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**Topology and Functionality of the Mail Art Network and its specific significance for Eastern Europe between 1960 and 1989**

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*This essay is a summary of the dissertation “Topology and Functionality of the Mail Art Network and its specific significance for Eastern Europe between 1960 and 1989”. The work was submitted to the University of Bremen in 2006. It contains an analysis of the Mail Art Network with regard to its topology – i.e. a descriptive analysis of its temporal and geographical development – and functionality in view of the artistic, political and social developments in Eastern Europe during that time. Of necessity, many of the outstanding Mail Art projects discussed in detail in the thesis – with their sense of excitement, of subversion, of overcoming political and artistic boundaries – are only briefly mentioned – or neglected altogether in this short version.*

## **Introduction**

This study is dealing with the term ‘Network’ as it related to art in the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it is a term that is hardly limited to the art world. ‘Networks’ occur in politics, communication, economics, the physical sciences and sociology. The concept appears as a model in architecture and city planning. It may describe energy flow; it is also an electronic system. It is used in transportation systems and neurology – and as a global-environmental metaphor in media theory. The narrow meaning it has in the context of this work is that of a communication system making use of the internationally active postal system. The Mail Art Network formed in the early 1970s emerged as an international communication system outside governmental and commercial institutions. It developed from the need to communicate globally, to overcome the boundaries of national and political systems and to remove inter-medial barriers. Networking fever spread, not only among artists, and affected ever-growing circles around the world.

As the Network grew, it produced nodes – points of contact and exchange within the Network – which appeared in countries throughout the world. At the same time independent Network initiatives were developing in the countries of Eastern Europe. Until now there have been few systematizing studies of the Network aspect in the context of Mail Art. Expanding upon Géza Pernecky’s thesis that the Mail Art Network was the first World Wide Web, we can ask: how and on what basis did it develop? What special features did it have? What pioneering functions did it fulfil?

The present study, *Topology und Functionality of the Mail Art Network* has focussed on the initiatives of the Eastern European artists and Mail artists. Their social and political framework and the restrictions they were subject to gave the Mail Art Network a special meaning for them; it offered them a rare opportunity to exchange ideas and artworks across the borders of countries and political systems and to maintain contact to the international art world during the Cold War era. The activities of the Eastern European artists and Mail artists enriched the Mail Art Network in a number of ways. This review considers several outstanding projects, initiatives and individual efforts that used the relatively “protected” (i.e. censorship-free) communication space provided by the post to produce and disseminate important contributions to conceptual and performance art and concrete and visual poetry.

The social and political changes in Eastern Europe at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall brought a fundamental change to the conditions for artists and opponents of the regimes there. For that reason, this study has taken the year 1989 as a cut-off point after which the Mail Art Network ceased to have its special function for Eastern Europe.

### **The Mail Art Network in the Context of Art**

The collector, writer and curator Guy Schraenen once referred to Mail Art as a fashion, saying that like all fashions it would disappear.<sup>1</sup> This investigation has shown that neither Mail Art nor its associated Network were mere fashions. In fact, this particular Network represents the culmination of manifold developmental processes in the growth of post-war modernism.

The results from this study, which for the first time incorporated perceptions from Network theory, have led to a re-evaluation of the postal means of communication which developed out of an art-based context. Connections were found to media theory and to fundamental changes in art and society from the end of the 1950s. The development and characteristics of the Mail Art Network could be placed in the context of the Network debate being carried out in intellectual circles at the time. An example of the interdisciplinary discourse in the 1960s was the *Delos Meetings* initiated by Constantinos Doxiadis which were also attended by Marshall McLuhan and R. Buckminster Fuller. Here the area of architecture served as a model for developing ideas and visions for the future. The concept of ‘Network’ and its visualization in structural models moved more and more into the foreground.

The study showed that the Mail Art Network was not a singular phenomenon, but an idea of its time, with certain specific properties that could be investigated. McLuhan’s statement that ‘the medium is the message’ had already been called into question in the discussions circulating in the Network of Mail Art even while it was still being received euphorically in art circles.

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<sup>1</sup> Schraenen, Guy: Empfänger unbekannt, in: Berswordt-Wallrabe, Kornelia von (Hrsg.): Mail Art – Osteuropa im internationalen Netzwerk, Guy Schraenen, Kornelia Röder (Konzeption), Kat., Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Berlin 1996, p.19

The survival of this communication system depended not only on an idea shared by the different participants, but also on the creative energy invested in it. The Network acted as an exchange and communication forum for new artistic positions. Its activities were directed against received notions about art and modernity. The intention of its participants was no longer to produce pictures for museums, but to work to remove the distinctions between life and art, between high culture and popular culture. The aim of the Network was to develop alternatives to the commercialization and institutionalization of art.

## **Topological Analysis**

The topological analysis showed that a stagnation in Mail Art activities occurred in the early 1980s in Western Europe and the USA. One reason for this was the repeated circulation of the same messages. In addition, by the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s artistic movements like conceptual art, visual poetry, happenings, performance and action art had already become entrenched in the art establishment. As a result, even those initiators and artists who had been involved during the early phase began to abandon it.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, initiatives from Eastern Europe in the early 1980s brought new impulses into the field, as the evaluation of the initiated projects showed. The politically motivated component related to the lack of basic freedoms of opinion, press, assembly and travel spurred a great interest in the Mail Art Networks in the countries of Eastern Europe. It is not hard to see why Guillermo Deisler named it a “window to the world.” Artistically speaking, it functioned as an international action and communication space for all those who turned against the state-imposed “Socialist realism”. It helped substantially in making anti-government artistic positions known beyond the borders of the political system. As a number of examples show, it resulted in a reception of modernism in Eastern Europe and enabled artists there to participate in international developments.

In Eastern Europe the Network was directed against the ideological misuse of art; it helped artists to evade censorship and state regimentation and thus maintain artistic freedom. Because critical reflections about the real-life situation could circulate in the Network, it helped to keep a rebellious spirit alive and provide a forum for opposition circles to express themselves. Information about reprisals could spread from person to person. Because of the Network’s invisibility, its participants were able to partially elude the state-run control mechanisms and create subversive structures.

In both Eastern and Western Europe the Network also found uses beyond Mail Art as an autonomous communication system which was independent of governmental and commercial media. Even if it could not make up for the existing information and communication deficits in art and society as a whole, it was a major factor in the information flow between East and West. In

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Thurman-Jajes, Director of the Research Centre for Artists’ Publications at the Weserburg | Museum für moderne Kunst in Bremen holds the view that this period marked the end of Mail Art in the West.

the Western European and American Mail Art scene the Network was an artistic strategy offering alternatives to the existing forms of production, communication and multiplication. In Eastern Europe it also took on a crucial existential dimension.

Along with this communication system linking individual countries and political systems, new communications structures were developing – for example as expressed in the concept of the Global Village, popularized by McLuhan's book *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

The centres of artistic activity that had characterized modernism before the war began to dissolve in this period. Instead of dominating styles and movements, there was parallelism in artistic positions. According to the art historian Dieter Daniels, Fluxus marked the “end of the epoch of ‘movements’ in 20<sup>th</sup> century art”<sup>3</sup>. These new developments required new forms of organization, such as those provided by Networks.

### **Structure and Mode of Action**

The structure and operation of the Mail Art Network were intimately intertwined. In the present study, the rhizome theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as the investigations by the sociologist Manfred Faßler formed the basis used to show the interactions between structure and operation.

The Network's decentralized and non-hierarchical structure can be regarded as the ideal framework for its function as an alternative communication system. Following the unreservedly positive perception of the 'Network' concept in the 1960s, Deleuze and Guattari were already referring to its ambivalence. Faßler's analyses define the social relevance of Networks. In his view, new concepts of civilization and culture develop from Networks – like those arising from the Mail Art Network.

The versatility of the Mail Art Network enabled it to fulfil a wide range of requirements. The enormous consensus-producing capacity of the Network made it different from other art movements of this period. Its decentralized structure gave it the necessary means to connect people in different parts of the world – and to satisfy the growing demand for global communication. As the Mail Art Network developed on the basis of the international postal system, it was able to absorb new ideas through the artists' correspondence as well as from exchange, communication and networking strategies which had developed in the avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 1930s. Compared with these predecessors, the phenomenon investigated here exhibited a new quality.

Networking itself had become the artists' goal and had developed into an artistic strategy linking individual initiatives from around the world. In none of the predecessors had the networking process itself been taken quite as far.

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<sup>3</sup> Daniels, Dieter (Hrsg.): Fluxus. Ein Nachruf zu Lebzeiten, in: Kunstforum International, Wiesbaden (1991) 115, p. 100

## **The Nature of the Mail Art Network**

This study points out the formation of address lists that had already characterized many activities in the early 1970s may have provided one basis for expansion of the Mail Art Network. However this was not the reason for its creative content, or its sense of community. It was the participants' feeling of belonging to an international community which proved to be the inherent property of the Network. In Mail Art the intrinsic feature was that for the first time people who did not know each other, who belonged to different cultures and lived in different social systems were able to contact each other. Their exchanges about artistic, political, social and everyday themes created a feeling of intimacy and familiarity – despite the Mail Art tourism which growing as an unintended by-product in the mid-1980s. The act of communicating by post had a quality quite different from that of a personal meeting.

The investigation of the topology of the Network showed that artists were instrumental in its development. This raised a number of questions concerning its relationship to art. Guy Schraenen's view of the Network as an artistic concept was helpful in pinpointing numerous relationships to conceptual art, but did not go far enough in grasping the complexity of the phenomenon. The significant impulses for the development of the Network were many-layered. The especially relevant aspects can be summarized as follows:

The Mail Art Network revived the internationality of modernism, which had been interrupted by the Second World War. Its appearance was presaged by Fluxus and Correspondence Art and came in the early 1970s in an era of major change. The framework in which it emerged was the interplay of political, sociological and artistic developments. Widespread upheaval had touched most areas of society, including art. The positions represented in the Mail Art Network included – apart from conceptual art and concrete and visual poetry – strongly directed at social change. Here we find a consensus between East and West – even though the intentions being pursued were demonstrably different.

The Network was eminently suitable as an autonomous communication system, independent of state institutions, and using artistic means to activate consciousness-raising processes, and to discuss and disseminate them. This was also the function fulfilled by the Network in Eastern Europe. There, as already mentioned, it became part of an intellectual and artistic survival strategy for many of the participants.

In its rejection of aesthetic quality criteria, the Network represented one of the most uncompromising standpoints of its time. It culminated in the 1990s in ART STRIKE, a radical call

for artists to stop producing any kind of art. The rise and popularity of Mail Art was closely connected with the rejection of elitist art establishment.

### **Predecessors**

Various art movements of the 1960s and 1970s had devoted themselves to overcoming the boundaries between art and life – foremost among them was the Fluxus movement. It is common to find references in the literature to the affinity between Fluxus and Mail Art; that prompted this study to a closer investigation of the similarities and differences between the two movements with regard to Network initiation. Fluxus had already advanced communication to art. The media of expression which were exploited and developed and the activities related to Flux Post were clearly closely related to Mail Art. In fact, Network initiation could be demonstrated for Fluxus in the case of certain concrete projects. Yet, despite these similarities, the widespread tendency to view the Mail Art Network as a post-Fluxus movement only serves to cloud the eye to its special features.

The analysis showed that connections between the two movements existed in the early years, based on similarities between the communication media used. However there were a number of major differences. For example, the Mail Art Network did not formulate a program or other classifying or exclusionist criteria. It was open to all people interested in communication and exchange. The networking itself was the focal point of its activities – and thus reducing the Mail Art Network to Fluxus does not do justice to its intentions.

### **The Networking Aspect**

With the *New York Correspondence School* developed by Ray Johnson, Mail Art first was linked with network-formation. It was however, largely focussed on its initiator. At this stage, one cannot speak of a self-organized Network, although Johnson provided the initial spark and numerous further initiatives were influenced by him. Correspondence Art brought forth new forms of interpersonal communication which were to become characteristic of the Mail Art Network. In addition to Johnson's activities it was Robert Filliou's *Eternal Network* that prefigured Mail Art. This artist placed creativity rather than the production of artworks in the centre. For him, 'creation' as an artistic process included exchange and communication. Filliou's ideas underwent widespread dissemination for the first time in the Mail Art Network. This spawned the development of new forms of production, communication and exchange based on a shared production of art as mirrored in Mail Art projects, in collective collages, assemblings and publications. The artist-genius had been replaced by the net-worker whose individual achievement alongside others helped in producing the joint work.

In contrast to other art movements, the exceptional feature of the Mail Art Network was that it was accessible and open to laypersons, so that people without an artistic background could also take part in its activities. Thus the status of the artist and the institutionalization of an academic art education had lost their importance.<sup>4</sup> This standpoint corresponded to the inter-medial and interdisciplinary notions connected with the idea of the Network. The schools like *Black Mountain College*, in which R. Buckminster Fuller and John Cage were involved and where artists like Johnson studied became more attractive because they did not function like ordinary colleges and universities, but viewed themselves as a egalitarian community of teachers and students. *The Free International University (F.I.U.)* founded by Joseph Beuys, the *Zentrum für permanente Kreation* of Robert Filliou and George Brecht or Robert Rehfeldt's circle in East Berlin pointed in the same direction.

### **Democratic Principle**

Everyone could take part in the activities of the Mail Art Network, regardless of their creative abilities, their education, religion, cultural background, social status or political orientation. For the participants this aspect proved to be fundamental for the democratic power provided by the Network. By identifying the interrelationships between structure and mode of operation it was possible to demonstrate why the Mail Art Network was especially suited to the democratization movements from the late 1960s until the 1980s both in the West and the Eastern Bloc. It had neither leadership nor coordination centre; it was not marked by hierarchical structures. Instead it took on the function of a platform, generating an unprecedented grass-roots culture of communication both with regard to the reception of artistic-creative statements and the critical reflection on processes in society. Moreover, as numerous examples show, the Mail Art Network was based on the principle of self-organization and had the ability to create alternatives – which corresponded to the widely-shared notion of democracy among its participants. It is thus not surprising that in the US, Canada and Western Europe Mail Art became a mass phenomenon and a counterculture form of expression.

In the countries of Eastern Europe this degree of dissemination could not be attained, due to social conditions which prevented such a level of popularity. But under the prevailing political situation the specific property of the Network, i.e. that it was invisible, became extremely important as it meant that participants could evade state control to some extent. This, of course, made it all the more interesting to intelligence services. The Network artists reacted to government reprisals with spirit, humor, ingenuity and creativity – and above all with bravery and moral courage. In this way the Mail Art Network in Eastern Europe not only contributed to the democratization of art, but

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<sup>4</sup> Siegfried J. Schmidt, Über die Funktion von Sprache im Kunstsystem, in: Louis, Eleonora, Stoos, Toni (Hrsg.): Die Sprache der Kunst. Die Beziehung von Bild und Text in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts, Kat., Kunsthalle Wien u. a., Stuttgart 1993, p.78

played an important part in the democratization of society. As shown by statements used in the evaluation, the Network supported subversive structures and upheld a critical spirit. In the case of certain concrete Mail Art projects it was possible to find connections to opposition groups involved in the peace, human rights and environmental movements developing in Eastern Europe. As the analysis showed, the activities reached a climax in the period in which communication between the Eastern and Western political Blocs was restricted, particularly after 1981 with the growing *Solidarność* movement in Poland. The desire to overcome their resulting separation and isolation was another important motivation for many artists and Mail artists from Eastern Europe to take part.

This investigation of the Mail Art Network raises questions about the political relevance of art and the function of art in society. The fact that it was not the artwork, but the act of communication and exchange that was the goal of creative activity was itself consciousness-raising. With this standpoint and the artistic practices it induced, the Network made a major contribution to broadening the concept of art. It not only communicated the ideas of Filliou and Beuys among others, but actually put them into practice. Additionally, as an anti-aesthetic movement it contributed to the further dematerialization of the artwork concept that had begun with conceptual art and the rise of happenings and performance art. The more art came to serve the Network and produce new, previously unknown communication structures, the more the art itself retreated into the background. At this point the artistic limitations of the Network become apparent. Mail Art as an independent form of artistic expression could only be convincing when the peculiarities of postal dispatch became an integral part of the work. Many participants did not claim to be producing art, but to be communicating with others using artistic means. True to the self-defined program *No jury – No return – No fee* no piece was to be judged using aesthetic criteria. However, among the participants of the Network were artists who represented new standpoints ignored by the art markets and art establishment or who refused to conform to the state-imposed regimentation of Socialist Realism. Thus, the 'mass' of material also invariably contained artistically significant works. These include, above all, the alternative publications which grew up in or around the Network such as assembling, journals and magazines that were mainly conceived and executed by artists. As a few selected examples show, in addition to their high information content, they were characterized by their unique design, typography and themes.

In considering the Mail Art Network, we are dealing on the one hand with the phenomenon itself, and on the other hand with the works which circulated using it. These vary widely in terms of their creative potential. We can also distinguish between works which were created as Mail Art, and those which were simply disseminated via the Network.

## **New Valuation of the Mail Art Network**

A trailblazing aspect of the Network – and one which is still relevant today – is its ability to form alternatives. This did not ultimately succeed in breaking the monopoly of the established institutions of art communication such as journals, galleries and museums<sup>5</sup>, but it did provide an alternative, at least for some time. Art historian Siegfried Schmidt's pronouncement that 'art is only that which is communicated as art in the art system by socially relevant individuals and groups'<sup>6</sup> shows the relevance of Networks for artistic positions developing outside the mainstream. Guy Schraenen rightly praised the achievements of the Mail Art Network, which he viewed mainly as allowing an unlimited number of artists with 'neither contacts nor opportunities to exhibit or publish' to 'find their place in the history of art'<sup>7</sup>.

In retrospect Schraenen wrote, "it was fighting a losing battle"<sup>8</sup>. Although the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and 1970s is no longer encountered as a widespread artistic movement, Networks still have an important function as a space for emerging counter-movements.

As we will see below in the example of Ryszard Waśko's *Construction in Process*, forms of potentially new art and culture emerged through the Networks. The emergence and spread of the Mail Art Network was accompanied by a profound break with the past in art and society. McLuhan and Fuller had defined Networks as a necessary condition for future societies. With its international, interdisciplinary and intercultural character, this Network was exemplary. It was at once designer, initiator and motor for necessary changes affecting the whole of society. It was bound up with the issues of new structures and communication media in globally evolving processes and it began to leave its mark on them. It also offered opportunities and strategies for developing alternatives to the prevailing structures in art and society. In view of its pioneering role, the Mail Art Network can no longer be considered a marginal phenomenon in art history.

## **Artistic Positions of Eastern European Artists**

This investigation does not only focus on determining the specific significance of the Mail Art Network for Eastern Europe, but is also looking at its individual achievements. Based on the topological approach it was possible to show for the first time that Eastern European artists and Mail artists were seminal in both the development and the expansion of the Mail Art Network. The frequently encountered assertion that the idea of the Network came from America to Europe and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 81

<sup>7</sup> Schraenen, Guy: Empfänger unbekannt, in: Berswordt-Wallrabe, Kornelia von (Hrsg.): Mail Art – Osteuropa im internationalen Netzwerk, Guy Schraenen, Kornelia Röder (Konzeption), Kat., Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Berlin 1996, p. 13f.

<sup>8</sup> Schraenen, Guy: Out of print. An archive as artistic concept, Kat., Archive for Small Press & Communication im Neuen Museum Weserburg Bremen, Bremen 2001, p. 27

moved from Western to Eastern Europe can thus be refuted. The *NET* developed by the Polish conceptual artists Jarosław Kozłowski and Andrzej Kostolowski in the early 1970s was one of the first applications of Network theory in the context of art. Their widely applicable formulation about Networks proved to be groundbreaking for the development of a potential culture, as seen in the project *Construction in Process*. After the fall of a regime there is no abrupt formation of new art and culture. Instead it is prepared by artists who have withdrawn from the regimentation of the state-run art system. It is them who pave the way for a new art and culture.

This effect is also seen in the Mail Art Network, since in the 1980s it was the projects initiated in Eastern Europe that provided the new impulses. In the initiatives of Paweł Petasz or Robert Rehfeldt networking was the intention and content of the actual artistic work. These artists' activities helped significantly to promote Eastern European integration into the Mail Art Network. A number of outstanding alternative publications resulted, including Guillermo Deisler's *UNI/vers(;*), *Total* by Nenad Bogdanović or Rea Nikonova's *Double*.

Using certain examples, such as the reception of Marcel Duchamp or Joseph Beuys, it was possible to identify the reception of modernism and the participation in international developments in art as special achievements of the Mail Art Network for Eastern Europe. Since the Network was especially used by artists who represented positions outside Socialist Realism, the circulating works as well as the initiated projects offer an insight into the alternative art scene of the various countries. The journals and magazines sent by artists and Mail artists yield numerous clues to activities in the field of conceptual art, visual and concrete poetry, happenings, land art and performances at the same time as these forms arose in the West. This is an aspect that has only been selectively addressed until now. These new artistic directions were principally associated with the names of artists known from the Network, such as Mirosljub Todorović, the artist group Bosch+Bosch, with Iosif Király, Călin Dan, Nenad Bogdanović, György Galántai, Endre Tót, Róbert Šwierkiewicz, Gyula Pauer, Árpád Tóth, Jiří Valoch, J.H. Kocman, Július Koller, Henryk Bzdok, Andrzej Dudek-Dürer, Hendryk Gajewski, Jarosław Kozłowski, Paweł Petasz, Dan Mihaltianu, Robert Rehfeldt, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, Oskar Manigk, Rea Nikonova, Serge Segay among many others.

Action art, happenings and performances rarely took place in public spaces in Eastern Europe – with the exception of churches. Generally such activities were performed in private homes, studios and authors' galleries. Despite the widely differing extent of artistic freedom in the various Eastern European countries studied here, it can be stated in general that the actions did not receive the same societal resonance as they did in Western Europe, the US and Canada. For the artists, the Mail Art Network generally remained the only means of announcing their activities and making them known and disseminated. Thus information material and photo-documentations only reached a limited part of the public. This special aspect was thematized in the present study

based on the example of the reception of Beuys' work. Further analysis of the material touched on here is sure to present more surprises in future.

Prior to 1989 few established institutions addressed the issue of Eastern European Mail Art. One exception was the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, which maintained a collection as well as carrying out academic research on the subject. The Getty Research Institute acquired the Jean Brown archive which also contains works by Eastern European artists and Mail artists. The collection is stored in a database which can be accessed worldwide. Apart from these examples, the traces of the East European Mail Art scene are principally restricted to the collections and archives of the Mail artists themselves. In the GDR, for example, only one museum purchased a Mail Art project before 1989. In 1987 Schlossmuseum Gotha<sup>9</sup> bought Guillermo Deisler's 1986 *Federn der ganzen Welt für meinen Flug*.

The situation has changed considerably over the past few years. The legendary Artpool Archive has become an internationally renowned art research centre. Guy Schraenen's collection with its rich trove of material on the East European avant-garde, including Mail Art, was acquired by the Weserburg | Museum für moderne Kunst in Bremen and incorporated into its Research Centre for Artists' Publications. The Academy of Art in Berlin bought part of the Deisler archive. The Tate Modern in London set up an exhibition room with Correspondence Art. Among the exhibited works were some by Eastern European artists and Mail artists. In this connection it is also appropriate to mention the establishment of the Mail Art Archive at Staatliches Museum Schwerin.

This appraisal of the developments in alternative art in Eastern Europe was based on exhibitions and publications such as *Präprintium* and *Samizdat*, which were used for the analysis. The solo exhibitions of Jiří Valoch (1997) in Bremen, Endre Tót (1995) in Cologne and Budapest and Július Koller (2003) in Cologne were not restricted to the artists' Mail Art activities, but were devoted to their outstanding artistic achievements in a retrospective, comprehensive show.

Since the German reunification there has been a far more intense process of reappraisal of the alternative art and cultural scene compared with other Eastern European countries. Because this inevitably reopens the debate about the status of art in the GDR and its significance in art history, the issue tends to attract considerable media interest – particularly as it relates to artists and positions outside the state-sanctioned art establishment. A number of prestigious exhibitions like *xx. Jahrhundert* or *Kunst in der DDR* have shown Mail Art by Robert Rehfeldt, for example, on an equal footing with other artworks. The 2003 exhibition *Mauersprünge. Klopfschritte - Kunst und Kultur der 80er Jahre in Deutschland* furthered the process of reappraisal.

The exhibition *The name of the game. Ray Johnson's Postal Performance* in Oslo and Kassel in 2003 curated by Ina Blom motivated the Mail artist Lutz Wohlrab to launch a Mail Art questionnaire about contacts between the inventor of Correspondence Art and the Mail Art scene in East Germany. Publications like *See you again* on the Duchamp reception in Hungarian art or

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<sup>9</sup> Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein Gotha

*Focus Belgrad* reflect the process of documentation and analysis in other Eastern European countries. The Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa) and other institutions have been instrumental in supporting and promoting this process. Exhibitions like *Out of Print*<sup>10</sup> which was conceived by Guy Schraenen – have made major contributions to pan-european art historiography. The show drew parallels and revealed relationships between the international and the Eastern European avant-garde. The present study focuses on the achievements of Eastern European artists with the aim of preserving this legacy and making this available for future studies.

### **Further Development of the Network Idea in Contemporary Art**

It would seem obvious to view Net Art as an extension of the Mail Art Network, although few Mail artists have actually realized their artistic projects in the internet. Most use it for the presentation of their works and archives. Net Art has brought forth a new generation of artists. However, some of the aspects that characterize the Mail Art Network continue to exist in this new field of art. In his essay *Von der Mail art zur E-mail* ('From Mail Art to E-mail') Dieter Daniels raised this question and stated three common leitmotifs:

- *the idea of a collective creativity that turns away from the cult of the individual genius;*
- *the attempt to find a non-commercial form of art that avoids the established paths of communication and marketing;*
- *the search for a form of communication that is global and bridges cultural boundaries and that can lead to something like a democratic discourse ('herrschaftsfreier Diskurs').*<sup>11</sup>

The formation of transient communities throughout the world may be added as a further common criterion. For Net artists, the ideas that were developed and put into practice in the Mail Art Network, such as its 'anti-commercial'<sup>12</sup> approach, have remained topical issues to this day. In his essay *Was ist Netzkunst?* (What is Net Art?)<sup>13</sup> Joachim Blank discusses the question of what Net artists regard as their fundamental concept, scope and challenges when working in a medium which offers unlimited communication. In his view, this art form does not use the internet as a communication system like Mail Art, but it itself – or the myth surrounding it – becomes the content of the debate. In Blank's definition Net Art creates "artistic projects, strategy projects, discussion forums and autonomous net structures"<sup>14</sup> within the incomprehensible vastness of the internet. The common element is the "construction of (autonomous) communication Networks"<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The exhibition was shown in several European cities, including 2003 in the Museum für Gestaltung in Zurich.

<sup>11</sup> Daniels, Dieter: *Von der Mail art zur E-mail*. *Kunst der Kommunikation*, in: *Neue bildende Kunst*. Berlin 4 (1994) 5, p. 14

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18. It should be pointed out that many Net Art activists are engaged in commercial activities today.

<sup>13</sup> Blank, Joachim has been initiating projects on the web since 1993; net projects were first exhibited at the *documenta x*.

<sup>14</sup> Blank, Joachim: *Was ist Netzkunst?*, in: Berswordt-Wallrabe, Kornelia von (Hrsg.): *Mail Art – Osteuropa im internationalen*

On the surface of it this may appear contradictory, as the artists have the *World Wide Web* at their disposal for artistic projects. They do not have to build up their communications structures as in Mail Art. The challenge posed by the internet arises less from the compensation of an information deficit than from an excess of communication – one that has reached the limits of human capacity to absorb it. According to Blank, numerous internet art projects have therefore concentrated on initiating “independent structure projects”<sup>16</sup> and “building up internet infrastructures”<sup>17</sup> of their own to enable artists to have free access to the Network, making them independent of providers and sponsors. Net Art also creates subversive communication structures and communication spaces, but the alternative approach to existing communication systems has not only proved relevant to Net Art, but, increasingly, for areas outside art.

Many of the context systems which have arisen through Net Art projects pursue the goal of building communities.<sup>18</sup> As a result the type of artist who emerged in the Mail Art scene lives on as a net-worker in internet art. As an example there is the project *Internationale Stadt* (1994-1997) initiated by Joachim Blank and Karl Heinz Jeron which was shown at the *documenta x*. It was based on the principle that a group or an individual would design a system which would be further developed by others. In projects like this one “the collective creativity in the Network ... became manifest”<sup>19</sup> as technological advances in interactivity created a new intensity in the communication process, strengthening the feeling of a community assembled by the concrete project. Interestingly, the initiators of *Internationale Stadt* found themselves confronted with the problem of ‘enmassment’ which paralyzed the entire project and the newly created system, and which ultimately led to its being abandoned.

In contrast to the Mail Art Network, the advent of the internet allowed the development of new artistic means of expression with text, sound and moving or real-time images, which could be combined and used “simultaneously at different levels of communication.”<sup>20</sup> The virtual art space used for internet projects brings about a change in human perception since the works which circulate in the internet have no haptic – i.e. sensory – presence. The complex workings of the electronic Network are comprehended by only a few of its users. Who but artists working in the net are able to reflect on processes that proceed in the interior of the internet, asks Gerrit Gohlke. His exclusivity disregards philosophical and sociological approaches and stresses the necessity “of an artists’ examination of the Networks and ... databases, of the chat servers and the software industry”<sup>21</sup>. Gohlke is referring to the social and political relevance of numerous Net Art projects.

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Netzwerk, Drei Tage rund um alternative Kommunikation, Kornelia Röder (Konzeption), Kongress-Dokumentation, Staatliches Museum Schwerin, Berlin 1997, p. 63

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 64

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. P. 63

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. P. 64

<sup>21</sup> Gohlke, Gerrit: Noch keine Malerei - aber auf dem richtigen Weg. Warum das Publikum mehr Netzkunst braucht, <http://www.welt.de/daten/2001/02/21/0221ku224213.htm>

ANGEWANDTE (UN)SICHERHEIT<sup>22</sup>, for example, thematized questions on the relationship between communication, surveillance and artistic freedom in a Network society.

The internet, which first raised hopes of a world-wide democratization of knowledge and information exchange, also carries the risk of becoming the world's most perfect surveillance system. This aspect is discussed by Inke Arns in her publication *Netzkulturen*<sup>23</sup> as well as by Adam Wishart and Regula Bochsler in *Leaving Reality – the battle for the soul of the internet*.<sup>24</sup> According to Arns, the internet is also being used as a “political space and political tool”<sup>25</sup>. Subversive and aggressive strategies come into play, as seen in the example of the Swiss artists' group *etoy*, which fought a famous battle over the internet domain *etoy.com* against the internet toy retailer *eToys*. The series of Network attacks became known as the ‘toywar’<sup>26</sup>.

Recent developments in Net Art have led to a dampening of the initial euphoria. The future significance of artists' projects in the internet is perhaps best captured by Gerrit Gohlke's description of Net Art as the “astonishing attempt to use the means of art to analyze a global phenomenon: the cross-linking of society and the nature of information.”<sup>27</sup> In view of the global marketing of images and information the latter is surely growing in importance.

However Net Art is not the only area where affinities to the Mail Art Network can be found. Networks now pervade many artistic contexts. They continue to exist – not only as communication systems, artistic strategies or concepts for exhibition projects – but function as organizational forms and as integration models in the everyday art world.

In the present assessment of the Network theme three main focal points can be pinpointed, using examples from the East European art scene:

1. *Projects that visualize or illustrate Network structures to provide insights into their mechanisms and structures.*
2. *Projects that take the networking aspect and make it an integral part of the art.*
3. *Projects that initiate the process of networking with areas outside the art field – thereby expanding the ‘art operating system’.*

The Polish artist Ryszard Waśko used the networking aspect for the first time as the conceptual departure point for a project, *Construction in Process* in 1981. Its goal was a joint exhibition bringing together international artists and the Polish art scene. Many noted artists participated in the event in Łódź, including Emmett Williams, Joel Shapiro, Günther Uecker, Jürgen O. Olbrich,

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<sup>22</sup> Discussion forum at: <http://www.fitug.de/debate/0205/msg00227.html>

<sup>23</sup> Arns, Inke: *Netzkulturen*, Hamburg 2002, p. 30

<sup>24</sup> Wishart, Adam, Bochsler, Regula: *Leaving Reality – the battle for the soul of the Internet*, London 2003

<sup>25</sup> Arns, Inke: *Netzkulturen*, Hamburg 2002, pp. 42-47

<sup>26</sup> Arns, Inke: *Die Netz-Community rüstet auf: etoy vs. eToys (“Toywar“)*, 1999-2000, in: op.cit. pp. 62-65

<sup>27</sup> Gohlke, Gerrit: *Noch keine Malerei - aber auf dem richtigen Weg. Warum das Publikum mehr Netzkunst braucht*, <http://www.welt.de/daten/2001/02/21/0221ku224213.htx>

Daniel Spoerri, Sol LeWitt, Monika Brandmeier, Lawrence Weiner, Daniel Buren and Richard Serra. Support for the project came from the Solidarność labor movement. Symposia and concerts, performances, video shows and workshops took place throughout the city and the artists donated their works to Solidarność, giving rise to an impressive collection of contemporary art. The imposition of martial law at the end of the year marked the end of this development. From then on, the Mail Art Network again offered one of the few possibilities of engaging in exchanges with international artists.

Shows with participating artists from Eastern Europe are no longer a rarity, but artists from Eastern Europe still find it difficult to find a place in the international art scene. A system of galleries and art associations to take on the task of the necessary presentation and contacts does not develop over night. That these artists come from a different art context is seen in projects like *Transferatu* by Dan Mihaltianu, a Romanian artist who was active in the Mail Art scene. By thematizing interconnectedness in the age of globalization, the project furthered the Network debate under changing social and political conditions. As curator of the exhibition, Mihaltianu deliberately referred back to the situation of video art in Romania in the mid-1980s – “which ... was marked by technical and economic problems”<sup>28</sup>. Taking little-known experiments such as *Spatiu Oglinda* (Mirror Space) from 1986 and *Haus Party* from 1987 and 1988 as starting points, he developed a concept which he described as follows:

*Transferatu*<sup>29</sup> is a project that investigates the circulation of ideas and tendencies in current art as well as the phenomena of transculturalism in contemporary societies.<sup>30</sup>

One characteristic aspect of Networks – the dissolution of the centre and periphery – that was so important in connection with the Mail Art Network became a central theme of this project. For Mihaltianu, globalization not only allows access to information, free transit of individuals and ideas and the transfer of technologies and capital, but also enables the integration of peripheral cultural regions.<sup>31</sup> In Romania, too, access to the new media expanded the spectrum of artistic expression, accompanied by a “shift ... from tradition to innovation, from one-dimensionality to interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity”<sup>32</sup>. At the same time, the curator recognized the support provided by the growing interest from abroad.<sup>33</sup> The participating artists served as reflective spectators of the changes due to globalization that were taking place in Romania. The formation of communicative Network structures became – along with interdisciplinary approaches – the focus of the artistic debate, although the specific Romanian situation was the starting point for the concept.

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<sup>28</sup> *Transferatu*: Neue Tendenzen in der rumänischen Kunst. Fotografie, interaktive Video- und Multimediainstallation [CD-Rom und Booklet] anl. der Ausstellungen des Instituts für Auslandsbeziehungen in Berlin u. a. , Berlin 2000, p. 9

<sup>29</sup> The title of the exhibition combines the words Transfer, Transsylvania and Nosferatu.

<sup>30</sup> Mihaltianu, Dan: in op. cit., p. 3

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

The 2001 project *OSTENSIV. Zeitgenössische Kunst aus Osteuropa* (Contemporary Art from Eastern Europe) also offered insights into an art scene marked by great upheavals and new opportunities, but also by losses. This is how the curator, Paula Böttcher<sup>34</sup>, described her intentions in making the exhibition:

*In my view, our culture is often and in many ways oversaturated – also in terms of our production and reception of art. I was searching for positions that could break with tendencies fixed only on defending that which had already been achieved, and that is when I encountered Eastern Europe.*

In this project the networking process served as a deliberate strategy. The exhibition was shown in several different places in Berlin including the Bulgarian Cultural Institute, Collegium Hungaricum, the Slovak Institute and the Czech Centre. A number of other cities such as Leipzig and Budapest also hosted the exhibition. This “alternative” look at the Eastern European art scene was shown in Moscow in 2002 parallel to the International Art Fair<sup>35</sup> with its established artworks. The ‘alternative’ spotlight on the work of Eastern European artists, developed by the curator through her direct encounters with the artists themselves, independent of museums and commercial galleries, shows parallels to Guy Schraenen’s approach. The result was a Network of personal contacts.

As another example of network-building in contemporary art let us look at *association APSOLUTNO*<sup>36</sup>, an independent group of artists founded in 1993 in the Serbian city of Novi Sad. Their projects exhibit further network-related aspects. Since 1995 the individual members have been active under their group name only, to emphasize the collective character of their work and methods. Over time, the group changed its artistic approach by bringing cultural, social and political aspects into its aesthetic inquiries.

The project *willing refugees*, which the group maintained as a work in progress over a period of years, shows the way they integrated the Network theme into their artwork. In the commentary to the project they write:

*With the arrival of the new millennium the phenomenon of the acceleration of information flow has become the emblem of the information age. The Network structure enabled easier and faster communication in several channels. Geographical distances were erased.*<sup>37</sup>

This project placed the value of personal experience in the foreground. Most people living today are exposed to permanent change in their lives, workplaces and lifestyles. The changing situation means that people are often likely to voluntarily leave their local surroundings. As a result,

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<sup>34</sup>Until 2003 Paula Böttcher ran a Berlin gallery for contemporary art from Russia.

<sup>35</sup> Restorff, Jörg: Art Moscow, in: Kunstzeitung, Regensburg (2003) 80, p. 22

<sup>36</sup>The members of the group are Zoran Pantelić, Dragan Rakić, Bojana Petri and Dragan Miletić. Further information at [www.absolutno.org](http://www.absolutno.org)

<sup>37</sup> Förderkreis Künstlerhaus Schloss Plüschow e.V. (Hrsg.): *Willing refugees, Arbeiten der Stipendiaten 1999 und 2000*, Kat., Lübeck 2001

Networks in our personal lives take on a completely new function which the artists' group described thus:

*More than the geographic environment, it is the individual environment that becomes a node in the Network, linked to numerous other nodes at which events and information take place at an ever increasing pace.*<sup>38</sup>

In their project, they place the personal "I" – applicable to every individual – in the center of their Network reflections. The biographically determined localization begins to dissolve as a stable coordinate and must be constantly recreated. At the same time, the desire to escape the hectic urban environment grows steadily. For the group the need for change and new experiences means it is necessary both to remain in motion and to retreat. The artists thematize the states of both voluntary and forced exile with a radically new perspective. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have proved to be an age of refugees. Political or social conditions have forced people to leave their homes or countries as exiles, refugees or displaced persons. And many of those who did not have the opportunity of leaving chose "inner exile" as a state of mind in order to withdraw from participation in society or to free themselves from their hated surroundings.<sup>39</sup>

The members of *association APSOLUTNO* incorporated sociological, cultural or political stimuli from their immediate surroundings into their projects. The choice of their medium of expression became a part of an active accretion process. The artists incorporate news reports, advertising, poetry and citations and employ the language of computer communication.<sup>40</sup> The contexts they present are mirrored in a Network of relationships and connections that – starting in a concrete location – develops in a variety of ways, without a schema or prearranged structure.

Cross-linking with non-artistic areas of society was part of the program of the *REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT*, an artists' project group founded in Dresden in 1996. Henrik Mayer and Martin Keil view their artistic approach as the "search for links and joins to other areas of society,"<sup>41</sup> in which "artistic thinking becomes the catalyst in the difficult process of re-orientation"<sup>42</sup>. The artists' Network initiatives address issues in which social communication structures are inadequate or need to be re-established. Their concern has been to develop pilot projects to demonstrate alternatives to existing structures. Much of the group's work deals with the issue of unemployment. In their 2000 project *ARBEITSGEIST* [work ethic], bearing the provocative subtitle *Between the right to work and divine laziness: perspectives of work-oriented thinking* they address the question of the social standing of work. People from a variety of social groups were questioned about their feelings about paid work. What alternatives are there when the majority of people define themselves, both socially and personally through their work status at

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Association APSOLUTNO, Biographies, in op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Mayer, Henrik, Keil, Martin, quoted by Wiese, Stephan von, in: REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT, Perspektiven für Kunst und Wirtschaft. Forum Unternehmenskultur, Projektdokumentation, Dresden 2001, p. 6

<sup>42</sup> Wiese, Stephan von, in op. cit., p. 10

the same time as they are – or believe themselves to be – shut off from the possibility of full-time employment? The artists saw the goal of their involvement with the topic in the “initiation of a wide-ranging consciousness process which allows for a re-definition of work and leisure time.”<sup>43</sup> The results of these artistic research efforts resemble sociological studies. In order to visualize the Networks they initiated, the artists used video, photography, internet presentations and exhibitions – in which they tried to open up communication spaces “by means of artistic actions”<sup>44</sup>. Accordingly, the project was exhibited, not in classical gallery spaces, but in the Leipzig employment office. In contrast to the Mail Art Network, the strategy used by *REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT* was not directed towards setting up independent communication structures but was designed to provoke and promote cooperation and cross-linking within existing social structures.

The examples mentioned here show how the treatment of the Network theme has changed. At the same time we see how much it has become an indispensable part of artists’ work in a globally active art system.

### **The Mail Art Network as a Model for the Development of a Network Society predicted by Faßler and Castells**

Today Networks pervade all areas of society, affecting the meshes of our personal relationships to an unprecedented extent. Manfred Faßler’s thesis of the development of Net Cultures was based on the observation that social systems “no longer produce media which are their own and exclusively controllable by them,”<sup>45</sup> but rather it is the media “through their propagation and intensive use that in a sense produce society-like systems which are adapted to them.”<sup>46</sup> The criterion of locality – as in the Mail Art Network – is left by the wayside. This viewpoint opens up new perspectives for the investigation of Networks. Like Manuel Castells, Faßler includes areas of economics and finance in his reflections. According to his studies, “distributed, globally dispersed data, information and knowledge ensembles [call forth] ... their own environments: virtual business levels, new market, e-business and global grassroots communities.”<sup>47</sup> All these are phenomena that would be impossible without the advancing medialization of all areas of society.

Manuel Castells, the author of the trilogy called *The Information Age* speaks of a Network Society, whose beginnings go back to the time in which the Mail Art Network was growing. Castell’s work confirms the thesis that these are not isolated phenomena, but the beginning of a worldwide process of networking initiated by a myriad of different movements. Castells wrote:

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<sup>43</sup> Mayer, Henrik, Keil, Martin, cited in op.cit., p. 8

<sup>44</sup> Mayer, Henrik, Keil, Martin, cited in interview with Regine Hebestreit, in: Marion Ermer Stiftung zur Förderung von Kunst und Kultur in Sachsen und Thüringen (Hrsg.): *REINIGUNGSGESELLSCHAFT*, Kat., Dresden 2001, p. 26

<sup>45</sup> Faßler, Manfred: *Netzwerke. Einführung in die Netzstrukturen, Netzkulturen und verteilte Gesellschaftlichkeit*, München 2001, p. 316

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

*A new world is taking shape at the turn of the millennium. It originated in the historical coincidence, around the late 1960s and mid-1970s, of three independent processes: the information technology revolution; the economic crisis of both capitalism and statism and their subsequent restructuring; and the blooming of social and cultural movements such as libertarianism, human rights, feminism and environmentalism.*<sup>48</sup>

This study demonstrates the relationship between the Mail Art Network and the growing environmental, civil rights and peace movements and shows in which way the activities within the Mail Art Network were supporting the democratization process in Eastern Europe. They contained the seeds of the new communication and societal structures, characteristic of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The dream of a networked world – which had been the subject of discussion as early as the 1960s among the predecessors of Network theory – has now become reality. Networks like the Mail Art Network can be regarded as pioneers, as experimental fields, as models whose advantages and disadvantages could be used to discuss the opportunities as well as the limitations offered by this new dimension.<sup>49</sup> It already exhibited many of the developments we are still confronted with today. The speed of the networking process accompanying globalization has brought profound changes that affect everyone – consciously or unconsciously. Artists continue to try to make the mechanisms of this invisible process visible and explainable – rather than accepting them as a ‘ruling phantom’.

As could be shown for the Mail Art Network, not only philosophy, the social sciences and other disciplines in the humanities, but also art itself can develop models for social blueprints, react to existing situations and present alternatives – or at least inspire their development. According to Castells, the ‘peaceful coexistence of diverse interests and cultures in the net has taken on the shape of the world wide web (www), a flexible Network of Networks within the internet where institutions, businesses, associations and individuals can set up their own sites.’<sup>50</sup> However, reality is still far from that scenario.

The development of the Global Village also has many critics. The *Attac* Network, for example, has opposed the globalization euphoria with globally coordinated actions, its own communication channels and critical information which receive little attention from the mass media. This international Network supports the “losers” in the present process of globalization. Networks always carry the possibility of alternatives, a statement that may be considered the quintessence of this study. Castells called networking a “dynamic, self-expanding form of organization of human

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<sup>48</sup> Castells, Manuel: End of Millennium, Vol. III, The Information Age – Economy, Society and Culture, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000

<sup>49</sup> Röder, Kornelia: Lern- und Erfahrungsfelder, in: Interkulturelle Netzwerke, Symposium, Mecklenburgisches Künstlerhaus Schloss Plüschow, vom 13. bis 15. September 2002, Schwerin 2003, pp. 6-19

<sup>50</sup> Castells, Manuel: The Rise of the Network Society Vol. I, The Information Age – Economy, Society and Culture, 1996

activity”<sup>51</sup>. His prognosis was that in the Network society, “the power of flows takes precedence over the flows of power”<sup>52</sup>.

The 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 has taught the world the ambivalence of networking and the necessity of a differentiated perception and subsequent responsibility. Thus this theme will continue to be controversial not only in the world of art.

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<sup>51</sup> Castells, Manuel: Das Informationszeitalter, Teil 3: Jahrtausendwende, Opladen 2003, p. 387

<sup>52</sup> Castells, 1996, p. 469, see Dotzler, Bernhard: Die Ära der Information. Manuel Castells' monumentale Analyse, in: Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Nr. 142 v. 22./23. Juni 2002, p. 67