

The Transversal Network: Mail Art Practices and International Contacts in Atelier 35, Oradea, and the MAMŪ group, Târgu-Mureş, in the early 1980s

Mădălina Braşoveanu*

Abstract

The article analyses the mail art practices in Romania in the early 1980s, focusing on two artistic groups – Atelier 35 from Oradea and MAMŪ group from Tîrgu-Mureş – and on the contacts and collaborations they established with the wide international and/or regional mail art networks – especially through the artist Ioan Bunuş. Comparing and discussing bibliographical and archival documentations, with visual mail art artefacts and oral history testimonies, the article argues that the local mail art practice was strongly shaped by specific local and regional characteristics – such as a rather “isolationist” tendency, than an eagerness to connect and communicate throughout the “unknown” world, or the prerequisite of direct contacts among artists, of pre-existent networks of collaboration that should have informed future mail art exchanges. As such, the local mail art practices seem to describe “transversal movements of cultures” (Lionnet, Shih, 2005), processes of hybridisation which, though not fully separated from the “major”, were actively generating a non-Western idiom of mail art that was to a large extent effective in diversifying and consolidating the artists’ interest in non-conventional languages.

Keywords: mail art, Romanian late-avant-garde, artists’ networks, Atelier 35 Oradea, MAMŪ Group Tîrgu-Mureş, minor transnationalism.

Introduction

In general, when we talk about artistic networks active regionally or globally in the last decades of the twentieth century, the topic of analysis is mail art in particular and the channels of communication that this artistic practice opened up and maintained, starting from the 1960s, among numerous artists located in the most far-flung or inaccessible—for reasons to do with isolationist political regimes—corners of the world. Only very recently has the subject of the networks created by artists, historians and art critics in the countries of the former communist bloc been examined, networks that were created via personal meetings and dialogues, joint projects and direct cultural exchanges, and which also incorporated connections forged and maintained through mail art, but which cannot be reduced to the latter.¹

The arts networks forged in the early 1980s by artists affiliated to Atelier 35 in Oradea, and by those who were self-organized in the group MAMŪ in Tîrgu-Mureş, were articulated according to this latter model of a network, springing from interhuman relations, from the sharing and circulation of similar artistic interests and concerns. Configured as delocalised collectives, these networks, through an urge to self-organise, managed to take advantage of favourable situations identified within the institutional system and to create a broad category of artistically relevant spaces outside this system. At the same time, these collectives also generated a local mail art micro-network and connected via a number of artists to the international mail art networks. Unlike the complex and multiple international mail art networks to which artists from other countries in the region adhered, or which they generated,

¹ In her recent book, Klara Kemp-Welch discusses the circulation of ideas, cultural exchanges and joint projects that numerous artists from Central and Eastern Europe realised via complex and ramified professional networks established on the basis of interpersonal relations and adherence to similar artistic ideas and concerns. See:

Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc. Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965-1981* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2018).

particularly in the late 1970s,² the journeys taken by mail art in the practice of artists from Oradea and Tîrgu-Mureş mainly trace a series of micro-networks, active at the local level and limited at the regional level, with a number of notable exceptions connected to situations in which some of them took part in large-scale events for the international mail art network. It is precisely these exceptions that are the subject of the present article, in which I shall discuss a number of the collaborations that the local artists had with the international arts scene via mail art, as well as a number of particularities that the embrace of this artistic practice acquired in their understanding of it.

International connections

Within the framework of the young artistic communities that had begun to develop in Oradea and Tîrgu-Mureş in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ioan Bunuş played a central part, both in the promotion of mail art at the local level and in maintaining a substantial correspondence with numerous and prominent segments of the international mail art network. He drew numerous colleagues into longstanding or occasional mail art exchanges, he made a significant contribution to the dissemination of invitations to take part in joint international mail art exhibitions and projects among young local artists, and he has remained a dedicated practitioner of mail art to the present day.

According to the artist's own account, Bunuş established contact with the international mail art network as early as 1975, when, as a result of circumstances that remain unclear even to him, he began to receive strange correspondence in the mail from abroad:

The first pieces I received, around 1975, came [...] from a U.S.A. soldier stationed in Saudi Arabia [...], rather a strange "artist," Wally Darnell (his project was called "Mr Sandman"), addressed specifically to me, in Reghin [Bunuş's home town]. Another mad American, named Steffen O'Soreff, send me a kind of futurist newspaper at that time, futurist in the sense that it was post-dated, for example No. 180, anno 2030 (not even

today do I have any idea how he calculated it so far in advance, how he projected his ravings into the future). The content of the newspaper was in keeping with it. In the end, even if I understood such things only very much in part, as I was a graphic art student in my second year at Cluj, I had enough of a shaky intellectual grounding, mostly in the visual arts, and I was curious about what arrived as if from other worlds.³

Shortly after these first contacts, to which he began to reply with his own contributions, by the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, the list of Bunuş's contacts in the international mail art network had expanded considerably, as a natural consequence of the way in which channels of communication worked and in accordance with a rhythm that can no longer be reconstructed chronologically, with the artist coming to correspond with a series of protagonists of mail art circuits from all over the world.⁴ Probably an active factor in this process of expanding Bunuş's contacts with mail artists from all over the world was precisely his early contacts with Wally Darnell, if we remember that the American mail artist played an extremely important part in promoting mail art in culturally isolated spaces and in establishing connections between Western and peripheral mail art networks during the early 1980s. As Chuck Welch mentioned, Wally Darnell had taken upon himself the role of mail art missionary in those years, and he was interested not only in drawing into the mail art network artists from cultures relatively isolated from the West or other cultural spaces, but also in introducing mail art as an official cultural phenomenon in states from the Orient.⁵ It was precisely his "Mr

³ Ioan Bunuş, e-mail correspondence with the artist, August 2017.

⁴ "For example: Shozo Shimamoto (Gutai, Japan); Rehfeld (D.D.R.); Jacques Massa – Groupe Diagonale, Paris; Guy Bleus (Administration Centre, Wellen, Belgium); Mark Pawson, Great Britain; *Afzets* magazine, Holland, I.S.C.A. magazine, New York; an unforgettable character from Vancouver, Canada (Robert Creeks), Anna Banana; in Italia, Vittore Baroni, Ruggero Maggi, Milano; I almost forgot the late Guglielmo Achille Cavellini, owner of Textile Industries, Bergamo, the supporter of György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay, Artpool Budapest; in Switzerland there was somebody active in Geneva, another in Trogen, St. Gallen." *Ibid.*

⁵ Chuck Welch mentions that in 1985, after the exhibition in Saudi Arabia, mentioned below, Darnell organised the first international mail art exhibition in China, with the permission of the authorities. According to the author, in the letter he had sent along with the invitation to take part in the exhibition, Darnell explained to the "network" that there shouldn't be anything political in the contributions to this particular exhibition, neither Marxist nor communist nor capitalist, in order for the event to be able to take place. See: Chuck Welch, *Networking Currents. Contemporary Mail Art*

² See for example: "NET, Jarosław Kozłowski in conversation with Klara Kemp-Welch", *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2-3 (2012): 14-35; Jasmina Tumbas, "International Hungary! György Galántai's Networking Strategies", *ARTMargins*: 87-115; Ivana Bago, "A Window and a Basement. Negotiating Hospitality at La Galerie des Locataires and Podroom – The working Community of Artists", *loc. cit.*: 116-146.

Sandman” project, unfolding over a number of years and during the course of which he had also contacted Ioan Bunuş, that was in the early 1980s a particularly relevant nodal point for many mail art networks in Central and Eastern Europe, alongside the Western networks.

In 1982, Wally Darnell organised the *First International Mail Art Show in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*,⁶ held in Al Khobar, in preparation for which he sent invitations all over the world, saying, “Mr Sandman: send me a Dream!”. The event managed to attract a massive number of entries from artists already active in international mail art networks, as well as from artists who had only recently become interested in this artistic practice and in the channels of communication by which it circulated. To this event is also connected the beginning of the close collaboration between György Galántai/*Artpool* and American artist Ray Johnson, according to Galántai. After making a number of attempts to contact Johnson in the early 1980s, without receiving a reply, in 1982 Galántai finally received a drawing by Johnson through the post, with the request that he send it to Darnell’s address in Saudi Arabia in order to participate in the *First International Mail Art Show* in Al Khobar. As a result of this first contact with Ray Johnson and the implicit invitation, György Galántai joined the “Mr Sandman” exhibition project.⁷

In the context of the Romanian arts scene, Ioan Bunuş and Wally Darnell are also directly responsible for attracting artist István Gyalai into local and, for a short time, international mail art networks. Gyalai kept up a steady exchange of mail art correspondence with Bunuş both during the period when the two artists were in Romania and after they emigrated in the mid-1980s. According to Gyalai, he received Darnell’s contact details from Bunuş and took part in the *First International Mail Art Show* in Al Khobar in 1982:

I’m almost certain that I received his [Darnell’s] address from Bunuş; in those years, Bunuş (in fact, the whole of the time,

our correspondence has been very intense and uninterrupted) sent me a lot of addresses and mail art invitations, his attachment to, his passion for this genre was obvious [...]. So I think that I received the address for the Mail Art action held by Wally in Saudi Arabia, where he was living at the time. It was always a puzzle in those years and in similar situations, “who might he be?” this W.D. from Saudi Arabia. An enlightened Arab? An American spy? Somebody in love with the exotic East, an exile from the West? In those years I frequented Bucharest bookshops where, unlike in the provinces, from time to time you had the opportunity to buy a current book from outside the country. [...] That was how I came by a small collection of Persian miniatures from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, renowned miniatures, very beautiful [...], and I adapted a reproduction from that album (I think it was Russian, made up of double-size postcards). To this contribution of mine he [Wally Darnell] responded with great interest and I think we exchanged a few more letters.⁸

As a result of his participation in the Al Khobar mail art exhibition and the correspondence he kept up with the American mail artist after the event, in the summer of 1983 Gyalai received a letter from Darnell in which he expressed his desire that they meet in person, as he was going to have a stopover in Bucharest on his way back from the Orient. Accepting to meet him, not without certain reservations, Gyalai was later informed, by telegram from Athens, that Darnell would soon be arriving in Bucharest. This faded scrap of paper, along with István Gyalai’s memories of that encounter, lend a certain solidity to the ghostly presence of Wally Darnell, but cannot make up for the huge documentary gap that still remains when it comes to his fervent activity as a mail artist and networker on the cultural periphery in the early 1980s:

[...] he arrived, he stayed in a small, shabby hotel somewhere at the back of the Palace Auditorium, as I remember, I showed him around those small, interesting streets, the hotel seemed “uncared for at the least,” he looked at me in amazement: “But it’s

Subjects and Issues, (Brookline, MA: Sandbar Willow Press, 1985), part I, p. 34.

⁶ *The First International Mail Art Show in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Mr. Sandman*, see: <http://www.artpool.hu/MailArt/chrono/1982.html>, accessed June 2019.

⁷ For György Galántai’s account of his first contact with Ray Johnson, see: https://www.artpool.hu/Ray/RJ_history.html, accessed June 2019. For the letter that Johnson sent Galántai, see: <https://www.artpool.hu/Ray/7/ray1.html>, accessed June 2019.

⁸ István Gyalai, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 2018.

wonderful, something OLD, back home in America something like that is utterly exotic, *rarissimo*, I love it!" He was just an ordinary guy, about my age or five years older, with the obligatory beard (like me).⁹ I hadn't understood what he was doing in Saudi Arabia, I asked him what life was like there, he turned to me and (I'll never forget) said: "It's impossible to meet a woman!" We photographed a few things, he showed me a few works, with my rudimentary English I was quite embarrassed and I was constantly thinking that we were under surveillance. I remember that when he left I took him to the Northern Station (I can't remember what his destination was), we boarded the train, I took a few photographs, we did some kind of "joint action," I can't remember what exactly. I had the photographs a long time, I sent them to his address in the United States after that, but essentially, the connection didn't continue. Maybe I was mainly to blame. The thought that all my correspondence was definitely opened [...] it dampened my enthusiasm for Mail Art. And not only that. For me personally, it was a scene that was too theatrical, too full of self-obsessed actors, with lots of superficial works, I sensed the influence of fashions typical of the artistic biotope. [...] To what extent I was wrong is another question.¹⁰

Despite his reticence toward mail art, István Gyalai continued to communicate via the medium even after he emigrated from Romania, in the late 1980s, but did so mainly with artists who came from or who had remained in his home country, colleagues with whom he had a personal connection, such as Károly Elekes and Miklós Onucsán, as well as Ioan Bunuş. His mail art pieces had a distinctly graphic, aesthetic character, and were often pen and ink drawings, sometimes collages, small-scale graphic works that also served as visual messages in

themselves and as vehicles to convey personal content.

On the other hand, Wally Darnell disappeared without trace from the international mail art network in the 1990s. In a letter to his old friend and correspondent Chuck Welch—mail artist CrackerJack Kid—in November 1988, Darnell mentioned that he had created very little mail art in the last year, maintaining contact only with a few friends, and that he suspected that his creative drive had disappeared; at the same time, he recapped all the places he had travelled to from 1983, when he left Saudi Arabia, to 1987, when he returned there after a long absence.¹¹ Despite the persistent documentary gap when it comes to Darnell's pioneering cultural work in the Orient in the early 1980s and his massive participation in international mail art networks, he remains a leading figure in the history of this artistic practice in the period, as emphasised by Chuck Welch in the passage he dedicates to him in his *Eternal Network Mail Art Archive*:

In the early 1980s Wally Darnell was the personification of mail art's first traveling Ambassador and this became the nucleus of my mail art travels with him (vicariously via my imagination) to Latin America. Those travels emerged in a stamp album commemorating Darnell's trip. I titled it, "Mail Art Ambassadors." Much of the correspondences listed below describe that journey and Wally's wanderlust as a student, teacher, and artist who in 1985 organized the "First Mail Art Show in China." He is also remembered in mail art as the organizer of The First International Mail Art Show in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The theme was "Mr. Sandman".¹²

To return to Ioan Bunuş, I shall trace another byway of his work in the early 1980s, which intersects with local and regional mail art networks: his connection with *Artpool* Budapest

⁹ The wearing of beards and long hair was not allowed by the communist authorities in Romania, and was tolerated only for medical reasons (conditions for which shaving was not recommended) or professional motives (actors playing parts that required long hair or a beard). The "obligatory beard" to which Gyalai refers was worn by the majority of artists and in those years was a "sign of identity" for non-aligned cultural actors and a reason that often drew harassment by the police, who might cut men's hair and beards if they did not have documents to justify their appearance.

¹⁰ István Gyalai, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 2018, *emphasis in the original*.

¹¹ "Since then [1983] and until now, I spent no longer than 5 months each in Japan, China, Nevada, and Connecticut, and finally 9 months in Manhattan before moving from there back to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Now, I've been here for a year and 5 months—longer than I've been anywhere since '83! Seems this place suits me." Wally Darnell, letter to Chuck Welch, 25 November 1988. The content of this letter was generously placed at my disposal by Chuck Welch via private e-mail correspondence on 20 May 2020. In the same letter, Welch mentions that Wally Darnell worked in Saudi Arabia as an English teacher, not as a soldier in the U.S. Army as Ioan Bunuş supposed.

¹² Chuck Welch, passage referring to Wally Darnell in his private archive, *Eternal Network Mail Art Archive*, which was kindly sent to me by the author via private e-mail correspondence on 20 May 2020.

and the *World Art Post* exhibition held there in 1982. Although Bunuş had established a series of direct contacts with certain figures on the Budapest art scene as early as 1980, when he visited the city, and even if he maintained professional contact with a number of Hungarian cultural periodicals, in which he regularly published works, he made contact with *Artpool* solely via the mail, having been invited to take part in an *Artpool* exhibition of artist stamps held in 1982. Direct interpersonal relations also certainly played a major part in activating microregional collaborations, and these also operated as networks, but I tend to believe that in accordance with the rules of self-propagation laid down by the mail art channels of communication, Bunuş's participation in the mail art exhibition organised by Wally Darnell in Saudi Arabia might have been the path by which his name ended up on the *Artpool* list of addressees rather than recommendations from various of his collaborators, as the artist himself suspects.¹³

György Galántai drew his inspiration for the *World Art Post* project from one of the veterans of artistic communication within the network, Guglielmo Achille Cavellini, together with whom Galántai had organised a joint exhibition at the Young Artists Club, Budapest, 1980, with the participation of the Italian artist, an event that awoke lively interest on the part of the local cultural scene.¹⁴ *World Art Post* had been designed as an exhibition aimed at creating a large collection of artist stamps from Central and Eastern Europe and at juxtaposing works by artists from the region with works by their counterparts from all over the world,¹⁵ and the result was an event bringing together contributions by more than five hundred artists, all of them reproduced in a documentary publication that was sent to all the participants.¹⁶ The call to take part in the *World Art Post* exhibition asked the artists to

contribute with artist stamps commemorating artistic events, artworks, other artists, or themselves.¹⁷

Besides Bunuş, the only other artist from Romania to take part in this event was Radu Procopovici, a young art critic from Bucharest, who was a mail art enthusiast and who was in constant correspondence with Bunuş and Károly Elekes from Tîrgu-Mureş, and who was most likely attracted to the exhibition by his friend from Oradea. The stamp Bunuş sent to *World Art Post* adapted a photographic self-portrait of the artist, depicted with a black band obscuring his eyes, and at the edge it featured a typewritten quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein: "*Seeing is not an action, but a state.*"¹⁸ Procopovici's stamp shows a photograph of a mass of people, with the author having traced a number of lines showing the directions in which people in the crowd are looking; the lines converge to form ideograms of eyes, which interrupt the letters of the word "NOMADISM", handwritten on a white band that divides the photograph vertically.¹⁹ Neither of the contributions of the two Romanian participants commemorates a specific artistic event or artwork, but both refer to the act of looking, conveyed as a sensory function cancelled out and transformed into passive, interiorised contemplation (in Bunuş's stamp), and in the form of a channel of circulation/a vehicle where connections are established between individuals (in Procopovici's stamp).

The collaboration between Ioan Bunuş and *Artpool*, which began with the *World Art Post* exhibition, was to be constant and long-lasting. Bunuş took part in many of the projects and events organised by György Galántai and Júlia Klaniczay up until recent years,²⁰ and has remained a highly consistent practitioner of mail art, particularly in the 1980s and 90s, maintaining a mail art correspondence with a long list of recipients, to which have continued to be added the names of renowned

¹³ Among the artists who took part in *World Art Post* was Wally Darnell, as a representative of Saudi Arabia, see: <https://www.artpool.hu/Artistamp/WAP/732.html>, accessed June 2019.

¹⁴ For Galántai's account of the *World Art Post* exhibition, see: <https://www.artpool.hu/Artistamp/Galantai.html>, accessed June 2019. For details of the Cavellini-Galántai exhibition of 1980, see: https://www.artpool.hu/events/Aps_5/GAC.html, accessed June 2019. On the rôle of the *World Art Post* event in the artistic biography of *Artpool*, see also: Jasmina Tumbas, "International Hungary!...", 109-110.

¹⁵ See Galántai's account of the *World Art Post* exhibition, *loc. cit. supra*.

¹⁶ See the digital version of the publication: <https://www.artpool.hu/Artistamp/WAP/default.html>, accessed June 2019.

¹⁷ See the *World Art Post* invitation at: https://www.artpool.hu/events/APS_6/invitation.html, accessed June 2019.

¹⁸ For the Ioan Bunuş stamp, see: <https://www.artpool.hu/Artistamp/WAP/427.html>, accessed June 2019.

¹⁹ For the Radu Procopovici stamp, see: <https://www.artpool.hu/Artistamp/WAP/441.html>, accessed June 2019.

²⁰ For example: *Stamp Images*, Budapest Museum of Art, 1987: <https://www.artpool.hu/Artistamp/artist/Bunus.html>; *Fluxus Flags and Documents*, 1992: <https://www.artpool.hu/Fluxus/flag/bunus.html>; *The Year of Chance in Artpool*, 2000: <https://www.artpool.hu/veletlen/naplo/0701a.html>; *Stamp Images*, Budapest Museum of Art, 2007: <https://www.artpool.hu/Artistamp/87-07/Bunus.html>, links accessed June 2019.

representatives from the international network, such as John Higgins, Ed Varney, Franklin Furnace, Picasso Gaglione, Carlo Pittore, Waste Paper, CrackerJack Kid, et al. For Bunuş the mail art medium was a space of spontaneous and free non-canonical creativity, which complemented and extended his artistic activity, providing him with channels through which he was able to put into circulation his current practice of producing personal history, which otherwise found only very narrow and isolated areas for manifestation in the immediate realities of the Romanian art scene in the early 1980s. Dissemination of the results of Bunuş's constant self-documentation in international mail art circuits also began in the early 1980s in Romania and has been perpetuated with varying degrees of intensity to the present, wherein it is reminiscent in a way of the *autostoricizzazione* project undertaken by well-known Italian mail artist Cavellini over the course of his life.²¹ Whereas for Cavellini the endeavour to create a personal history was founded principally on fictionalisation of his own artistic biography, for Bunuş self-historicisation remained largely a documentary approach and seems rather to have been an unintended consequence of his need to produce "living art":

Not having an overly rational personality even thirty-five years ago, I had no idea about self-historicisation, the concept was a great Cavellinian surprise to me thirty-four years ago—maybe I understood it thirty-three years ago. Without my premeditated will, those pieces became something of the sort over the course of the decades. On the contrary, I naturally, almost poetically, spontaneously, instinctively relied [...] on pinning down motives, when I was confronted with them, when I tried to put something on the page, often in haste. Therefore, I fabricated *velociter scribentem*, then it was off to the Romanian, German, Italian, French Post Office, spending my last pennies [...] on stamps—collector's ones if possible—the important thing was for the piece to be sent off (for me to get rid of it), a kind of compensatory easing filled my insides. Strange, no? Living art. What graphic laboratory, engraving press, engraving paper, etc.?! What did I need

prepared canvases, oil paints for? A slight curiosity, as a feeling: how would my piece look once it reached the recipient? The stamps, a possible delay, censorship, in the case of the Romanian Socialist Republic, for example, or the D.D.R.²²

Despite all this, the artist confesses that his adhesion to mail art did not mean uncritical acceptance of all the principles on which the new medium was founded or that he embraced any of the numerous ideological movements that were propagated via the network:

I've remained consistent, to this day I receive and send astonishing pieces [...], the problem being the basis of mail art: everybody can take part, there's no jury, all the entries are exhibited, the documentation is sent to all those who have taken part, and so on. Nevertheless, a lot depends on who makes the pieces: an ordinary person, a creative child, a doctor, a liberal left-wing sociologist, a salon anarchist who's discovered he's an artist overnight, a drawing teacher out in the sticks, a socialist, a frustrated Frenchman vexed that he "doesn't have time to make real art," or even an artist-sender (let's say, Giuseppe Penone). Whoever accepts the basis, has money for stamps, isn't afraid of the gallerist who sells his works for a lot of money on the art market (this risk exists) . . . For example, Anna Banana reproached me for not understanding the "deeper meaning" of mail art in about 1985. What, I didn't understand it? What's important seems to be the mix, the basic levelling, the rejection of elitism, the activism and the perpetuation of the original principles, the attack against culture, the beautiful, tradition; the principle that everything is worth as much as its opposite, let's make a tabula rasa of the past, let's cultivate promiscuity of values [...]. In the meantime, the problem is the same in my case: how can I accept all this, insisting on art? [...].²³

Mail Art at the Local Level

As he explained in another occasion too, the founding principle of mail art that awakened

²¹ See: http://www.cavellini.org/Cavellini.org/Mail_Art.html, accessed June 2019.

²² Ioan Bunuş, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 2017.

²³ Ioan Bunuş, e-mail correspondence with the author, August 2017.

the greatest reticence on the part of Bunuș was that of cancelling out art in the major sense, along with any hierarchy among those who contributed to the network, thereby undermining the value system within whose upper strata the professional artist was situated.²⁴ Even if his recent testimony sum up his experience of more than three decades within the international mail art network, it can provide all the more so clues as to the conceptual frameworks within which Bunuș managed, in his own practice in the early 1980s, his activity as a mail artist along with the one of a “legitimate” artist. The latter activity was partly continued by and partly transferred to mail art, which is particularly obvious at least in the period that Bunuș spent in Oradea, an interval from which is preserved extensive documentation of the densest and most consistent mail art dialogue in which he was involved, namely the *Journal of Mail Art*, which he initiated in the spring of 1982 with Károly Elekes from Tîrgu-Mureș.²⁵ His daily exchanges with Elekes had, at least for that period, a wholly special status within the economy of Bunuș’s practice of self-archiving, thanks to the professional affinities between the two artists and the particular meanings that the “alternativity” of mail art acquired in relation to the local visual culture as they understood it, forming a shared framework of reference for them.

In the case of Károly Elekes, the use of mail art in particular as a means of communication within artistic micro-networks that had sprung up based on connections and contacts established directly by the artist was far more obvious than in the case of Bunuș or István Gyalai. The practice of mail art was founded for Elekes mainly on the need to maintain constant

contact with his peers, with whom he shared ideas and professional interests and less on the need to make contact, via the international network, with artists from the wider world, an experience he was soon to have, once placed in contact with certain international channels of the genre via Ioan Bunuș. During the early 1980s, Elekes had become a focal point within local mail art micro-networks, and use of the medium intensified in his practice. Despite his commitment to maintaining these exchanges of artistic correspondence, Elekes’s participation in regional and international mail art networks was less consistent than his involvement in local networks, and before emigrating the artist communicated only sporadically, mainly with Ryosuke Cohen and György Galántai. According to his own account, he dialogued with Galántai via a series of pieces on the theme of artist stamps, during the period when Galántai organised an exhibition at the Young Artists Club in Budapest, at which the public was invited to interact freely using a collection of art stamps.²⁶ In 1984, after he left Romania, Elekes took part for the first time in an event dedicated to mail art, an international exhibition held by the Young Artists Club in Budapest, and in 1985 he participated in the *Mail Art Projekt*, held at the Kröger Galerie, Kirkheim, West Germany.

For Elekes, mail art was interesting not as a medium that enabled artists to forge links all over the world and disseminate their ideas and interests by such channels, but rather as a means of alternative communication within the circuits of local and limited regional artistic micro-networks, a sphere in which exchanges of ideas and information fulfilled both the direct practical function of continually animating dialogues between artists and the experimental role of testing and probing, through immediate experience, the possibilities opened by this means of communication. His contribution to mail art therefore remains somewhat paradoxical, having been marked by dense and consistent activity, which confirmed him as a focal point for mail art in Romania in the late

²⁴ “Mail art is based on a number of rules that it has been enormously difficult for me to understand. The rules are repeated from time to time for the weakest to be able to understand, but I don’t really take these rules seriously or to the letter. Because it’s said for example that ‘mail art is not art.’ Therefore, for whoever ventures as a professional artist into mail art, another mail artist, who’s a train driver but does mail art, tells him: I don’t have the gift of being able to draw or create, but I’m an artist, a mail artist, because I do mail art. But don’t say to an artist, you’d do well not to do mail art, because there’s no money in it, no fame in it, you just waste a huge amount of money on stamps. And there are very few plastic artists on the market who do mail art, that’s clear, you complicate your life, in a way, with mail art. Romania was interesting because, as it was the Iron Curtain, there weren’t many who did it.” Ioan Bunuș, recorded conversation with the artist, April 2012, Forbach, Germany.

²⁵ See also: Mădălina Brașoveanu, “Mail Art Diary. Brief Account Concerning an Exhibition Project”, *Institutul prezentului*, <https://institutulprezentului.ro/2017/09/15/mail-art-diary/>, accessed May 2020.

²⁶ According to Elekes, he corresponded with Galántai on the subject of the personal artist stamp, but he does not remember the precise year and context, which makes me consider the hypothesis of a potential contribution to the event on his part, but from the existing information this cannot be certified. Based on *Artpool* data, there is no record of the artists who contributed to stamp projects for the *Everybody with Anybody* exhibition of 1982, but it is mentioned that the event was realised with the participation of a number of local and international collaborators. See: <https://www.artpool.hu/Pecset/Everybody.html>, accessed June 2019.

1970s and early 1980s, while Elekes remained nonetheless a “local mail artist,” given his sporadic activity in the international mail art networks.

A similar status was shared by other members of the communities of young artists that sprang up in the early 1980s in various centres in Transylvania—such as those in Cluj and Sfintu-Gheorghe, besides those in Oradea and Tîrgu-Mureș—who included Károly Ferenczi, Imre Baász, Árpád Nagy, Alexandru Antik and Gábor Szörtsey. For these artists, mail art played above all the rôle of providing a means of communication and unconventional interaction aimed at maintaining the links they had already established through meeting each other and personal dialogue, a means whereby they circulated information and exchanged ideas. Only occasionally and less consistently was mail art also harnessed in its function as a bridge to artists from the wider world, a potential of the international mail art network that they taken advantage of less, for reasons largely to do with the limited or temporary interest that many of the artists displayed toward this means of exchange and which played out within local circuits of communication.

Conclusion: transversal mail art

In the late 1980s, the practice of mail art found a number of adherents among the artists active within Atelier 35 Oradea, through the occasional contributions of Anikó Gerendi, Dorel Găină, Dan Perjovschi and László Ujvárossy, which took the form of communications to which the artists resorted in an unsystematic way on various occasions, and which were usually disseminated within small circles of acquaintances or prompted by calls to take part in exhibitions (on the topic of mail art or other unconventional topics that might include mail art).

A comprehensive and publicly visible mail art exhibition was not held in Romania until December 1985. It was organised by Atelier 35 at the Galeria Orizont in Bucharest.²⁷ The event took place in a period when the artists that had played an active part in propagating mail art within art collectives in Oradea and Tîrgu-Mureș, such as Ioan Bunuș, Károly Elekes and Gábor Szörtsey, had emigrated, without their activity in

the field becoming known outside the confined professional circles to which they were connected within the country. I think it is also worth mentioning here the fact that the first mail art exhibition to be held in Romania was, it would seem, a small-scale event with a low level of visibility: *Life Without Art*, held in Timișoara in 1983 at the studio of Constantin Flondor and then at the gallery of the Union of Plastic Artists in Lugoj, in 1984.²⁸ It was also via Constantin Flondor and the Sigma Group from Timișoara that artist Josif Király²⁹ came into contact with certain international channels of mail art in the early 1980s. Király was an artist who collaborated intensively with the network, and with Shozo Shimamoto in particular, over the course of the decade. Although with hindsight it may be observed that in the early 1980s there were in Romania a number of local micro-networks that had through various channels made contact with the international mail art networks, it is all the more surprising that these local micro-networks did not communicate among themselves and did not know about each other, which is valid at least for the Oradea/Tîrgu-Mureș nucleus and the Timișoara nucleus. On the other hand, although they were connected at one time or another to the same focal points of the international networks, like other mail artists from the region, not every mail artist in Romania made contact with colleagues from neighbouring countries. I am thinking in particular of *Artpool*, which was established in the early 1980s within a regional mail art hub and was in contact with Shozo Shimamoto,³⁰ with whom the mail artists from Timișoara also frequently communicated; despite this, none of the Timișoara mail artists took part in the mail art events organised by György Galántai. These clues point to the fact that, in a manner seemingly paradoxical when it came to the internal logic of the mail art networks’ self-propagating actions, they functioned at the local and micro-regional level in the form of dispersed nuclei of branches

²⁸ See: Simona Dumitriu, “Expoziții oficiale și alternative în arta românească a deceniilor ’70-’90. Un exercițiu de călătorie în timp”, în *Arta în România între anii 1945-2000. O analiză din perspectiva prezentului*, ed. Călin Dan, Iosif Király, Anca Oroveanu, Magda Radu (București: Fundația Noua Europă, Editura UNArte, MNAC, 2016), 181.

²⁹ A section of mail art was also included in the exhibition *Closed Doors, Open Envelopes. Iosif Király – Early Works, 1975–2000*, curator Ruxandra Demetrescu, which opened in April 2018 at the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Bucharest.

³⁰ By 1983, *Artpool* had already made contact with Shimamoto via Ray Johnson. See: <https://www.artpool.hu/Ray/7/bru405.html>, accessed June 2019. In the 1980s Ioan Bunuș was also corresponding with Shimamoto, as mentioned above.

²⁷ For more details on this event, see: *Revista Arta – Mail Art*, ed. Dan Mihățianu, no. 32 (2018).

which, although they intersected at some points with shared addressees from the international networks, did not manage or were not interested in identifying themselves or contacting each other.

At the same time, the artists' manifest interest in sooner getting involved in exchanges of artistic correspondence at the local and micro-regional levels, in dialogues through which they shared the alternative nature of the medium relative to the shared reference base provided by the local visual culture, is a distinct feature of the mail art activity carried on by the few artists from the Oradea/Tîrgu-Mureş nucleus, with its local branches in Bucharest, Cluj, Sfintu Gheorghe, and the other regional and international branches mentioned above. But the dynamic and persistence of these dialogues depended in very large part on the pre-existence of contacts, collaborations and direct relations between interlocutors, as the local and even the micro-regional mail art networks developed based on various other types of professional network that took shape independently of mail art and for which the medium provided adjacent and alternative means of communication.

This distinction between categories of networks active in the region had been noticed even in the early 1980s by J.P. Jacob, editor of American mail art magazine *PostHype*, which had initiated a photographic art project by correspondence aimed at artists from Eastern Europe. Sending invitations to take part via the mail art network from the region, Jacob received a very large number of replies, many of them from artists who did not practise or who had not heard of mail art, but who had found out about his project via channels of direct communication that were active within the local art scenes. This experience demonstrates, as Jacob argues, that "the world of art includes a variety of networks," as well as the fact that "information is transmitted from one artist to another, a good example of working with communication, which has developed independently of mail art."³¹ Although to a large extent they replicated the same model of organising and functioning, the artists from Oradea and Tîrgu-Mureş do not

seem to have felt an urgent need to link up to Western nuclei of the mail art network so much as they felt a need to explore and exploit the medium with the local and micro-regional professional circuits to which they were connected, an observation that equally applies to the exception that was Ioan Bunuş, through his constant and very early connections with the protagonists of the international mail art network.

This aspect, central to their mail art activity and in general to the dynamic of such artistic collectives, seems to relate to what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have named the minor transnational or horizontal character. Conceiving a theoretical framework in which the transnational is not limited to the local/global binary, but is able to occur at the national, local, and international levels, Lionnet and Shih understand the minor transnational or horizontal character as a space of exchange and participation, localised wherever processes of hybridisation take place and wherever cultures are able to produce and be produced without requiring the mediation of a centre.³² As Lionnet and Shih argue, through the reconstruction of the relations between marginal subjects and places, what becomes visible is a "transversal movement of culture" that includes both minor cultural articulations that are in productive relations with major cultural articulations, as well as the "hybrid and relational" interactions that the minor networks have with one another, wholly removing themselves from any relationship with what constitutes the "major."³³ Under the lens of minor or horizontal transnationalism, the assimilation of mail art into the practice of some of the artists who were active in art collectives from Oradea and Tîrgu-Mureş can be understood as a transversal process of hybridisation that did not fully divorce itself from the "major"; a process of hybridisation during the course of which the new medium was experimented with and adapted to the particular concerns of each artist and in relationship with the immediate context in which his activity was integrated, generating a non-Western idiom of mail art that was to a large extent effective in diversifying and consolidating the artists' interest in non-conventional languages. This conceptual framework for

³¹ J.P. Jacob recounts this experience in a letter to Chuck Welch, reproduced in his book of 1985, where it makes up the core of Chapter 14 "Networking in Eastern Europe." See: Chuck Welch, *Networking Currents...*, Part I, 41-42. Also, here Jacob specifies that a large part of the material he received had no connection with mail art, with the artists sending material that documented their activity in other media, in some cases even entire portfolios.

³² See: Françoise Lionnet, Shu-mei Shih (eds.), *Minor Transnationalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 2-5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

mapping marginality described by minor transnationalism and transversal cultural movements is all the more useful for salvaging recent local histories of art given that it can be noted that the reconstruction of relations and interactions with Western art on the part of the various peripheral art scenes of Eastern Europe and Latin America persists as a central vector of historiographical discourses.

As can be observed for example in both the *Artpool* “autobiography” and in other recent research, the emphasis on the relations that artists from isolated cultural spaces managed to establish with various actors in the West occupies a central place and has a certain value of (self-)legitimation.³⁴ To the extent that the

³⁴ In the case of *Artpool* the emphasis is on the connection established between Galántai and Ray Johnson and Cavellini, and there is little or no explanation of details about relations and contacts with artists in the region, even though *Artpool* had taken on the rôle of nucleus of mail art in Central and Eastern Europe. See: GALÁNTAI, György, Julia Klaniczay (ed.), *ARTPOOL. The Experimental Art Archive of East-Central Europe*, (Budapest: Artpool, 2013), especially the section „Artpool 1979-1991”, 35-105. On the other hand, in her recent book on art networks in Eastern Europe, Klara Kemp-Welch shows that in the 1970s there emerged numerous artistic networks in the region that created links between East and West, as well as among the countries of the Eastern bloc, in an experimental dialogue that involved Western participation, but which is today largely forgotten in the West. See: Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc*, 2-6. Likewise, in the special issue of

permeability of the Iron Curtain, via the active engagement of Central and East-European artists in communication and interaction with the Western cultural space, remains a captivating and necessary subject for the historiography of recent art from the region, the absence of such an engagement or the fact that in some areas it was not a priority ought not to be interpreted as signifying lesser relevance for the exchanges and interactions in which the artists were engaged, particularly in the local and regionally restricted climate. Rather, the latter ought to function as an indispensable complement to the former. As Lionnet and Shih argue, while major transnationalism gives shape to the image of spatial super-compression or the elimination of distance, minor transnationalism maps a far more complex configuration of space and heterogeneous “spatial practices,” thereby providing room for diversity and multiple analyses on a reduced scale and making visible places that are far more expansive and full of possibilities.³⁵

ARTMargins dedicated to art networks in Eastern Europe and Latin American, there can be observed a greater focus of attention on the connections that existed between peripheral spaces and the West and less on the regional dynamics of the art networks.

³⁵ Françoise Lionnet, Shu-mei Shih (eds.), *Minor Transnationalism*, 19.

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Biographical note

Mădălina Brașoveanu is an art historian and curator currently based in Oradea. Her researches focus on art in Romania during state socialism, with a special interest in artistic micro-communities, conceptual art, archival and exhibition studies. In 2019 she defended her PhD thesis at the National University of Arts in Bucharest. Between 2018-2019 she worked as a researcher in the project "Crossing the Borders: Transnational Collaborations and Institutional Critique in Exhibitions of Eastern European Art during Late Socialism (1964-1989)", hosted by "George Enescu" National University of Arts, Iași. She contributed to several publications, among which: *Art in Romania between 1945-2000. An Analysis from Today's Perspective* (2016); *Artists&Agents. Performance Art and the Secret Services* (2019); *(In)Visible Frames. Rhetorics and experimental exhibition practices in Romanian art between 1965-1989* (2019). From 2019, she is an editor of *ARTMargins Online*.

