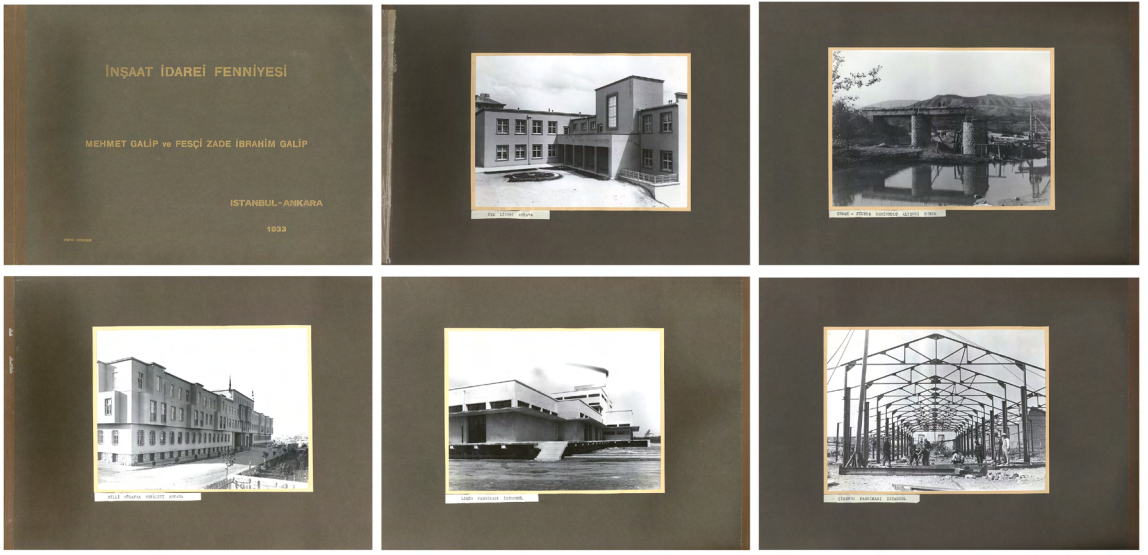


Fig. 2 Foto Sender, *Prestige Album*, organized by the Technical Office of Civil Constructions of the constructions carried out by Mehmet Galip, Fevzi Zade İbrahim Galip, and Nafiz (Kotan) Bey from Erzurum in Ankara, Istanbul, Bursa, and Eskişehir, 1933, 31 × 42.5 cm, Print, Black & White, Salt Research, Photograph and Postcard Archive, Istanbul.

tectural photographs began appearing in *Arkitekt*, the leading architectural magazine of the period, which aimed to promote “Turkish” architects (Dogramaci 2021) (fig. 3). The thematic shift within the Foto Sender archive reflects the broader socio-political transformation of Turkey and coincides with the Zender family’s naturalization as Turkish citizens in 1932, marking a significant turning point in Zender’s work, his network, and, thus, the production of infrastructure.

The relations between the new regime and the Soviet Union (King 2022, 116), as well as certain legal regulations targeting non-Turkish citizens, led many Russian-speaking immigrants to leave Turkey during these years.⁷ Those who remained in Turkey changed their names to align with locally common ones, and many converted to Islam and acquired Turkish citizenship (Üre 2020, 10). In 1932, Vladimir Zender changed his name and, along with his family, acquired Turkish citizenship;⁸ from this point onward, he was credited as Veli Demir Sender under his photographs of early Republican architecture, while his son Valentin, sharing his father’s interest in photography, became known as İsmail Demir Sender. The transformation within the Foto Sender

⁷ During this period, several laws were enacted that impacted photography studios and photographers. One of these targeted non-Turkish citizens who owned businesses in Turkey. In June 1932, Law No. 2007, titled “The Law on Professions and Services Reserved for Turkish Citizens in Turkey,” prohibited non-Turkish citizens from practicing certain professions, including barbering, singing, and photography.

⁸ The Republic Archives (BCA), Ins. Code: 30.18.1.2, Loc. No: 26.15.20, 10 March 1932.



Fig. 3 *Arkitekt* covers with photographs taken by Vladimir Zender. *Arkitekt* 7 (1936); *Arkitekt* 7 (1937); *Arkitekt* 1-2 (1939); *Arkitekt* (3-4) 1943, The Chamber of Architects of Turkey.

archive reflects Zender's process of establishing himself as an immigrant in Turkey and forming new relationships. It is also observed that there were shifts in his professional relationships, as Zender, who initially worked primarily with the Russian émigré community, gradually expanded his collaborations with local actors in Turkey, diversifying his photographic focus. In the context of a newly established nation-state, policies prioritizing national identity and the pressure exerted on many Russian immigrants to eventually leave Turkey can also be seen as an example of the asymmetric power relations within the production infrastructure. Zender's choice not to leave the country, but instead to become a Turkish citizen and shift his focus from Byzantine architecture to Republican architecture, illustrates his integration into the system, temporarily transitioning to the other side of these asymmetric power relations while continuing his productions.

The Journey of the Archive

A significant portion of the Foto Sender archive is currently housed in the National Library of Greece, and its current location within Greek borders is far from coincidental. Following the September 1955 attacks on non-Muslims in Istanbul and Izmir, waves of Greek, Armenian, and Jewish communities began emigrating from Turkey (Güven 2022, 173). One of the primary routes for this migration, which was triggered by what is now known as the Istanbul pogrom led to Greece. Despite the Zender family's conversion to Islam and acquisition of Turkish citizenship in 1932, they were not exempt from the patterns of ethnic and religious targeting that characterized the period; therefore, their studio, located parallel to İstiklal Street, was also targeted during the events of September 6-7. Consequently, Vladimir Zender's son, Valentin, decided to close the studio and leave Istanbul with his family. The family first relocated to Athens before eventually migrating to Canada. The political

transformations of the new regime ultimately rendered the Zender family's presence in Istanbul untenable, leading to their forced displacement. While the family initially adapted to the new production infrastructure established under the emerging regime, they were soon marginalized within this framework. As a result, the Zender family's migration not only marked a rupture in their personal and professional trajectories but also reconfigured the circulation and institutional positioning of the Foto Sender archive.

In a letter to the Byzantine historian Jack Thacher dated 20 April 1963, Valentin explained their departure from Istanbul: "I am an old refugee from Russia since 1920 and lived since in Constantinople, which I left 4 years ago to live in Athens." (Von Sender 1963) Another letter from the same year, written to Ernst Kitzinger, a historian of Byzantine art, reveals the impact of the September 6–7 events on their decision to leave Turkey:

Unfortunately, life has reserved us very hard blows. After the exile in Turkey as a result of the Russian Revolution, we sustained a second blow on the 6th September 1955 when riots and commotions bursted out in Turkey in relation of the Cyprus question among Greeks and Turks. I have not been spared in this trouble and in a few hours my studio equipped with the last technical achievements and up to date apparatuses and installations as well as my shop of sales, were plundered by the raged mob who destroyed and stole everything. Fortunately, the archives in question were in the store behind the shop and suffered little damage. [...] This situation has totally upset me, the more so as I am 52 years old. I have decided to leave Turkey and to start again at zero. [...] I have 4 persons to my charge and I confess that life is now more than difficult and uncertain. (Von Sender 1963)

When the Zender family emigrated to Athens in 1959, they transported with them what remained of the archive following the events of September 6–7, either in its entirety or as a fragmented collection. While the precise conditions and mechanisms of its transfer remain undocumented, the archive – containing copies or negatives of numerous photographs and postcards now housed in various institutions in Turkey or sold at auctions – was ultimately left behind in Athens when the family migrated to Canada. How the Foto Sender archive eventually found its way to the National Library of Greece remains unclear, as do the exact reasons behind Valentin's decision to relinquish it. However, several assumptions can be made regarding this decision: as suggested in his letter, Valentin's decision to part with these photographs may indicate a deliberate attempt to sever ties with the past, particularly considering the archive's extensive visual documentation of Turkey. Fur-

thermore, the material constraints of the archive – its physical condition, the weight of negatives and albums, or potential deterioration – may have also influenced his decision. Although the precise networks or institutional channels through which the archive remained in Athens remain unclear, it is evident that migration placed the archive within a new system of circulation, ultimately determining its final location. This reconfiguration of the archive's spatial and institutional positioning has, in turn, shaped how researchers and viewers engage with and interpret this photographic collection today.

The Foto Sender archive, estimated to have arrived at the National Library of Greece in the 1970s, was transferred to the Manuscripts Department in 2018, where it has since been cataloged, repackaged, and preserved. This strategic transfer, therefore, placed the archive under the care of a department with the specialized expertise and resources required for in-depth processing and long-term preservation. According to various notes, the archive, which was left in Athens, may have undergone a preliminary arrangement around 1973; however, a comprehensive cataloging effort was only initiated after its transfer in 2018. This process adheres to two fundamental archival principles: 'provenance' and 'original order.' Acknowledging that the archive's original order was significantly disrupted by the 1955 events, the National Library of Greece has endeavored to restore this structure as accurately as possible, considering its initial state, arrangement, and the physical characteristics of the materials. As a consequence of the fact that the original boxes did not meet the requisite standards for long-term preservation, Foto Sender's printed photographs, albums, and negatives are now stored individually in archival acid-free folders and boxes in order to protect them from environmental factors such as light exposure and pollutants. However, the original boxes are retained alongside the archive to reflect its original organization. Researchers working with the archive can therefore also access these original boxes to examine those used during its transfer.

While the library preserves these albums in their original arrangement and makes them accessible to researchers, it also organizes a significant number of printed photographs and negatives according to a classification system that parallels the sequence found within the albums. Consequently, many photographs are grouped based on geographical location or thematic content, including monuments, landscapes, and architectural structures. When examined through the lens of object biography – considering the processes through which a photograph is produced, circulates, is repurposed in different contexts, and undergoes transformation over time – it becomes evident that photographs originally intended for commercial sale have, within their new institutional setting, been recontextualized as historical artifacts

that offer researchers valuable insights into the past. Furthermore, the institutional classification of these materials not only reveals Vladimir Zender's method of documenting architectural structures but also provides indications of his intended audience.

Maintaining the groupings established by the archive's creator, therefore, provides insight into how the photographs were curated, presented, or intended to be viewed. For instance, in the albums prepared by the studio to share its portfolio with their clients, images taken around the same time are grouped and presented together. Placing consecutive shots on the same page enables viewers to discern subtle camera movements, thereby elucidating two prevalent methodologies for photographing buildings: either by rotating around the structure at 360 degrees to showcase it from multiple angles, or by initially capturing a general view and then proceeding to close-ups of details intended to be emphasized.

The archive encompasses images of Istanbul's well-known tourist landmarks, such as Galata Tower and Sultanahmet Square, alongside its central and densely populated areas. Additionally, it contains visual records of figures integral to the city's everyday life, such as fishermen, street vendors, and boatmen. However, beyond these widely recognizable scenes, the archive also includes a substantial number of photographs in which Zender captures intricate architectural details that would be fully appreciated only by a trained observer or an individual with specialized knowledge. These images often frame their subjects in a manner that prioritizes detail over general composition, potentially appearing excessively focused to a casual viewer. This diversity within the archive suggests that Foto Sender catered not only to tourists but also to specialized audiences, including archaeologists, architects, and art historians.

The presence of the Foto Sender archive in the library enables an examination of the condition and traces acquired over time in the photographs, postcards, and negatives within the archive, making any damages more easily noticeable. However, the visibility of these traces is closely related to the archive's current location. The intricate work archivists undertake to make materials accessible to researchers often remains hidden; revealing this process – acknowledging the 'invisible hands' behind the archive – enables a deeper understanding and interpretation of archival materials (Morris/Rose 2009, 51f.). The National Library of Greece considers the Foto Sender archive an invaluable resource, offering distinctive visual data and primary sources for research in history, art, culture, and other disciplines. This perspective provides essential support to academic studies and complements textual sources. While museums, seeking objects through which curators and viewers

can create their own narratives, often exclude tactility to preserve the object, they do not always account for traces of the object's past (Willumson 2004, 76). In contrast, the library provides researchers with access to the archive as an organized collection without selective curation, enabling them to trace the archive's previous journey through its materiality.

The presence of broken negatives or damaged photographs – though limited in number – is visible in the archive's presentation and may impact the perception of individuals unfamiliar with its historical trajectory. However, when we evaluate this situation from an infrastructural perspective, that is, by examining the object in relation to the conditions and practices of production and circulation rather than solely focusing on aesthetics, it becomes possible to make some inferences. Such damage may be the result of inadequate preservation techniques employed during that period, or it may raise the question of whether the archive was subjected to some form of disturbance. Within the context of the Foto Sender archive, it is possible to interpret that the traces on the photographs and storage boxes may have been influenced by two factors. First, the archive sustained slight damage during Istanbul pogrom and second, the archive's subsequent journey with the Zender family may have led to further damage during physical transportation. While these material traces do not allow for definitive conclusions, they serve as indicators of the broader social and historical processes that have shaped the archive's trajectory. Indeed, approaching the archive from an infrastructural perspective enables a deeper engagement with these traces, facilitating an understanding of the ways in which historical events have materially and contextually impacted the archive.

Conclusion: The Pursuit of the Lost Archive

The discovery of the Foto Sender archive in Athens and the subsequent research visit to the National Library of Greece provide a transnational perspective on the archive's biography, tracing its trajectory from the 1920s to the late 1950s. Engaging with the archive on-site allows for a material-based approach that foregrounds the physical properties of the photographs, including their formats, conditions, and the traces they have accumulated over time. This direct interaction with the materiality of the archive – examining photographs as objects rather than mere images – reveals crucial insights into the infrastructures that shaped their production, circulation, and preservation. The archive's current location in Athens reflects a broader history of displacement, shaped by political and social transformations that affected both the Zender family and their photographic practice. By situating the ar-

chive within these infrastructural networks, it becomes possible to map not only the material and logistical conditions under which it was produced and transported but also the ways in which these processes left visible marks on the photographs themselves. The disruptions caused by the 1955 events in Istanbul, for instance, not only had an impact on the Zender family's migration but also contributed to the archive's fragmentation, ultimately shaping its present form and institutional framework.

The relocation of the archive to the National Library of Greece marks a crucial shift in its institutional status, reconfiguring its accessibility, classification, and function. Initially structured for commercial purposes, the archive was later absorbed into a scholarly setting where its significance was reframed through archival and historiographical practices. This transition underscores the ways in which infrastructures of knowledge production mediate the meaning and use of archival materials. Rather than viewing the Foto Sender archive as a static collection, an infrastructural perspective highlights its ongoing transformation – one shaped by political ruptures, institutional reconfigurations, and evolving methodologies of preservation. As the archive continues to be researched and recontextualized, its material and historical layers offer insight into the broader mechanisms through which photographic archives are shaped, displaced, and reinterpreted across time and space.

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The Dresdner Werkstätten für Handwerkskunst and the Material Infrastructures of Making (an Armchair)

Kaja Ninnis

In 1903 Karl Schmidt, founder of the Dresdner Werkstätten für Handwerkskunst, decided to take a trip. In search of new talent, he had contacted the German architect and author Hermann Muthesius, who was working as a cultural attaché in London and reporting on the latest developments in the field of English design. In the letter, Schmidt asked Muthesius if he knew of any designers in England and Scotland who were doing ‘Hervorragendes’ (outstanding things) (qtd. in Němečková 2018, 18). At the time, many involved in the applied arts looked to England and Scotland for inspiration, where the Arts and Crafts movement had infused the ongoing debate about reforming industrially produced goods with a renewed sense of purpose. Idealizing the figure of the medieval craftsperson, Arts and Crafts practitioners proposed a new regime of quality, based on ‘good’ materials, simple and functional forms, and a celebration of traditional craft methods. Schmidt was preparing an extensive exhibition intended to showcase the reformative ambitions of the furniture enterprise he had founded in 1898: to produce affordable, simple but artistic objects for everyday use. The exhibition would comprise thirty furnished rooms, designed especially for the occasion by renowned national and international designers.¹

One of the names on Muthesius’s list was the British Arts and Crafts designer Mackay Hugh Baillie Scott. He had already made a name for himself in Germany when art patron Ernest Louis, Grand Duke of Hesse commissioned him to design two interiors for the New Palace in Darmstadt.² Scott designed two rooms for Karl Schmidt’s exhibition, a ladies’ sitting room and a bedroom.

¹ This article draws upon ongoing doctoral research conducted by the author at the Institute of Cultural History and Theory at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

² The two rooms, which the *Illustrierte Zeitschrift für Innendekoration* deemed to be “of the utmost importance for the development of the style of the modern home” (Anonymous 1899, 1) were made for the Empress Victoria Melita. Both were designed by Baillie Scott but executed by two different manufacturers: The breakfast room was made by the Glückert’sche Hof-Möbelfabrik in Darmstadt and the parlor by an English Arts and Crafts institution, the Guild and School of Handicraft, established by Charles Robert Ashbee in 1888.





Both included a version of the same armchair – one stained black, the other left light to showcase the woodgrain (fig. 1). After the exhibition, the Werkstätten only included Scott's ladies' sitting room in their range of handmade furniture. A rare light version was put up for auction at Ketterer Munich in 1997 and purchased by Karl H. Bröhan, founder of the Bröhan-Museum in Berlin, for 15,000 DM, making it the auction's most successful sale (Valentin 1997, 1413).

Today, in the Bröhan-Museum, visitors learn about the armchair's making through the information provided on the object label: *Armchair*, 1903, Design Mackay Hughes Baillie Scott, Execution Dresdner Werkstätten für Handwerkskunst, Birch wood with mother-of-pearl and ivory inlays, Textile upholstery. This narrative, reproduced again and again through the structure of museum databases, exhibition catalogs, and object labels, aligns with the conventional project-based concept of making as described by Tim Ingold: "This is to start with an idea in mind, of what we want to achieve, and with a supply of raw material needed to achieve it. And it is to finish at the moment when the material has taken on the intended form" (Ingold 2013, 20). This essay will consider the making of the armchair, beginning not with the idea or its translation into form, but rather with the vital yet frequently overlooked prerequisite for any kind of physical shape-giving: the trajectory of 'raw' materials. By examining fragmentary archival records from 1898 to 1914 from the Saxon State Archive and the writings of Karl Schmidt, this essay brings together the eclectic evidence of the infrastructure that provided a steady flow of wood for furniture production at the Dresdner Werkstätten für Handwerkskunst. Material infrastructure here is understood as an organizational structure, created and maintained by humans to enable material mobility on local and global scales. As more-than-human natures are cultivated, extracted, processed, and transported through a multi-sited performance of human and non-human labor, their function is reassigned, whereby, for example, a tree is transformed into timber.

The Bröhan-Museum's armchair is constructed of 'flamed birch' – a somewhat obscure trade name for rare birch wood with wavy fibers. This unique growth pattern, unrelated to geography or environmental conditions, creates a surface resembling "the iridescence of wrinkled silk,"³ as German chemist Paul Kraus noted in 1910 (Kraus 1910, 631). Prized for its aesthetics and scarcity, flamed birch was highly sought after for furniture and veneers around 1900. At the time of writing this essay, there is no way to exactly determine the geographical origin of this extraordinary birch tree. This is partly due to the re-

3 All German quotes were translated into English by the author.

sistance of birch to scientific investigation (Haag et al. 2023) and partly due to lack of archival documentation. This curious gap in the historical record begs the question: why does the material input of industrial production leave so few traces in the archive, especially considering the vast amounts of wood that must have been purchased at the Dresdner Werkstätten to ensure that production ran smoothly?⁴

Archival sources, absent and extant, tell us something about the attitudes of the people who created the archive and the values of the society they inhabited. The Dresdner Werkstätten established an official company archive only after the GDR government released a decree requiring all state-owned firms to do so. Prior to this, documents related to legal matters, business operations, artistic work, and company history were preserved sporadically (Ludwig 1999). Among these few early sources, evidence of wood purchases – the names of merchants, invoices, and order lists – are sorely missing. Still, what can be found are peripheral hints, notes in margins and previously unnoticed photographs that paint a blurry yet telling picture of the conditions and practices that sustained the wood supply chain at the Dresdner Werkstätten.

At the time of the armchair's construction, the Dresdner Werkstätten für Handwerkskunst were growing rapidly: Karl Schmidt had purchased the former Jasmatzi cigarette factory in Dresden in 1902, continuing to expand his enterprise by renting out three further factory buildings in the area as well as two separate timber yards. The number of employed workers jumped from 60 in 1901 to around 250 after the expansion (Arnold 1993, 48). The space soon became too small and, since it was never intended for furniture production, increasingly uneconomical as Karl Schmidt lamented in 1909: "How much wagon material and labor is unnecessarily tied up in transporting wood between wood storage areas and machine rooms, and then again between the latter and work halls [...]. Finished furniture stands in the narrow corridors for weeks, constantly exposed to damage from bumping" (Werkstätten-Berichte 1909, 2). The situation improved when production was moved to the newly built factory in Hellerau in 1910. Designed by Richard Riemerschmid, the new ensemble was fitted with a large timber yard (fig. 2) and laid out according to the chain of furniture production. Around that time, the Werkstätten's product catalogs began highlighting the benefits of large-scale opera-

⁴ The ideas in this essay have been shaped by enriching discussions within the Art | Material | Ecology working group. I am grateful for the support of my fellow pre-doctoral researchers at the Cluster of Excellence "Matters of Activity" and the remarkable scholarly community cultivated by Claudia Mareis, whose mentorship and support have been invaluable to this work. Special thanks go to Babette Werner, whose thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts significantly strengthened this essay.



Fig. 2 Anonymous, *View of the timber yard at the Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau*, c. 1910/1920 (© Bildarchiv Foto Marburg).

tions, emphasizing bulk wood purchases that enabled the firm to offer high-quality, affordable furniture (Preisbuch 1909, 1910). A 1912 catalog proudly presents a series of photographs showcasing the factory's light-filled, spacious offices and wood-working workshops, along with its modern machinery – all evidence of a factory capable of high production output (Preisbuch 1912). Curiously, the timber yard is absent from this series.

The wood stored in the Werkstätten's timber yard was sourced locally and internationally. Looking back on his life's work, Karl Schmidt credited the Dresdner Werkstätten with introducing 'German' woods such as birch, elm, ash, larch, cherry, and pear into the furniture making industry: "We have brought German timber back to honor" (Schmidt, undated). A 1911 inventory list partially confirms this, listing birch among other trees common in Germany. The list also mentions several non-German woods: African pear, white-wood, gaboony, and redwood. However, by far the most money was invested in the supply of oak and mahogany (Bilanzbuch 1911). When buying furniture, customers were able to choose between different material configurations to suit their needs and budget. For instance, the black-stained armchair in Bail-

lie Scott's ladies sitting room could be ordered in alder for 78 M, pear for 100 M, or, for prestige-seeking customers, 155 M for 'real' ebony (Preisbuch 1910, 6).

Unable to find any trace of flamed birch wood in the archive, one is forced to move further into the realm of speculation, that is to research the material's trajectory according to the likelihood of events. Maren-Sophie Funderich points out that furniture-making centers emerge not necessarily in forested areas where wood is abundant, but in locations where both skilled labor and eager customers reside. As minimally processed wood is sturdier and easier to transport than fragile furniture, it made more sense to move the 'raw' material to manufacturing hubs and not the other way around (Funderich 2019, 117). Therefore, it is likely that the Dresdner Werkstätten purchased their timber from one (or several) of the c. 75 timber merchants listed in Dresden's 1902 address book (Anonymous 1902, 85–86). It would have arrived either by train (having a railway siding was regularly used as a selling point by timber merchants)⁵ or by boat via the Elbe. Some merchants, such as Julius Jacob Hirsch, maintained their timber yard right on the riverbank.⁶ At the merchant's timber yard, the Werkstätten's buyer would have encountered flamed birch as planks, stacked to dry and labeled as 'precious' due to the wood's rarity. Contemporary carpentry and forestry guidebooks repeatedly mention Scandinavian countries as sources of beautifully grained birch wood for furniture making (Büchner 1922; Kraus 1910; Krauth/Meyer 1892; Printz 1909). Such statements might not refer to the specific wavy growth of the armchair's flamed birch, still, they reveal that extraordinary birches were known to come from places with a large birch population. According to Eduard Printz, the author of *Die Bau- und Nutzhölzer* (1909), Sweden and Norway dealt mostly in spruce and pine, however, birches grew in "immeasurable expanses" (Printz 1909, 70).

Karl Schmidt saw wood both as a precious *Werkstoff* and as an economic resource on which the success of his company depended. He started his apprenticeship to become a carpenter when he was fourteen (Schmidt 1941), developing an intimate connection with wood throughout his life. His writings reveal a craftsperson's deep understanding of the material's properties, displaying both technical mastery and reverence towards wood as a natural

⁵ Take, for example, the letterhead of the Friedrich Schindler Nutzholzhandlung from 1931, which promoted their private railway siding connected to Dresden-Friedrichstadt station (Friedrich Schindler Nutzholzhandlung 1931).

⁶ The location of the company's timber yard opposite the König Albert Harbor is known because it burned down in a widely publicized fire in 1926. Several postcards documenting the extent and aftermath of the fire survive (Anonymous 1926).

resource. In his article “Materialverschwendung und Materialgefühl” (1912) he lamented the decline of quality in materials, which he traced back to consumers wanting cheap goods and manufacturers providing them. “It is remarkable how difficult it is to grasp this simple truth: raw materials [...] remain most economical when they are processed well and conscientiously. When we turn wood into shoddy furniture [...], we are essentially creating firewood and laying waste to the material, committing a sin against a natural product” (Schmidt 1912, 51). However, he was also a businessman running a large-scale furniture enterprise dependent on a constant supply of affordable wood. This resulted in an acute awareness of the rise and fall of wood prices as well as to the limits to local and global wood availability. Unable to meet rising demand, Germany had become a wood import country since the middle of the 19th century. “It won’t be long,” writes Schmidt, “before furniture made from German wood can only be seen in museums” (ibid., 50). Procuring wood from other countries had become increasingly difficult as well: “But the Balkan countries, Russia, and America have already been deforested by half. Over the last 20 years, the price of oak has risen by approximately 60 per cent!” (ibid.).

The term *Rohmaterial* (raw material), as used by Karl Schmidt, had gained popularity since the mid-19th century,⁷ a process indicating the increasing commodification of the natural world (Shiva 2010). The concept of the raw material, as shown by Adelene Buckland, emerged at the intersection of industrialism and empire, “grafting them into a shared narrative of the transformation of the earth to its highest potential” (Buckland 2023, 19). The active conception of ‘nature’ as “a sharply separate, even alien lower realm” (Plumwood 1993, 4), creates space for what Val Plumwood describes as a natural act of domination over everything that didn’t belong to the category of the cultured human, excluding plants, animals, women, Indigenous peoples, and more. This othering involved the denial that non-humans have their own history. “History deals only with humans,” write Marek Tamm and Zoltán Boldizsár Simon, “while the rest of the non-human world belongs to the province of an entirely distinct ‘natural history’” (Tamm/Simon 2021, 204). The material silences in the archive can therefore be traced back to human attitudes based on the nature-culture divide, according to which humans and wood do not

7 Visual analysis using the Digital Dictionary of the German Language (DWDS) reveals a striking pattern in the usage of *Rohmaterial* in German texts. While the term first gained notable traction around 1800, its frequency increased dramatically between 1840 and 1890, showing a steep upward trajectory. Usage reached its historical peak around 1910, suggesting a period of intense engagement with the concept during the height of industrialization (DWDS 2024).

share the same history and therefore their achievements do not belong in the same archive.

Other mechanisms of silencing may have been at play: wood was a ubiquitous presence at the Dresdner Werkstätten, so much so that its mundanity could have rendered it invisible. This may be especially true for inconspicuous materials with a low degree of friction, such as birch wood. Birches grow fast and in abundance, posing little threat in terms of continued availability or price fluctuations. They rarely appear in newspapers or journals from around the turn of the century, quite in contrast to mahogany or teak, their colonial provenance and relation to slave labor making them subject to public political debate (Anderson 2012).

Finally, the perceived lack of evidence left behind by the material of industrial production may have less to do with archival practices themselves than with scholarly disinterest. According to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “[m]ost analysts of capitalism, following nineteenth- and twentieth century leads, have ignored the formation of ‘raw’ materials, taking them for granted as capitalist resources” (Tsing 2015). This analysis is echoed by Lea Haller, author of *Transithandel. Geld- und Warenströme im globalen Kapitalismus*: While the global flow of goods and materials in the early modern period has been thoroughly investigated, historians seem to steer clear of the 19th century, as if the expansion of the transport sector reduced the flow of commodities to a “vernachlässigbaren Automatismus” (negligible automatism) (Haller 2019, 26). If no one tries to follow the traces of the ‘raw’ material, none will be found.

The incomplete story of the flamed birch that today exists as an armchair in the Bröhan-Museum in Berlin sheds light on the material infrastructures that underpinned artistic production at the Dresdner Werkstätten für Handwerkskunst. At the same time, it reveals how a disconnection from the ‘raw’ materials of industrial production has led to a historical record that rarely accounts for the trajectory of, in this case, a birch tree. Further, the essay suggests the need for a more ecological approach to the study of art and design that considers not just the final aesthetic object, but the distributed agencies (Friedman/Krauthausen 2023) that co-constitute its existence. Arguing alongside Laura Turner Igoe, paying attention to the material infrastructures of making serves to “reenvision the untenable perception of the environment as the passive, unchanging backdrop to human cultural production” (Turner Igoe 2018, 164). To achieve this, scholars of material histories must become versed in reading between the lines and actively listen for murmurs in the archive of those non-humans that once were trees, mountains, or animals before being made ‘raw’ and thus historically silenced. Instead of glossing over missing information, we must tune into the silences we encounter and

creatively write *into* them, rendering audible what has gone unheard.⁸ In the end, researching material trajectories, which are open-ended and elusive world-making projects in themselves (Tsing 2015), requires the courage to speculate and, most importantly, a lucky day in the archive.

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⁸ The notion of writing *into* material silences, rather than being deterred by the lack of traditional sources, emerged from insightful advice shared by Jessica Varner at the workshop "Toxic Material(ities): Eco-Material Entanglements in Art" held at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg Cultures of Research in Aachen (6–7 December 2023).

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From Buenos Aires to Brno to Lublin

Transnational Infrastructures of Mail Art and the Circulation of Czechoslovak Conceptualism

Aneta Zahradnik

For conceptual artists from the Socialist countries of Eastern Europe, the global infrastructure of the postal system was essential for the transfer and exchange of artworks. Favored materials, technologies, and formats in Conceptual Art production – such as printed texts, photographs, and graphic reproductions were often characterized as ‘poor,’ lightweight, accessible, and cheap. These qualities made them ‘ideal’ for circulation beyond the Iron Curtain, allowing artists to circumvent economic restrictions and evade official censorship. The 1970s were the heyday of what came to be known as Mail Art with a growing international community of artists.¹ The following text explores different forms of Mail Art practice, from the transfer and exchange of artworks via postal services with the aim of presenting them in exhibitions, catalogs, or magazines to the use of Mail art’s infrastructure as a site of art production, with the work constituting itself in the process of circulation.

My analysis focuses on a series of case studies of Czechoslovak conceptual artists who participated in the exhibition *arte de sistemas* in Buenos Aires in 1971, as well as Mail Art projects and exhibitions by Czech artist and curator Jiří Valoch. My selection emphasizes the global reach of these endeavors, which were entirely dependent on the postal infrastructure as a fundamental prerequisite for their realization. Mail Art and transporting conceptual artworks via post in general is analyzed in relation to the infrastructural space of postal services, which depend on standardized formats and media to facilitate easier and more efficient transportation. Infrastructure studies in the field of media theory that focus on aspects of standardization, format, and media infrastructures provide the foundation for this investigation (Jancovic et al. 2020; Volmar 2020; Volmar 2023). Further, my analysis is informed by an understanding of infrastructural space as a field of power relations, where social, governmental, legislative, and ideological structures are at play (Larkin 2013; Easterling 2014; Beck et al. 2022) and calls for an investigation of its

¹ On the significance of Mail Art for artists in Eastern Europe, see esp. Berswordt-Wallrabe 1996; Röder 2008; Dittert 2010.

material conditions located in a field of structural violence (Vishmidt 2017). What follows, is the attempt to question the dependencies and regulating factors in this supposed ‘free zone’ for non-conformist, unofficial art from Socialist Czechoslovakia. How are the infrastructural conditions of postal transportation “*productive*, as relays through which social and material processes are instantiated and formatted” (Daugaard et al. 2024, 6) and how do they shape the materiality and aesthetics of Conceptual Art? What is its impact on the production, distribution, and presentation of these art objects based on its infrastructural circulation? And what are the strategic potentials of this bureaucratic or infrastructural aesthetics?

Mail Art from Czechoslovakia in Buenos Aires: the Exhibition *arte de sistemas* (1971)

In April 1971, the Argentine critic, businessman, and exhibition maker Jorge Glusberg invited artists from all over the world to send material for an exhibition entitled *arte de sistemas*, which was to open in July of that year at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Buenos Aires.² The exhibition was organized, as the invitation letters emphasized, “completely independent”³ of the Argentine government by the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC), a private art space that Glusberg had founded with a number of Argentinian colleagues in 1968. The CAyC became a collaborative platform for interdisciplinary and experimental art for Latin American and international artists. Glusberg’s networks not only connected US and British art scenes to CAyC but also artists from Eastern Europe, some of them active in unofficial art circuits of the Soviet bloc countries, others officially working artists. As early as the 1960s, he made private trips to Czechoslovakia and in the following decades he traveled to Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia as well, mainly in his official capacity as an architectural expert for the CICA and AICA.⁴

arte de sistemas opened on 19 July 1971 with the participation of more than 100 international artists, showing mainly conceptualist works or, as Glusberg

² For fundamental research on *arte de sistemas* and the CAyC, see Herrera/Marchesi 2013, Spencer 2021, and Schwaller 2023.

³ See the invitation letter to Jochen Gerz, reproduced as Gerz’s contribution to the exhibition catalog (*arte de sistemas* 1971, n.p.).

⁴ On Glusberg’s and CAyC’s relations with Eastern Europe, see Cytlak 2017; Cytlak 2018; Kemp-Welch 2018, 287–294; Schwaller 2023, 168–171 and 272. On CAyC’s relations with the Czech art scene, see Štěpánek 2014, 130–132 and Kappel 2024; Jana Písaříková has also recently explored connections between Czechoslovak artists and CAyC resulting in the exhibition intervention *The Argentine Experiment* (2025) within the permanent collection exhibition of the Moravian Gallery in Brno.

put it in the catalog's introduction, "art as idea, political art, ecological art, the art of proposals or cybernetic art," which he summarized under the label of "art systems" (Glusberg 1971a, n.p.).⁵ Alongside artists from Latin America, mainly Argentina, the US, Japan, and Western Europe, Czechoslovakia was the only Eastern European country present in the exhibition. All of the nine participating artists were active protagonists in the unofficial art circuits of Conceptual and Performance Art: Jiří Valoch, Dušan Klimeš, and J.H. Kocman from Brno, Eugen Brikcius, Olaf Hanel, Josef Kroutvor, Petr Štembera, and Robert Wittmann from Prague, and Stano Filko from Bratislava. From the outset, *arte de sistemas* was conceived as having two independent forms of presentation: the exhibition and the catalog. For each of these, separate instructions were communicated through the CAyC newsletter, the so-called '*gacetillas de trabajo*' (worksheets), which were regularly sent out from 1970 onwards and were an essential promotional strategy within Glusberg's intensive utilization of publishing infrastructures. As a businessman and owner of the lighting company Modulor – with numerous public and private sector contracts – Glusberg was certainly no stranger to marketing and public relations techniques.⁶ Known as the "yellow sheets" (Herrera 2013, 40), because of the light yellow color of the paper with a standardized visual and typographical style (the cut corners of the sheet, the rectangular linear structure, and the popular lowercase Helvetica font), Glusberg aimed to create a highly recognizable visual identity inspired by information aesthetics, data processing, and statistics. The "Instructions for the exhibition Art Systems" (CAyC, GT-34, 1971) and "Instructions for the catalog Art Systems" (CAyC, GT-35, 1971) included specific recommendations for shipping and international customs clearance: all shipments should be clearly marked as "SIN VALOR COMERCIAL, MATERIAL PARA PUBLICIDAD," i.e. material intended for publication with no commercial value. The material – such as documentation, photographs, serigraphs, and drawings – should be sent unframed, between cartons, in rolls, or flat packages. Negatives would be enlarged to a specified size (0,6×0,7 m) and provided with wooden frames and transparent acrylic panels. Proposals for installations would be carried out by local technicians

5 The terminology is, according to the time, an expression of the widespread interest in systems aesthetics and structuralism in art and theory. Glusberg's knowledge of the concept of 'systems esthetics' introduced by US art and technology theorist Jack Burnham in 1968 is more than likely, although Glusberg didn't refer to Burnham's text in the exhibition catalog at any point.

6 The CAyC was partly financed by Glusberg's entrepreneurial business. This raises the question of how independent of government policy the CAyC actually was. On this question, see Schwaller 2023, 100 and Spencer 2021, 55.



Fig. 1 Exhibition views of *arte de sistemas*, 1971 (Courtesy, J.H. Kocman Archive, Brno).

and architects and texts would be translated into Spanish. Each participant received the same size wall or panel (fig. 1).⁷

The standardized and egalitarian principle of the installation of the artworks in the exhibition also determined the production and concept of the catalog. The publication consisted of a collection of unbound sheets in a folder, presenting over 300 text-based artworks, photographs or drawings that had been sent to Buenos Aires (Schwaller 2023, 260). Each artist was given two pages: one for a biography, a personal photograph and a reproduction of a characteristic work; the other for an individual idea. For this purpose, each artist was given a gridded sheet for the sketch of a project that would constitute a “sheet work” (“*la hoja-obra*”) in its own right. The line grid had the function of visually unifying the catalog, as was emphasized in the instructions. The logo and address of the CAyC on each sheet, the lines reserved for the artist’s name, the title and the date, added to the bureaucratic order and equal treatment of each contributor. The catalog contained, in alphabetical order, names of North American and Western European Conceptual Art, as well as in the international art world less visible Latin American artists such as Mirtha Dermisache, Marie Orensanz, or Edgardo Antonio Vigo.

The Czechoslovak artists sent material ranging from conceptual poetry, proposals, and drawings to photographic documentations of happenings and landscape actions. The Brno artist J.H. Kocman received his invitation to *arte de sistemas*, typewritten on CAyC’s characteristic letterhead, as early as February 1971 (Glusberg 1971b).⁸ For the exhibition he sent two photographs from his series *Weather Activity* and photo-documentation of the collective action “10 white squares,” a series of activities led by his artist colleague Jiří Valoch in 1970 in the Pálava countryside, 40 km South of the Moravian city of Brno. Since 1970, Kocman had been interested in communication in his artistic endeavors and the effect of “communicative materials” such as statements, texts, etc. on the relationship between the artist and “the addressee” (Valoch 2017, 103). Throughout the 1970s, he practiced so-called stamp art, creating individual rubber stamps, printing them on card and sending them out to friends and colleagues. In this process, the materiality and tactility of the paper, the act of inserting the printed matter into the envelope and the opening of it by the recipient, were crucial for Kocman.

⁷ The instructions refer to a planned follow-up edition of *arte de sistemas* at the 11th São Paulo Biennial in September 1971, which ultimately never took place due to the boycott of the Biennial by many cultural workers who spoke out against the Brazilian military government and its crimes (Spencer 2021, 69f). See also the instructions for *arte de sistemas II* in Glusberg 1972.

⁸ Kocman was actually invited to two exhibitions: *An International Show of Propositions [...]* (poetic research) in June and *Systems Art*.

His colleague Valoch sent several pieces of conceptual poetry to Buenos Aires: the photo series *Valoch pronounces his poem 'POEM'* and examples of what he called “earth-poems” and “earth-actions” – all of them photographs and text-pieces which could be easily shipped and reproduced. Valoch was very active as an artist and curator in his hometown of Brno and beyond, and established contact with Glusberg through the German computer artist Georg Nees, who had participated in Valoch’s *Computer Graphic* exhibition at the House of Arts in Brno in 1968 (Musilová 2018, 100). Another well-connected artist was Petr Štembera from Prague, who in the early 1970s made intensive use of Mail Art infrastructures and participated in a number of projects:⁹ for example, in Jan Dibbets’s *Art & Project Bulletin* in 1969, in various book projects by German Mail artists Klaus Groh and Walter Aue (both participated in *arte de sistemas*), such as the anthology *Aktuelle Kunst in Osteuropa* published by Groh in 1972. The realization of these projects was mainly based on contacts made through Mail Art networks and built on its inherent generative principle of the constant expansion of personal infrastructures. Štembera’s contribution to *arte de sistemas* is exemplary for those networking activities. He addresses the practice of postal dispatch, such as the packaging of items, as an integral part of the work: next to Štembera’s portrait, a photograph shows the artist’s hands wrapping an unidentifiable object as if preparing it for shipping (fig. 2). Instead of a title and date, the artist has given his postal address, signaling his wish to be contacted. One reason for Mail art’s popularity among Eastern European artists, but also for artists working under difficult economic or political circumstances in general, was the very low cost of postage – which was even lower if the mail was classified as ‘printed matter.’ A small package to Canada, for example, could be sent for as little as 50 Czech hellers.¹⁰ Although customs officials were said to inspect the letters – they were said to be ‘x-rayed’ – in the case of Kocman, he reports that he never suffered any consequences for his mail art activities and did not notice any decline in his mailings.¹¹ It must have been the materials’ “‘official’ conspicuousness” (Kemp-Welch 2018, 284) that didn’t arouse suspicion and prevented them from being confiscated by the authorities.

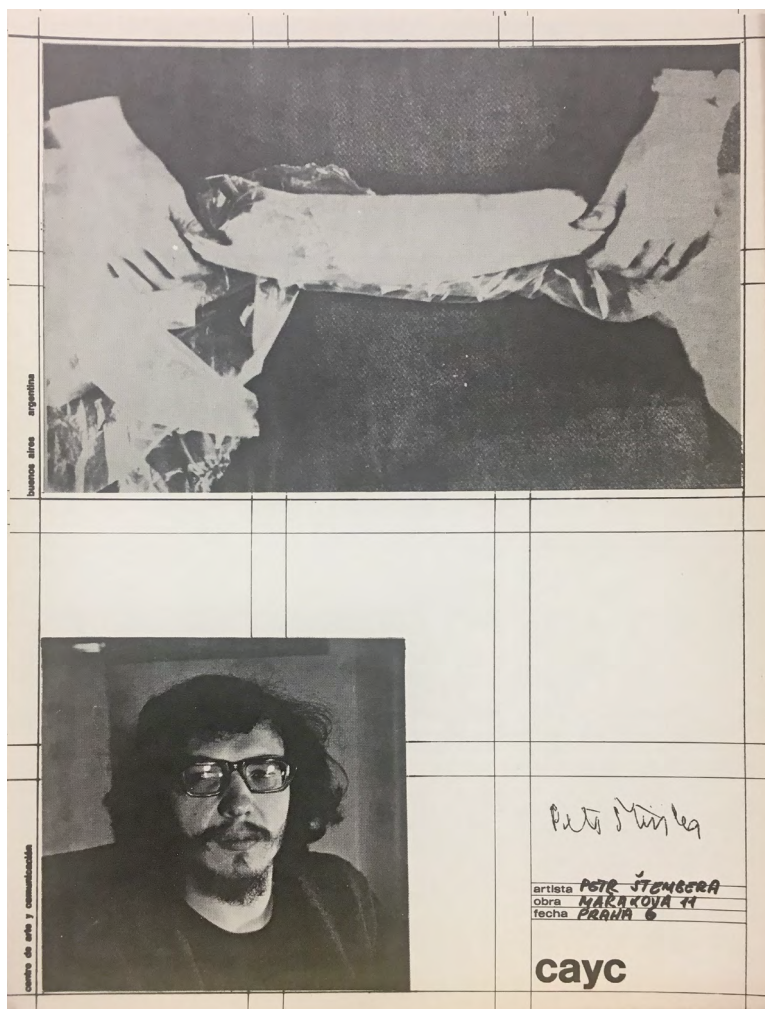
The circulation of artworks within postal infrastructures inevitably led to adaptations of the material, technique, and format for better transportability;

⁹ On Petr Štembera’s networking strategies, see Buddeus 2018.

¹⁰ Email from J.H. Kocman. Received by the author, 22 October 2024. This information is based on a parcel labelled as “*tiskopis*” (Czech for printed matter) sent to B.P. Nichol in Toronto in May 1970.

¹¹ Email from J.H. Kocman. Received by the author, 22 October 2024.

Fig. 2 Petr Štembera's contribution to the catalog *arte de sistemas*, 1971 (arte de sistemas, exh. cat. Centro de Arte y Comunicación, Buenos Aires, 1971, n.p.).



at the same time, this aesthetic adaptation¹² to infrastructural conditions held the strategic potential to subvert existing political restrictions, providing an ideal ‘camouflage’ for conceptual artists living under communism. For Glusberg, who saw works of art as “communication channels,” the value of the new media used in art lay in their standardized and reproducible form (qtd. in Schwaller 2023, 134). He saw this as the “regional answer” of the technologically and economically underdeveloped Latin American countries (CAYC GT-133, 1972). And he knew how to use it in the many traveling exhibitions he organized in the following years to promote Latin American art on a global

¹² I thank Burcu Dogramaci and Ursula Ströbele for their valuable comments in this regard.

scale.¹³ In these efforts, he also showed solidarity with the Socialist countries of Eastern Europe, which were under the control of the Soviet Union and lacked economic resources and presence on the international art scene. In this spirit of unification of the peripheries against the dominant Western art world during the Cold War, Glusberg organized numerous exhibitions which were increasingly political and ideologically motivated. He not only collaborated with Eastern European artists working unofficially, but also co-organized exhibitions with institutions and museums in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia through official channels of cultural policy.¹⁴

Jiří Valoch Curating Through Mail Art's Infrastructures

Like Glusberg, Jiří Valoch also knew how to make use of networking strategies, as he was very well connected internationally as an artist and curator at the House of Arts in Brno.¹⁵ Not only did he realize entire exhibitions with material collected solely by post, he also carried out artistic projects that were constituted by the very act of sending, receiving, and returning material. In 1973, he created the Mail Art project *dedication piece*, a series of twenty numbered and signed sheets, copied on a Xerox machine, with a list of twenty recipients to whom he dedicated each sheet (fig. 3). These included artists from Western Europe such as Timm Ulrichs or Jan Dibbets as well as colleagues from neighboring countries such as Endre Tót or Dóra Maurer. The

13 For example, CAyC's traveling exhibition of heliographic posters, *Hacia un perfil del arte latinoamericano* (1972): Glusberg instructed participants to send works only in the standardized dimensions of IRAM 4504 and 4508 (which correspond to the formats A0 to A4 defined by the ISO 216 standard). For a study of this exhibition series, see Schwaller 2023, 112–190. Interestingly, only Jiří Valoch remained a constant presence in Glusberg's subsequent exhibitions among the Czechoslovak artists. Between 1972 and 1975, his work was presented in the exhibition series *Towards a Profile of Latin American Art*. He even contributed political artworks, which were an absolute exception in Valoch's oeuvre. The reasons for Valoch's continuous participation under the label of Latin American Art and the withdrawal of the other Czechoslovak artists remain unsolved and call for further investigation.

14 For instance, an exhibition on experimental photography from Poland supported by the Polish Embassy in Argentina in 1971 or the exhibition *121 grabados checoslovacos* showing graphic art from Czechoslovakia organized in collaboration with the National Gallery in Prague in 1972; both shown at CAyC.

15 During the so-called normalization period in Czechoslovakia, he presented short exhibitions of artists from the unofficial art scene between exhibitions of officially accepted art. Valoch's activities during these years were highly ambivalent, as from 1975 on he was registered as a secret agent for the State Security (StB). In the late 1970s and 1980s, under severe pressure, Valoch was forced to report on several artists from the unofficial cultural sphere. See Musilová 2018, 178–182 and Vodrážka 2018, 111–117.

Fig. 3 Jiří Valoch, *dedication piece*, 1973, Paper, xerox, >>>
210×297 mm (Courtesy Moravian Gallery, Brno).

this is copy nr. 5 from twenty numbered and signed identical sheets copied by means of xerox from one typewritten original.

copy nr. 1 is dedicated to endre tót, budapest
copy nr. 2 is dedicated to ben, nice
copy nr. 3 is dedicated to günter uecker, düsseldorf
copy nr. 4 is dedicated to jochen gerz, paris
copy nr. 5 is dedicated to j.h. kocman, brno
copy nr. 6 is dedicated to kajetan sosnowski, warszawa
copy nr. 7 is dedicated to ken friedman, san diego
copy nr. 8 remains to me
copy nr. 9 is dedicated to dóra maurer, budapest
copy nr.10 is dedicated to sol le witt, new york
copy nr.11 is dedicated to g.a. cavellini, brescia
copy nr.12 is dedicated to jan dibbets, amsterdam
copy nr.13 is dedicated to robert rehfeldt, berlin
copy nr.14 is dedicated to robin crozier, sutherland
copy nr.15 is dedicated to p.-a. gette, paris
copy nr.16 is dedicated to ladislav novák, třebíč
copy nr.17 is dedicated to timm ulrichs, hannover
copy nr.18 is dedicated to j.o. mallander, helsinki
copy nr.19 is dedicated to rune miels, köln
copy nr.20 is dedicated to john cage, new york

the typewritten original is dedicated to armin hundredmark,
west berlin

the real sense of this piece is the relation arising
between the receivers to whom the copies are dedicated.

the original version of this piece is dated 20/2/1973.

For Valch

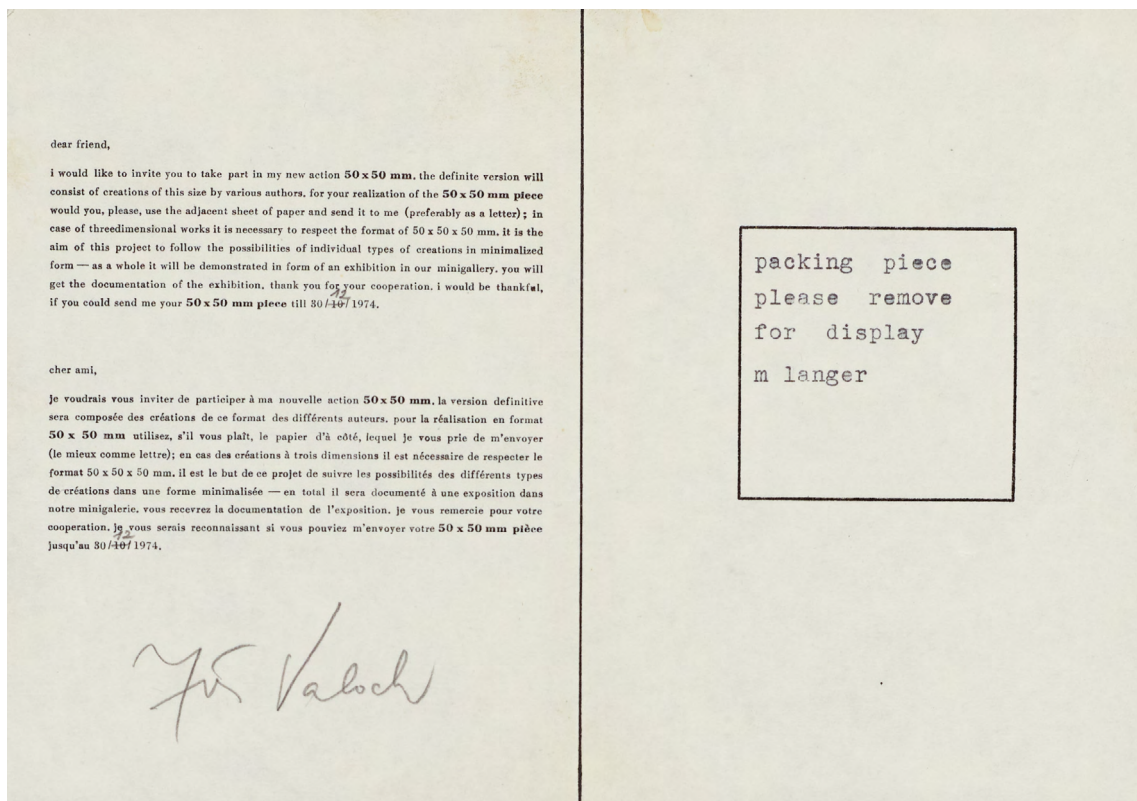


Fig. 4 Jiří Valoch and Michael Langer, *action 50×50*, 1974, Printing, typewriting, 210×150 mm (Courtesy Moravian Gallery, Brno).

typewritten original was dedicated to the West Berlin gallery owner Armin Hundertmark. In the text, Valoch explained that the “real sense of this piece is the relation arising between the receivers to whom the copies are dedicated.” He also emphasized the fact that a Xerox photocopier had been used, which was certainly not a matter of course in Czechoslovakia at the time as every purchase of a copying machine had to be approved by the authorities. Valoch had access to this reproduction technology through friends who worked in a printing workshop. Copying machines by the US company Xerox were considered new and innovative, they were emblematic of the modern communications industry and held “the cachet of vanguardism” (Alberro 2003, 148). Valoch certainly chose xerox for its ‘flat’ and impersonal aesthetic and its popularity among US conceptual artists and curators like Seth Siegelau. Its promise of “instant publishing,” which allowed everyone to “become both author and publisher” (McLuhan/Fiore qtd. in Alberro 2003, 130), made it a favorable technology for Valoch’s projects. In 1974, he went one step further in another participatory Mail Art project that explicitly asked the recipient to be creative and stick to a certain format. In *50×50 mm*, he sent a

half-folded sheet of A5 paper to around 100 fellow artists – such as Ruth and Robert Rehfeldt, Heinz Gappmayr, or Meret Oppenheim, to name just a few – and invited them to create a work of art using the given space of a 50×50 mm square (fig. 4).¹⁶ The results were to be preferably returned by letter post, with the aim of presenting them in the ‘minigallery’ at the Veterinary Research Institute in Brno, where his colleague Kocman, a veterinarian by profession, was employed. But the campaign never culminated in an exhibition,¹⁷ and two years later Valoch was still sending out invitations for this project, even while already working on his next ambitious Mail Art exhibition.

In the summer of 1976 Valoch organized the exhibition *Teksty Wizualne – Visual Texts* for the Galeria Labirynt in Lublin, Poland. It was one of several exhibition sections in the course of the *OFERTA '76* art festival. The exhibition was divided into thematic sections like photo art, film and video, and ‘contextual art,’ along with a separate section on Henryk Stażewski, each with its own curator. Valoch was invited by Polish filmmaker Józef Robakowski, who was responsible for the film and video section, to curate the section “visual texts.”¹⁸ Valoch had the infrastructural networks – he was informed about names and thanks to his curatorial position at the House of Arts had the economic and organizational structures to contact around 100 artists from all over the world. This time, all submissions were to be sent directly to Galeria Labirynt’s director Andrzej Mroczek in the format of an A4-page. After collecting all the material, Valoch traveled to Poland to sort everything out, which was possible after Mroczek issued an official invitation on behalf of the gallery. Due to Galeria Labirynt’s formal status as a cultural institution, Czechoslovak citizens like Valoch were able to travel abroad legally on official invitation (Wasiak 2010). Art historian Tomasz Załuski pointed out Galeria Labirynt’s significance as a “formal, public, alternative and experimental art institution [...] in a peripheral region of Poland” that combined “formal institutional structures with informal networks of cooperation” (Załuski 2023, 61, 83).¹⁹ In the 1970s, working in Poland allowed Valoch (and others) to curate large group exhibitions that would not have been possible in Brno at the time.²⁰ Valoch’s

¹⁶ Three-dimensional objects were permitted as well, but should not exceed the dimensions of 50×50×50 mm.

¹⁷ The action is partly documented in the Moravian Gallery in Brno. Works sent in the conjunction of 50×50 mm by artists such as Imre Bak, Robin Crozier, Michael Langer, Jacques Lenep, Sol LeWitt, Michael Kidner, and others are stored there.

¹⁸ Other commissioners were Zbigniew Dłubak, Zdzisław Sosnowski, and Jan Świdziński.

¹⁹ The gallery was established in 1969 by local artists from the Lublin Group. It operated as part of the Lublin House of Culture and was supported by local political authorities.

²⁰ For Valoch’s collaborations and connections with the Polish art scene, and the *Visual Texts* exhibition in particular, see Musilová 2018, 158–166.



Fig. 5 Exhibition view of *OFERTA* at the Galeria Labirynt, section *Teksty Wizualne – Visual Texts*, Pstrowskiego Street 12, Lublin, 1976 (Courtesy Galeria Labirynt, Lublin).

first contact with the Polish art scene came through another by now famous Mail Art project to which he had been introduced by Klaus Groh: Jarosław Kozłowski's and Andrzej Kostołowski's *NET*, created in 1971 as an open networking platform in the form of an ever-growing list of names and addresses (Kemp-Welch 2018, 97–123; Kemp-Welch 2019).

Valoch structured *Visual Texts* according to his understanding of the basic categories of contemporary visual-textual art production, showing “visual poetry as one of the most widely spread intermedium” (Valoch 1978, n.p.). The works were grouped into concrete and visual poetry, handwriting, mail art and rubber stamps, textbooks and book-objects, photography, and works at the boundary of visual poetry and Conceptual Art (ibid.). The primarily two-dimensional works were presented on equally-sized partitions; a small collection of booklets and small objects were arranged on tables or pedestals (fig. 5).²¹ A small brochure was produced over the course of the exhibition,

²¹ In 1978, Valoch donated the entire collection to the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, where it is now kept.

containing a list of artists and some installation photographs. The collected material stayed in Poland and the exhibition was repeated two years later at the House of Creative Environments in the city of Łódź, supplemented by a colloquium with lectures, presentations, and discussions. A more elaborate catalog was produced, which, with its sophisticated material and typographical design, was closer to an artist's book. It included a detailed introduction to the exhibition concept by Valoch and reproductions of works by Josef Honys,²² Robin Crozier, Aaron Marcus, Klaus Burkhardt, Horst Tress, John Furnal, Michael Wulff, Ferdinand Kriwet, Andrzej Partum, Luciano Ori, and Seiichi Nikuni. This selection of exclusively male protagonists for the catalog belies the fact that the exhibition included a relatively large number of an international selection of female participants, such as Mirella Bentivoglio, Betty Danon, Fria Elfen-Frenken, Amelia Etlinger, Katalin Ladik, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, or Mary Ellen Solt.

In Conclusion

"Just printed sheets of paper" did not arouse suspicion among officials and therefore remained unrecognizable to people outside artistic circles (Mroczek qtd. in Wasiak 2010, 305). But for a large community of artists in the 1970s it was more than just printed text and paper. As Valoch pointed out in his introduction to *Visual Texts*, while Mail Art was not new in terms of its materials, "its contribution [was] the introduction of a new communicative medium as intermediary of an artistic message" (Valoch 1978, n.p.). This included elements of correspondence that went beyond the mere objects sent, such as the opening of the envelope or the way it was read and/or viewed. Postal services were the essential infrastructure, deeply embedded in everyday life practices. They were the premise for the realization of exhibitions like *Visual Texts*, and the festival's poster, framed like an airmail envelope with its typical red, white, and blue striped edge, underscores the post's significance (fig. 6). The nature of Mail Art is fundamentally shaped by the infrastructural conditions of postal services: how objects move within them, and the possibility of circulation at all, very much depends on specified norms and standardized formats that ensure transportability, compatibility, and interoperability. Scholars have highlighted infrastructure being the "*embodiment of standards*" (Borgman 2000, 19) and the production of standards as instruments of control and

22 Other Czechoslovak artists in the exhibition were: Karel Adamus, Miroslav Klívar, J.H. Kocman, Jan Kubíček, Karel Miler, Ladislav Novák, Jan Steklík, Petr Štembera, Jan Wojnar, and Jiří Valoch himself.



Fig. 6 Exhibition posters, *OFERTA* at the Galeria Labirynt, 1976 (Courtesy Galeria Labirynt, Lublin).

regulation (Brunsson/Jacobsson 2002). The powerful role of infrastructural space and organizations such as ISO (International Organization for Standardization), creating standardized formats as a form of “a ‘soft law’ of global exchanges” (Easterling 2014, 18) has a profound impact on everyday life practices and artistic production. Their embeddedness in geopolitical and ideological power structures must always be considered. Recent research in the field of media studies stresses the importance of formats “as specific formal and aesthetic configurations of media” in the study of infrastructures (Volmar et al. 2020, 10). These approaches promise to be fruitful for the study of artistic production, where technological developments and media infrastructures have a profound impact on the materiality and aesthetics of current and past artistic production. In the exhibitions and Mail Art projects outlined, there is a conscious choice for standardized formats in favor of optimum transferability of the art objects. The incorporation of the material and aesthetic characteristics of administration, an “infrastructural aesthetics” (Daugaard et al. 2024), if you will, represents, against the backdrop of global geopolitical tensions during the Cold War, a subversive potential to evade censorship, cross national and political borders, and gain international mobility and visibility.

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- »» **Cai Lyons** is an independent art historian. They received their PhD from the University of Birmingham in 2023. Lyons’s doctoral thesis was the first to critically analyze the career of Dublin-born artist Mary Swanzy in the first half of the 20th century and forwarded the artist’s exhibiting practice as pivotal to her professionalism during this period. Lyons has presented their research on the artist internationally, from Dublin to Paris to Auckland. Their most recent publication addressed Swanzy’s time in American Samoa in the peer-reviewed, open-access journal *Affirmations: of the Modern*.

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- »» **Sophia Prinz** is Professor of Design Theory and History at Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). Her research engages with practice theory, design sociology, aesthetics, exhibition studies, and transculturality. Alongside her academic work, she was a researcher and co-curator at the Johann Jacobs Museum (2012–2021), where she contributed to numerous exhibitions. She also co-directed the BMBF-funded exhibition project *Mobile Worlds*, which explored the global entanglements of a historical museum collection (www.mobile-worlds.org).
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- »» **Luciana Tamas** is a Romanian-German visual artist, curator, and researcher completing simultaneous PhDs in Art History and Aesthetics at the Braunschweig University of Art (HBK) and in Literary Studies at TU Braunschweig. In 2012, she received a full, five-year scholarship from the DAAD to study Art at HBK; parallel to that, she graduated in English Studies and Art History and Aesthetics at TU and HBK Braunschweig. She has participated in and (co-)organized over 200 cultural events – solo and group shows, artist talks, lectures, and conferences – and has been granted several awards, most recently the Young European Artist Trieste Contemporanea Award (2021).

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- »» **Simone Wille** is senior scientist at the Institute of Art History, University of Innsbruck. She is an art historian of 20th-century modernist and contemporary art, working at the intersections of transnational modernism, mobility studies, and historical transition. Her research focuses in particular on historic and artistic entanglements and cultural mobility between South and West Asia and Europe in the 19th and 20th century. She thereby examines decolonization and how these processes have shaped the global art world. Her book *Cold War Art Worlds: South Asian Art and Artists in Prague, 1947–1989* was published by Leuven University Press in fall 2025. She is currently preparing the exhibition *Modern Indian Art in Prague*, which will be on view at the National Gallery Prague in 2027.
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