

ABSTRACT

In the 1980s, the northeastern Brazilian city of Recife became a major hub for the international mail art network. If an occasionally defiant northeastern regionalism marks the production of Pernambucan writers, artists and intellectuals throughout the 20th century, how would this cultural stance meet with the accelerated internationalisation of communication systems that led to the formation of increasingly cross-national artistic networks? This essay explores how local concerns, registered through performance, urban interventions and works that foreground the everyday life of the city, intersected with bodies of matter—mail art works—that travelled on behalf of the artist, transferring their bodies or their localities into varied worldwide contexts. These parallel activities were elementally conjoined both as expressions of the local and immediate and as displacements of these experiences to other localities.

Key words: *Networks, mail art, globalization, Brazil, translocal, conceptual art, performance.*

RESUMEN

En los años ochenta, Recife, ciudad del noroeste de Brasil, se convirtió en un gran núcleo para la red internacional de arte correo. Si a lo largo del siglo XX, un regionalismo ocasionalmente desafiante del noreste marca la producción de los escritores, artistas e intelectuales de Pernambuco, ¿cómo se encontrará esta instancia cultural con la acelerada internacionalización de los sistemas de comunicación, que derivó en la formación de redes artísticas transnacionales cada vez más grandes? Este ensayo explora cómo las preocupaciones locales, registradas a través de *performances*, intervenciones urbanas y obras que colocan en primer plano la vida cotidiana de la ciudad, se intersectan con cuerpos de materia —obras de arte correo— que viajaron por cuenta del artista, transfiriendo sus cuerpos o sus localizaciones al variado contexto mundial. Ambas actividades paralelas estaban elementalmente unidas como expresiones de lo local e inmediato y como desplazamientos de estas experiencias hacia otras localidades.

Palabras clave: *Redes, arte correo, globalización, Brasil, translocal, arte conceptual, performance.*

Fecha de recepción: 21 de marzo de 2017

Fecha de aceptación: 7 de mayo de 2017

Networking Regionalism

Long-distance performativity in the international mail art network

Zanna Gilbert¹

In the 1980s, the northeastern Brazilian city of Recife became a major hub for the international mail art network with the activities of the artists Paulo Bruscky, Daniel Santiago, Unhandeijara Lisboa² (Paraíba), Ypiranga Filho, Silvio Hansen, and Leonhard Frank Duch. If an occasionally defiant northeastern regionalism marks the production of Pernambucan writers, artists and intellectuals throughout the 20th century, how would this cultural stance meet with the accelerated internationalisation of communication systems that led to the formation of increasingly cross-national artistic networks? This essay explores how these concerns with the immediate locality, registered through performance, urban interventions and works that foreground the everyday life of the city, intersected with bodies of matter –mail art works– that travelled on behalf of the artist, transferring their bodies, and by extension, their localities, into varied worldwide contexts. These parallel activities were elementally conjoined both as expressions of the local and immediate context and as displacements of these experiences to other localities. They were also responses fraught with the tensions of living under military government, particularly after the Institutional Act 5 was instituted in 1968, which effected a

¹ Getty Research Institute

² Lisboa has always lived and worked in Paraíba, but he maintained a strong dialogue and participation in mail art projects emanating from Recife.

subsequent nulling of the sphere of collective action and social resistance initiated in the 1960s.

Into the translocal

In 1925, Pernambucan intellectual Gilberto Freyre complained of the imported visual styles in the Brazilian northeast, which he characterized as a “tyranny of distance imposed on our eyes and our imagination”. Freyre lamented a “cultural regime” that resulted in a lack of artistic methods that could respond to the particularity of regional conditions, notably the special quality of light in the region.³ However, it also called for an art that would present not only local subject matter but also an epistemological or methodological difference in its approach.⁴ As one of the most important intellectuals in Brazil, the discourse of regionalism pronounced by Freyre became a debating point for Pernambucan artists seeking at once to respond to their immediate locality and, at the same time, take part in artistic conversations further afield. As the twentieth century’s accumulating developments in printing, reproduction, and communications technologies marched on, the resulting closure of distance between the “here” and “there” led artists to negotiate the increasing ability to communicate beyond their towns and cities, and to further engage the often cosmopolitan aspects of regionalism.

That Recife became a hub for the international mail art network is not incidental; the northeast’s strong cultural identity, its cosmopolitan history and artistic heritage meant constructing a cultural forum that was independent and removed from the dominance—still effective today—of the Rio–São Paulo axis.⁵ While curator and critic Moacir dos Anjos has pointed out the relatively recent construction of the northeast

3 Gilberto Freyre. “Algumas notas sobre a pintura do Nordeste do Brasil”, in Gilberto Freyre *et al.*: *Livro do Nordeste, comemorativo do centenário do Diário de Pernambuco: 1825-1925*. Recife, Off. Do Diário de Pernambuco, 1925.

4 *Ibidem*.

5 The constructed cartography of the north-east and indeed, all symbolically-constructed geographies, is noted by Moacir dos Anjos: “Although it sometimes seems eternal for Brazilians, the idea of the northeast is only a century old, its origin being the political reaction to the dismantling of the sugar and cotton trades and a solution to the crisis faced together with the Brazilian provinces that depended upon it”. He further points out that the crystallization of the region through the works of writers, musicians, novelists, essayists and painters solidified its legacy, and defined it, along with Gilberto Freyre’s characterization as a center that held the roots of Brazilian cultural traditions. Moacir dos Anjos. “Desmanche de bordas: notas sobre identidade cultural no Nordeste do Brasil”, in Clarissa Diniz, Gleyce Kelly Heitor and Paulo Marcondes Soares (orgs.): *Crítica de Arte em Pernambuco, Escritos do Século XX*. Rio de Janeiro, Azougue Editorial, 2012, p. 265-266.

as a discursive delimitation, regionalism as a position that could be either pursued or challenged is undeniable. Nevertheless, this commitment to the local was not hermetic and in no way compromised the desire to reach beyond Brazil, with artists often circumventing entirely the path through the country's acknowledged art centers. By the early 1970s, artists in Recife saw an opportunity to once again reinvent geographies by reconfiguring the structures of transmission of information, ideas, and art through the mail. Recife's port had already inaugurated the city as a 20th century cosmopolitan hub, which moreover in previous centuries had been defined by Dutch, English, and French colonial incursions. Recife was a locality, then, defined as much by the 'beyond' as by the local.

The *Manifesto Tropicalista: Porque somos e não somos tropicalistas* (Tropicalist Manifesto: Why We Are and Are Not Tropicalists), authored in Recife in 1968 by Jomard Muniz de Britto, laments the "cultural stagnation of the province", asking: "Why do we insist upon living ten years behind Guanabara, and a century behind London? For regionalist loyalty? For the love and defence of our traditions?"⁶ The second part of the manifesto was published the same year, this time subtitled *Inventary of our Cultural Feudalism*, where the authors argue for 'new creative processes' and the use of the mass media as a way of overcoming the aforementioned stagnation.⁷ With the examples of more recent Pernambucan innovators in mind then, such as Vicente do Rego Monteiro, Aloísio Magalhães, and Montez Magno, artists began working with performative experimental practices with the aim of disseminating them locally, nationally, and internationally.

A mailing sent in 1977 by artist Unhandeijara Lisboa, who lived in the neighbouring state of Paraíba, to Paulo Bruscky proposes an appropriately radical geographical vision, one in which mail art has drastically reconfigured the earth. Lisboa's drawing depicts a cubic world map accompanied by the message "Hail! Hail! A Package from Recife!". Lisboa's map recalls earlier artistic distortions of the world's territory according to the centers of surrealist activity or interest; he depicts a decentralized and reconfigurable cuboid fragmented into four moveable sections that demonstrate the multiplicity of connections and possibilities in mail art networks. Instead of a unidirectional transmission of aesthetic norms from center to periphery, mail art embraced the possibilities of multidirectional exchange.

6 Jomard Muniz de Britto *et al.* "Manifesto Tropicalista: Porque somos e não somos tropicalistas", *Jornal do Comércio*, Recife, 20 April, 1968.

7 Jomard Muniz de Britto *et al.* *II Manifesto Tropicalista: Inventário do nosso feudalismo cultural*, first published for the solo exhibition of Raul Córdula at Oficina 54, Olinda, 1968.

Urban bodies: *poema processo, performance and the city*

In the late 1960s, a new generation of artists who wished to experiment with media and question institutionalized values in the artistic and broader sphere emerged. In a move that was as much pragmatic as ideological—for museums were generally not open to their artist experimentation—artists' urban interventions became a strategy of insertion into the everyday life of Recife's public sphere. Differing somewhat from body art actions that investigated the physical limits of the body to existential ends, Recife artists' use of the body was often extrapolated to the social body and explored divisions between the popular and the erudite. The first action of Bruscky–Santiago Team (Paulo Bruscky and Daniel Santiago), *Exponáutica e Expogente* (*Exponautical and Expopeople*, 1971), took the beach as a space for exhibition in place of the customary privileged gallery space. The next year, at the action *Artexpocorponte* (*Artexpobodybridge*, 1972) Bruscky and Santiago invited participants to communicate between two Recife bridges by means of coloured cards



Figure 1. Paulo Bruscky, *Exponáutica e Expogente* (Exponautical and Expopeople), 1970. Image courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler and Paulo Bruscky.

invoking collective action, participation and communication without language and in the same year for *Artemcágado* (*Artontortoise*, 1972), the pair invited people to adorn their pet tortoises for exhibition in the street. This posture of turning art into a collective and popular activity built upon the development and subsequent repression of social movements of the 1960s that had impacted on the artistic sphere, such as the Recife Popular Culture Movement (Movimento de Cultura Popular do Recife, 1960), the Ribeira Movement (Movimento da Ribeira, 1960), and the Armorial Movement (Movimento Armorial, 1970) that were concerned both with collectivity and popular culture.⁸

8 Itamar Morgado da Silva. "Fissuras e Capilaridades: O indivíduo e o colectivo na formação da poética artística de Daniel Santiago", MA Thesis, Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife,



Figure 2 y 2a. Paulo Bruscky, *Artexpocorponte*, (*Artexpobodybridge*), 1971. Image courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler and Paulo Bruscky.



Figure 3 y 3a. Paulo Bruscky, *Artemcágado* (*Artontortoise*), 1972. Image courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler and Paulo Bruscky.

The formation of mail art network in Recife was both literary and performatic (implicating the body) from the beginning. Artists in Recife became involved in mail art initially through the movement *Poema Processo* (process poetry), which developed some of the achievements of the concrete and visual poetry movements. Introduced by the Rio-based poet Wladimir Dias-Pino through the magazine *Ponto* in 1967, *Poema Processo* proclaimed a poetry focused on process, or, as Dias-

Pino put it, the “critical unleashing of always-new structures”.⁹ Most

2013, pp. 33-34.

⁹ Interview with Regina Célia Pinto, undated, Museu de Essencial e do Além Disso website,

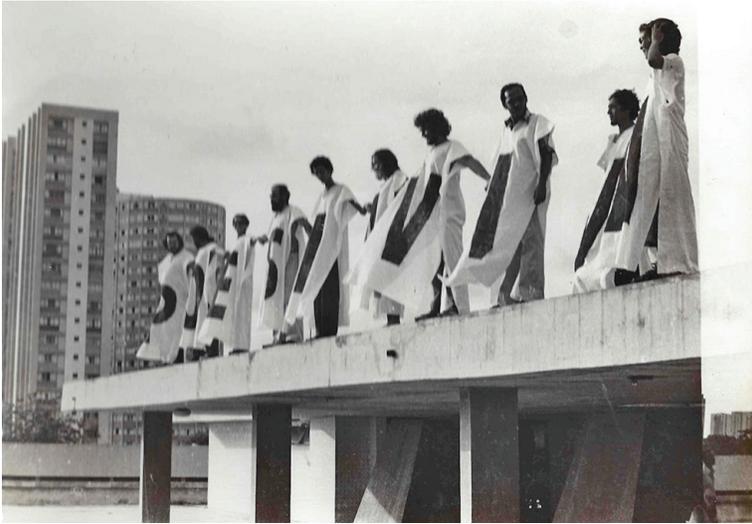


Figure 4. Recife Poema Processo group, *Poesia Viva (Live Poetry)*, 1977. Image courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler and Paulo Bruscky.

crucially, Dias-Pino defines process poetry in relation to the notion of games, scores, and activities—a poetry that emerges from the page into the social sphere: “Process poetry builds on the advances of concrete poetry and moves towards that tendency, towards visual conceptual games, scores, and activities. Although these poems are not yet scores, they do suggest a secret code system waiting for a reader to interpret or play”.¹⁰

Like mail art, the movement was networked, arising in various cities at the same time, as noted by Nedie Sá:

Process Poetry was founded as a movement in 1967, it happened simultaneously in various ‘points’ throughout Brazil: here in Rio, in the northeastern Natal and Recife, and in Minas [Gerais]. From 1967 to 1972, the Process Poetry movement came to have about 250 participating artists and poets. It was open to new participants so that mail was intensively employed... Many of those who now do mail art participated in Process Poetry.

The already established networks described by Sá included Recife, where the artists’ interest in conceptual proposals and visual poetry

accessed July 4, 2012, <http://www.artonline.arq.br/museu/interviews.neide.htm>

10 Wladimir Dias-Pino. “Process: Project Reading”, Rio/Montevideo, Ponto/OVUM, October, 1969, cited by Charles A. Perrone. *Seven faces: Brazilian Poetry since Modernism*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1996, p. 66.

coincided with the internationalization of mail art, which also focused on process, visual poetry and conceptual propositions. This internationalism was achieved by sharing mailing lists of poets and artists' addresses in networked artists' publications.¹¹

The connection between experimental poetry and the body was exposed in the 1977 performance poem *Poesia Viva (Live Poetry)*, a culmination and celebration of process poetry. Organized by Paulo Bruscky and Unhandejara Lisboa, the performance asserted the body as the poem itself. In the text distributed at the event, Lisboa stated: "We are the work itself, we are the moving letter".¹² Each of the participants bore one of the letters that spelled the title of the work, and throughout the performance each of them helped form additional words by moving their bodies around. The body became the letter, the letter fused with the body, and meaning was created collectively through a symbolic recuperation of the relation between language and the body, the collective's answer to breaking codified semiotic systems.

The intersection between text and body is also notable in the case of two comparable performance works, each by the long-term collaborators Bruscky and Santiago. In the case of Bruscky's *O que é arte, para que serve? (What is Art, What is it for?, 1978)*, the work asks a literal question about the role of art in society. The question, like the letters borne by the participant-actors in *Poesia Viva*, was carried on Bruscky's own body, by being displayed on a sandwich-board. The artist exhibited himself in the window of the Livraria Moderna bookshop, after which he physically distributed the message around the city. In 1982, Daniel Santiago also employed his body and a text in the work *O Brasil é o meu abismo (Brazil is my Abyss)*. The title of the work refers to a poem by Jomard Muniz de Britto, *Aquarela do Brasil (Watercolour of Brazil)*, which is a dark commentary on the years of military dictatorship ("Brazil is not my country, it's my abyss"). The artist suspended himself from the banister of the Galeria Metropolitana (today the Museu de Arte Moderna Aloísio Magalhães, or MAMAM) holding a poster with the words "Brazil is my abyss" on the card. Hanging upside down challenges norms of perception, and conjures up the "abyss" of the artists' personal response to the political situation at that moment. Both of these literal and physical actions depended on the body as a support for text and as an instigator of poetic action.

11 For more information on the relationship between visual poetry circles, mail art and conceptualism, see my article "Genealogical Diversions: Experimental Poetry Networks, Mail Art and Conceptualisms", *Caiana* 4, 2014. Available at: http://caiana.caia.org.ar/template/caiana.php?pag=articles/article_1.php&obj=136&vol=4.

12 Statement issued as part of the performance, 1977. Paulo Bruscky Archive.

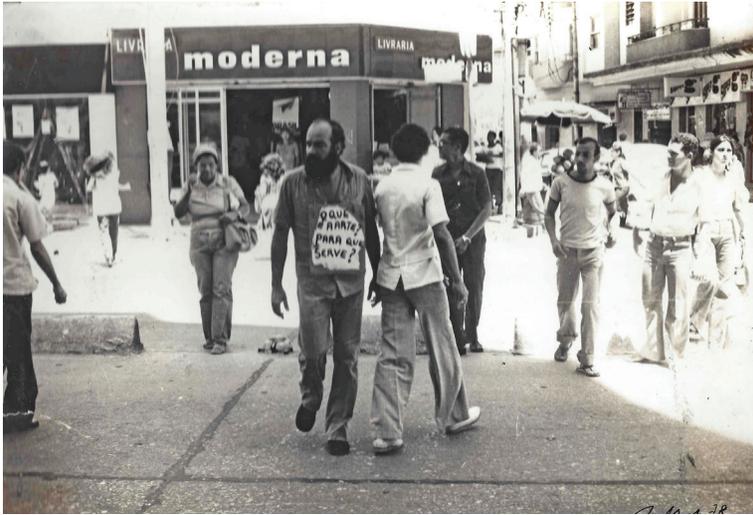


Figure 5. Paulo Bruscky, *O que é arte, para que serve?* (*What is art, what is it for?*), 1978. Image courtesy Galeria Nara Roesler and Paulo Bruscky.



Figure 6. Daniel Santiago, *O Brasil é o meu abismo* (*Brazil is my abyss*), 1982. Photo: Sérgio Lobo. Image courtesy of the artist.

Bodies of matter: the human letter

The fact that mail art is a disembodied art practice did not prevent artists from experimenting with ways of making the body the protagonist of their mailings. In 1975, for example, Leonhard Frank Duch sent a humorous 'souvenir' from a holiday to Itamaracá, a well-known beach destination on the northeast coast. The postcard, instead of bearing picturesque images of a typical



Figure 7. Daniel Santiago, *De que é que tenho medo?* (*What is it that I'm afraid of?*), 1978. Image courtesy of the artist.

beach town, carries Duch's own burnt skin, drawing attention to the body and flesh of the absent sender. In mail art works, then, the mailing often acts as an emissary, travelling as a proxy or in lieu of the artist. Moreover, the preoccupation with establishing more intimate interactions against the backdrop of dehumanising technological communication and mass media meant to establish affective connections between one another. Art historian Amelia Jones ascribes conceptual artists' interest in the body to a reaction against commodification, stating that in "pancapitalism, subjects become objects of the commodity system with its never-ending processes of exchange".¹³ However,

while they were certainly concerned with the rationalising processes of commodification and mechanization, artists working in the context of dictatorships extended the implications of featuring the body, or traces of the body, in their work.

Another couple of works by Bruscky and Santiago explore how the possibility of corporal danger and physical punishment demanded a visceral awareness of the somatic realm.¹⁴ After he and Bruscky were imprisoned in 1976 for organizing an exhibition of mail art with some political content, Daniel Santiago made a touching self-portrait accompanied by the question, "What is it that I'm afraid of?". The ink drawing depicts the downcast artist, clearly profoundly affected by his treatment at the hands of the authorities. The three-quarter-length portrait would be quite conventional had the artist not replaced his shoulders and upper torso with an envelope, from which his head and shoulders emerge. Santiago makes a direct link between his artistic pursuits and his somatic fear that refers to the atmosphere of intimidation during his brief period of incarceration. The question—a thought bubble implicating it as a private one—is rhetorical, but it could also be accusatory, or refer to impending self-censorship. The process of internalising structures and modes of behaviour imposed by dictatorship is seen in action here, alongside the compromised opportunities for free artistic

¹³ Amelia Jones *et al.* *The Artist's Body*. London, Phaidon, 2000, p. 21.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body as the locus of perception can also be borne in mind as it develops a notion of *embodied* knowledge that was influential for the well-known artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica.

activity presented by the mail art network. Santiago's self-portrait refers directly to the overt policing of the body, and implicitly refers us to the indirect effects of censorship and a rigid societal order. Paulo Bruscky's *Cuidado com Violação* (*Careful with Violation*, 1978), also alludes to the mailed work as a metaphor for the body. The violence that might be exerted on Bruscky's image as a careless recipient that tears open the envelope equates with its fragility during transit. Just as with Santiago's



Figure 8. Paulo Bruscky, *Cuidado com Violação* (*Careful with Violation*), 1978. Image courtesy of Paulo Bruscky.

work, the artist's body merges with the medium of communication. The vulnerability of the body—and, by extension, the vulnerability caused by engaging in mail art—is addressed by both artists.

Both works suggest a danger in engaging in artistic practice; but, at the same time, they suggest that the envelope can contain, conceal, and transport the artist, as if the practice of mail art allows either escape or flight. These works then, show how the mail work is able to displace the body of the artist to another locale. Anthropologist Alfred Gell has argued that images and objects are not social others, but real physical “channels of access” which are projections of human consciousness.¹⁵ These

“envelope bodies” convert the envelope from its function as a container into subjects to be considered agents in themselves. This understanding of the mail art work as an agent, a body or an icon is variously employed by different artists' engagement with the body in mail art. The mail art work can thus be seen as a proxy for the artist's body, and perhaps a means of ‘escape’ for artists living under repressive regimes.

Paulo Bruscky's work helps us to further understand the way that artists transposed their concern with the *presence* of the body in public performances, and how these ‘performances’ travelled and connected across distances through the network of correspondents. His mail art works are laden with indexical traces that establish immediate somatic references: photographic self-portraits, figures on exposed negative film, x-rays, and fingerprints. Art historian Ian Walker points out that the indexes' physical relationship makes it a distinctive kind of sign, since the extremely close connection between the sign and the object constitute a quality of realism, which in turn achieves the effect of immediacy in

15 Alfred Gell. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.

an image creating an “extra authenticity and magical charge”.¹⁶ If artists embraced the democratic potential of reproduction wholeheartedly, they also maintained a need for the artwork’s “magical” quality, since through this immediacy they were able to figuratively ‘touch’ the recipient. For example, the distortions Paulo Bruscky created by pressing the body against the photocopier’s scanner bed evoke an atmosphere of claustrophobic violence—the artist’s mouth is open in a silent scream, which registers the precise instant being recorded. In this case, the specificity of the moment conveys both the possibility of creating an impression of immediacy through the mail by attempting to reduce the distance implicit in postal communication, *as well as* the ultimate impossibility of direct contact (registered here by the lack of sound in the scream and the sense of claustrophobia created by the trapped body). In his 1980 *Xeroxperformance*, Bruscky literally translated his body-action onto paper, which was then mailed to recipients. The reproduction and documentation of the image thus becomes an integral part of the work itself, rather than, as with many performances, a mere document.

Regionalism and the translocal

Mail art is quite literally inscribed with translocality. It bears the markers of place in the stamps affixed to envelopes and the addresses of sender and recipient, but importantly, it is also beyond this place: it travels or transports these markers of their context into a different location. Thus, mail art is both rooted and contextual; a movement that responds to the specific political and social conditions of place, while it also transcends those same conditions and categories. Despite this animistic character, the human experience and the body itself must be codified in order to travel. In this in-between sphere, the body can also be conceived as a translocal entity, which provokes questions about the limitations of what can travel and be translated through communications media. As such, what is local might be thought of as presence and the *trans* through degrees of absences, traces or indexes of that presence, the body inscribed in the work itself.

Constructed notions of the local are redefined by the intersection of multiple localities. Arjun Appadurai defines locality as “a quality of social life that is constituted by a sense of social immediacy brought about by certain forms of sociality, thus generating itself as a context”.

¹⁶ Ian Walker. *City Gorged with Dreams: Surreal Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002, p. 12.

Appadurai's analysis of the effect of electronic mass media on the formation of localities reflects upon its ability to construct new realities that are not necessarily geographically determined: locality is relational, not spatial.¹⁷ This is because "deterritorialised viewers" with access to globalised media create "communities of sentiment... [groups] that begin to imagine and feel things together".¹⁸ The mail art network, in its development of inter-subjective sociability, can be defined as a "community of sentiment"; a locality in itself. This translocality at once transgresses cartographic conceptions of space and enables an articulation of a multiplicity of localities, both those bound to place and constructed by distance, and those that are constructed in between spaces, in this case, in channels of communication.

As we have seen, Recife's mail artists' ideas about performance and the body were translated between presence and absence, the local and the far away, matter and concept, and page to action.

In these translocal interactions experiences that occur in specific places (in the mail art work this is signified by the stamp, the address, the mail worker, and the mailed work) are transported to other places, creating virtual imaginaries through networking practices. Arjun Appadurai's understanding of locality, developed in the 1990s, was based upon electronic communication, now superseded and enhanced by the Internet. But, what of earlier analogical communication in which messages travel less quickly, allowing a gap between two places to emerge? It is in this gap, this in-between space, that utopias can emerge, a space now compressed by a hyper-networked condition. Recife's mail artists' attempts to both engage and transcend their locality acted as a defiant critique of cartographic conceptions of space and power in the local and the national spheres; categories which continue to be strongly codified. Art that is in flux, which defines itself through its passage within systems of circulation, by definition, resists attempts to be definitively located. As Daniel Santiago often stamped on his works: "Arte Correio: Onde Quer que Seja" (*Mail Art: Wherever it might be*).

17 Ferdinand de Jong. "The Production of Translocality," *FOCAAL* 30/31, 1997, p. 61.

18 *Ibidem*, p. 8.