Robert Rehfeldt: "I‘m living in your art"

He raised correspondence to an art form and was a conduit between artists in the East and the West: the East Berliner Robert Rehfeldt has long been considered one of the founding fathers of German mail art. Now a new book appreciates the life and work of the late artist who died in 1993.

by Lutz Wohlrab
translated by Mark Bloch

Robert Rehfeldt was born in Stargard, Pomerania in northwest Poland on January 5, 1931. After his father's early death he was first transferred to foster parents, then retrieved by his mother in Berlin. He was sent to a second foster home in Bad Ischl, Austria in 1940 via the Kinderlandverschickung, a rescue effort which brought thousands of children to the countryside. After the war he had been a stone cutter’s assistant and a transportation worker, before studying art at the University for Fine Arts in West Berlin from 1948 to 1953. Afterwards he worked in East Berlin as designer, press draughtsman and photojournalist. Since 1963, Rehfeldt freelanced and worked as part of East Berlin’s experimental arts community.

In 1975, in what turned out to be the first ever East German mail art exhibition, he asked artists from all over the world to design and submit postcards that he then exhibited as part of his own exhibition at Galeria Teatru Studio in Warsaw. That subsequently inspired two legendary mail art exhibitions: one at the East Berlin gallery Arkade in 1978 and the other at the EP Gallery of Jürgen Schweinebraden in ‘79.

In this way, Rehfeldt attained importance within the international mail art scene. He managed to set up an extensive network between Eastern and Western Europe, the USA and Latin America. Rehfeldt’s Pankow studio in Berlin became the informal information clearinghouse for Western art developments among his fellow East Germans. Rehfeldt could talk about Joseph Beuys "as if he was his neighbor", said Eugen Blume, director of the Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art in Berlin.
The Co-worker

We know Beuys' answers to Rehfeldt's correspondence took the form of the occasional dedication on a print. Nevertheless, Rehfeldt was surely in contact with Beuys, who addressed everyone directly with his slogans. Beuys is most well-known for his encouragement, "Every man is an artist" but he goes on to say that problems arise "where one gets ready to buy canvas and frames." Rehfeldt's answer was: "My idea helps your idea; our ideas helps other ideas."

Rehfeldt was a co-worker. More than anything else he would have liked to have a kind of Art Factory. Is it possible that Warhol was more important to him than Beuys? For everyone who came to him, he had some noble task to complete – as a craftsman or assistant, a driver, photographer, or just to get him something. Or simply as a listener.

I got to know Robert Rehfeldt in May 1985 on the occasion of the opening of Oskar Manigk's exhibition at the unofficial Prenzlauer Berg Gallery in Sredzistraße. After being thrown out of the University of Greifswald, and because I didn't want to define myself as an assistant male nurse at the special hospital in Lichtenberg, I found employment as a research student in Rehfeldt's mail art archives. When Robert wasn't distracting me with his long stories, I worked sorting his incoming mail.

Impress your stamp on the future

In September 1986, for the East Berlin installment of the first Decentralized International Mail Art Congress that took place in Rehfeldt's studio (as a substitute location, since it was officially forbidden) I arranged a small exhibition. For the Congress photo I borrowed an old student cap from his props pool. Shortly thereafter I arranged a considerable number of loans from Rehfeldt's archives for the exhibition, “Artist Letters/Letter Drawings“ at Orangerie Putbus, organized by Walter G. Goes. In January 1987, Rehfeldt sent me to the island of Ruegen in order to give an inaugural address in his place but the exhibition was forbidden by GDR cultural functionaries before it ever opened.

For his appearance at the Permanent Art Conference in May 1989 at the Berlin gallery Weißer Elefant, where he only played his guitar, he left it to B.E.R.M., an artistic collective, to prepare the exhibition and for the public
to use his stamps. There is a beautiful photo from this day that Rehfeldt sent me as an altered postcard. I took his "Impress your stamp on the future" as a personal request. When the Pankow Democratic Socialist Party used this saying on a poster for their election campaign in March 1990, I urged Robert to protest but he declined.

At the end of the 1990s I saw Wolf Vostell’s presentation of his assemblage "9 November 1989" at the former GDR Center for Art Exhibitions at Weidendamm in Berlin. The exhibition consisted of only one quite large picture. Monitors showed films of the fall of the Berlin Wall and a live television program. I had never experienced such a thing before. While Wolf Vostell was impressive, that evening Robert was in an unexpected mood, close to the edge of a nervous breakdown. What had brought him to such a place?

**Failed to paint over Honecker’s portraits**

I experienced something similar another time when I drove him to an opening on a U.S. military base in West Berlin, of all places. Not only was a personal invitation required but so were the proper identification documents. I found it rather strange to be admitted with our GDR I.D. cards on U.S. Army grounds. But we were – until Robert caused a disturbance and we were thrown out. Soon after that he gave up his roomy studio in Mendelstraße and moved to a small dwelling. He found a new studio space in Spandau where he kept large Honecker pictures that he wanted to paint on – but that he couldn’t.

In September 1992, Robert Rehfeldt attended the Berlin part of the 2nd Decentralized International Mail Art and Networker Congress. 23 participants from East and West sat at the Art Strike Café in Käthe Niederkirchner Straße, enjoying themselves. Following the Congress, we younger ones decided to document the GDR Mail-Art scene in a book. We wanted to do this without Robert. But upon hearing of our efforts, he supported us with loans from his archives and, in a move that was typically Robert, immediately had the idea to include the pages of our book in his much larger world-wide Mail Art book. Unfortunately he wasn’t able to continue this plan. Robert Rehfeldt died unexpectedly on September 28, 1993 after an operation in Berlin. However, when our book "Mail-Art-Szene DDR 1975-1990" was published, we dedicated it to him.
Since his death Robert Rehfeldt has been part of many important group exhibitions. In addition to his work as a mail art catalyst, he created a considerable amount of graphic works and engaged himself with photography as well as Super 8 film. I liked him very much and always enjoyed listening to him… though I must confess… towards the end, I was so annoyed by his early morning calls that I simply had to disconnect the telephone. Sorry, Robert!

Lutz Wohlrab, a mail artist himself, has created a Mail Artists’ Index on the net. There you can find biographies of many artists. In addition to the standard work "Mail-Art-Szene DDR 1975-1990" together with Friedrich Winnes, available from publishing house Haude & Spener (Berlin 1994), he recently published the book "Robert Rehfeldt – Kunst im Kontakt". He works as psychoanalyst in Berlin.

More on Robert Rehfeldt – Kunst im Kontakt at:
http://wohlrab-verlag.de/buecher_rehfeldt.php