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Brown, Mary, "Open to the Public: The Political Zoo" (2017). *Bachelor of Fine Arts Senior Papers*. 32.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/bfa/32>

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Open to the Public: The Political Zoo

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5 May 2017

BFA: Studio Art (No Concentration)

Washington University in St. Louis

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Abstract

Open to the Public: The Political Zoo is a two-part project that began as an experiment, a creative curiosity into the intersections of co-authorship, political censorship, and mail art. Spurred in a moment when the news media is being challenged by those in the highest offices, the analog nature of this project explores the potential of a world in which online self-expression is hindered. Mail art projects, while out of the box in this digital era, are situated in a history of 20th century artistic practices. Used as a tool for creative exploration and community in Western countries, in Eastern Europe and Latin America, mail art became a way to evade totalitarian regimes that controlled and censored other forms of media, such as the news. This paper will examine the connections between collage, mail art, politics, and poetry citing historical and contemporary figures in each realm and those who identified in between them. *Open to the Public: The Political Zoo* seeks to conflate the author and audience, allowing creators and non-creators the opportunity to venture into uncharted territory.

Why Mail Art?

In the wake of the 2016 election, fear and glee swept the United States imagining what would become of our nation looking forward. Much of the fear revolved around technological concerns, the way social media affected voting and voter knowledge of the issues, namely, fake news. Many reputable news sources discounted Donald Trump's win as absurd, not going to happen. Then it did.

In January 2017, mere days after the presidential inauguration, news broke that Trump's Chief Strategist, Steve Bannon claimed, "The media should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while" (Grynbaum). A concerning sentiment by itself, it trailed a campaign built on a common distrust of the news media, an entity that is meant to inform the public. I read of Trump's self-proclaimed "running war" with the media, and wondered what our country would be like if the media was censored in drastic ways, if the internet was reshaped based on Trump's wishes (Grynbaum). Much of my correspondence, be that shared links on Facebook, text messages, or my own artwork, was anti-Trump. I observed my freedom of expression relying so heavily on social media and the internet and decided to embark on a mail art project. Part test of the power of a word-of-mouth network, and part creative endeavor in co-authorship, poetry and collage, my thesis was born.

I made 5 collages, each with visual and textual nods to the current political climate as well as historical references that remain relevant today. After printing these collages onto postcards, I addressed them to myself and put a stamp on each. I gave 40 sets of 5 postcards out to my participants and asked them to give away 4 postcards, and keep 1 for themselves. The intention of the give-away was to produce a degree of separation between myself and 80% of the participants. Each participant was asked to write or find a poem in response to the collage on the

front of the postcard and send it back to me with their ekphrastic poem, a poem written after a piece of visual art. Much of my previous work explores the way the creators of news act as a filter of the information, myself as the artist creating another filter when I appropriate the words and images I place in my collages. In *Open to the Public: The Political Zoo*, another manipulative layer is added through the participants. I knew many of my participants were not poets, many not self-identified “creatives” either, but I hoped that something in the collages would strike a chord, allowing them to dig deeper into the feelings and information they were consuming and interpreting.

History of Mail Art: Product of Persecution or Projection of Privilege

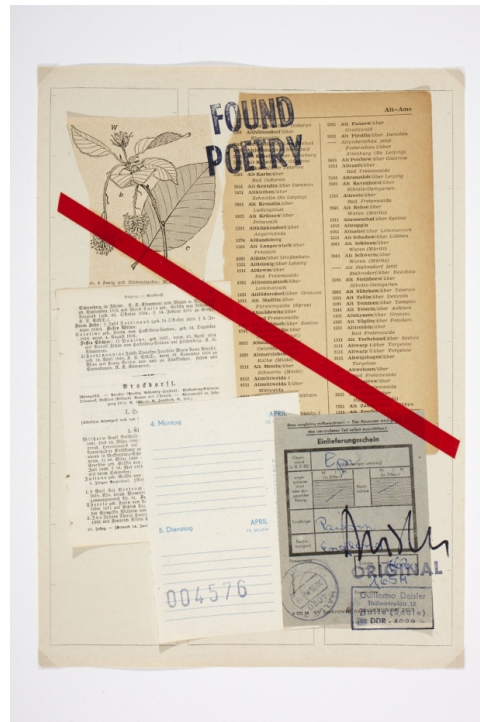
I want to begin by acknowledging that *Open to the Public: The Political Zoo*'s analog nature, while out of the box in this digital era, is situated in a history of 20th century mail art projects and networks. What I have created here is not a groundbreaking invention. Used as a tool for creative exploration and community in Western countries, in Eastern Europe and Latin America, mail art became a way to evade totalitarian regimes that controlled and censored other forms of media, such as the news: “official mail was protected by international treaties that had to be respected by both democracies and dictatorships, and thus became one of the only possible means of communication” (Allen, 128). This project, inspired by similar ideas, is taking place in a country where freedom of speech, and freedom of press remain protected by law, however, self-censorship and social pressure change the way citizens interact with media. I will discuss projects on both sides of this spectrum: mail art as necessity and mail art as creative endeavor. Clemente Padín eloquently states the distinction in *The Magazine*, “If we take into consideration Duchamp’s position that art can be born either from art or from life, we can make the claim that

Anglo-Saxon conceptual art is born from art and that Latin American and Eastern European conceptual art is born from life” (128).

It is difficult to discuss mail art without the mention of Ray Johnson. “New York’s most famous unknown artist,” Johnson used postcards to create networks of artists, friends and collaborators. His work included add and pass postcards, false promotional materials for gallery events which he invented, and *moticos*, 11x8 flyers he sent to curators, dealers, and the like. Johnson surrounded himself with the art world, simultaneously rejecting it: “[his] ambivalence for the institutions of the art world and marketplace led him to develop other ways of circulating and exhibiting his work, either through the mail or in performances and installations on the street or somewhere else” (de Salvo, 20), especially when he entered a self-imposed exile in his later years.

In Latin America, Chilean mail artist, Guillermo Deisler made interdisciplinary work based in collaboration, circulation, and visual poetry: “He used them to produce visual poetry, in which textual elements were more than just a written language to transport content. His artistic handling of the linguistic sign had been influenced by his experiences in exile.” (Henrique Faria) He also published an anthology of experimental poetry, and incorporated found poetry and collage into his pieces, shown by Henrique Faria | New York in 2012.

Both artists used language in their work, Deisler directly incorporated poetry as a mainstay of his mail art, and Johnson wrote to friends, fabricated tag lines, and less often included poetry to complement the images. Because the postcard is a means of communication, unlike some other visual art forms, the text to image relationship is a crucial consideration on the part of the artist/author, making poetry a likely art form to enter the conversation.



Left: *Untitled (El culto...)*, c. 1982. Collage. 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (29.8 x 21 cm.) Mounted on Board: 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (45 x 36.4 cm.)

Right: *Poema Visual*, c. 1990. Mixed Media on paper. 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (29.8 x 21 cm) Mounted on Board: 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (45 x 36.4 cm.)

(images courtesy of Henrique Faria)

Art as Poetry, Poetry as Art

The word collage originates from the poet, Guillaume Apollinaire, “which derives from the French word *coller*, meaning *to paste*” (Perros, 1). This very fact proves the intermingling of poetry and collage, as do the many examples of artists who blur the lines between the two: to name a few, Ed Atkins, Hito Steyerl, and Sue Thompkins. Poetry and visual art have long lived with stark distinctions that are beginning to blur. This phenomenon, discussed in “Art Hearts Poetry” an essay that appeared in *Frieze* in 2014, often allows for the art world to envelope poetry proclaiming it as art, without allowing the reverse: “Like capitalism, contemporary art is hungry and omnivorous; it devours and assimilates everything. If the art world has a bright,

muscular market, much of what it has absorbed – independent film, theatre, dance, publishing, philosophy – does not” (Latimer). Why poetry falls lower in the hierarchy is curious considering the formal concerns of many poets include content, how the form embodies that content, and the self-referential gestures mentioned by Latimer, often discussed as “metapoetry,” all equally valued concerns of creators in the visual art world.

There is, however, a difference, even if self-proclaimed, between artists who use text and image, such as Mel Bochner, and those who fuse art and poetry:

At times, Bochner’s work may resemble a kind of color-infused, tricked-out poetry, but he does not consider himself a poet, as he made clear to the Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine when that publication asked his permission to reprint a series of linguistic compositions. “The editor called me and said, ‘We’d like to do a portfolio of your paintings in color,’” recalled Bochner. “And, I said, ‘OK, that would be great, but I just want to make it clear that what I am doing is not poetry.’ ‘Oh, we think of it as poetry.’ ‘Well, you can’t think of it as poetry.’ ‘Well, it’s kind of like concrete poetry.’ ‘No, it isn’t, I hate concrete poetry.’ ‘Why isn’t it poetry?’ ‘Because I don’t know one poet — except [Stéphane] Mallarmé and Dan Brown — who really cares what the typeface is.’” (Hopkins)



Mel Bochner, “Meaningless” (2003) oil and acrylic on canvas, 45 x 60 in. (image courtesy the artist, Hopkins)

While these types of distinctions may come from the artist/author, they are no less important than the choice to distinguish oneself as a fuser of multiple practices within a single career, body of work, or piece of work. On the contrary, ekphrastic poetry situates itself strictly in the realm of poetry as the formal qualities and conventions that go into it do not stray from other types of poetry.

The participatory aspect of *Open to the Public: The Political Zoo* functioned in this way, working within the conventions of one art form, and asking my co-authors/collaborators to respond to the visual art form using the conventions of the written form. The second portion of my project is where the fusion begins. From a selection of poems I received, I wrote ghost poetry, a form of poetry in which the writer follows some formal or structural quality of the original poem to produce another. The logic I followed to maintain consistency was to use in my new poem the first line as well as three words of my choosing from each selected poem. The final product was a small illustrated booklet of the ghost poems. This time, the visuals and poetry

were made together, meant to mingle with one another on each page, combining elements of writing, collage, and design.



Open to the Public: The Political Zoo, postcard response

The Visual is Political

The Dadaists asserted, “one is entitled to have ideas only if one can transform them into life” (Cran, 16). If one follows this logic it can be said that because the Dada movement existed during a post-war era, ignoring the implications of politics, the government, and societal

concerns would have been irresponsible on the part of the artist. Therefore, it is not a far reach to claim that in today's world. Our experience is saturated by images of news, scandal, and violence from every angle and on every device. It seems that in tumultuous times, artists become more invested in the subject of politics, and public opinion. As a group, they have proven their ability to act as catalyst for social change, which in turn affects the political landscape. The creative responses to the 2016 election ranged from whoopee cushions, to magazine covers, to interactive websites. *Take Trump Live*, seen below, inserts Trump's tweets onto virtual toilet paper for viewers to scroll through, ripping, and discarding as they please. (It's Nice That). Many projects provide comic relief from an increasingly bleak image of the president of the United States, but they also display the variety of creative production that can come from our consumption of information.

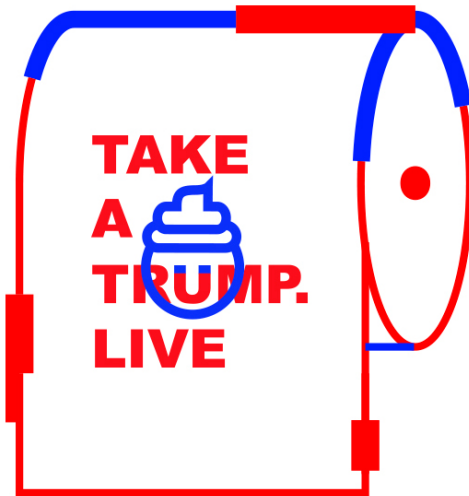


Image courtesy of Take a Trump Live

Visual art can both resist and support those in power. The much talked about “Make America Great Again” hat has been dissected by the design world for its strong branding through poor design skills. Its success went against much of what the industry thought they knew: “The

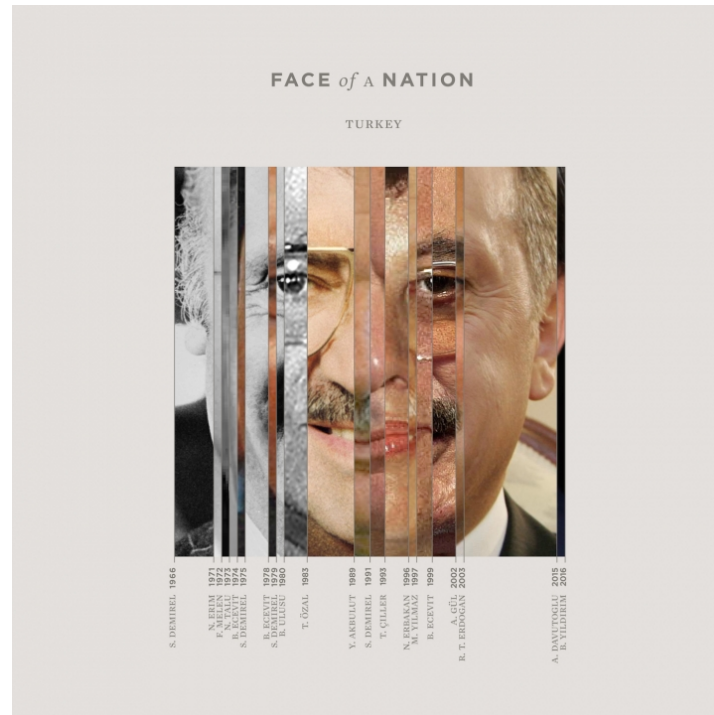
“undesigned” hat represented this everyman sensibility, while Hillary’s high-design branding—which was disciplined, systematic, and well-executed—embodied the establishment narrative that Trump rallied against and that Middle America felt had failed them” (Budds). Further, design played an important role in 20th century politics, artists such as El Lissitzky supported revolutions and new regimes through their aesthetic practices. In 2015, Lissitzky’s work was shown alongside poet, Alice Milligan at the Irish Museum of Modern Art: “What becomes clear is the conviction and active participation in the task at hand: the artist as active in the formation of the new world order” (IMMA). In Lissitzky’s collage, *Klinom krasnym bej belych*, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919-20), the direct political stance combined with Constructivist tendencies insists that the red wedge holds the modern way of making, and of thinking. This propagandistic tactic was part of the Soviet State’s collective art making practices. At the time, Russian artists and designers did not spend time making what they wanted in their own studio, rather art was to be made collaboratively, for the public (IMMA).



El Lissitzky, *Klinom krasnym bej belych, Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, (1919-1920) reprint 1966, offset on paper, 48,8 x 69,2 cm, Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, Photo: Peter Cox, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (image courtesy of IMMA)

Amersterdam-based artist, Guney Soykan, made a project in 2016 titled, *Face of a Nation*, collages that he calls “visual data.” Soykan’s portraits span geography and centuries, splicing together the faces of rulers from a given country from 1966-present day. These informational montages show the brevity and/or extent of a leader’s time in office, the change in race, gender, and age of the leaders, and even insinuate a political consistency or chaos that a country possesses based on the illustrated information. These collages provide hints of hope, concern, and fear, but they remain ambiguous enough to be taken at face value, no pun intended (Voon).

Open to the Public’s aim was to offer a similar associative experience with the political world while also allowing for the viewer to respond to the image and share said experience. The visual information on the front of the postcard was meant to offer associations on either side of the political spectrum, while the back of the postcard acted as a platform for sharing, anonymously or not, making the often solely informational experience of reading and viewing news media into a creative shared experience.



Guney Soykan, “Turkey” (2016) from the series Face of a Nation
Image courtesy of *Hyperallergic*

Looking Ahead

Open to the Public: The Political Zoo may be an ineffective way to gain concrete information on current public opinion, but, as we saw with Trump’s “poorly-designed” campaign hat, ineffective and good are not synonymous. The project offers a plethora of associative creations, visual to textual, textual to textual and textual to visual. Its creators are more varied than we know, as many of them chose to remain anonymous, and the sentiments shared were both direct and subtle, all thoughtful and creative. What began as a creative exploration quickly became a departure point for collaborative projects, incorporating poetry, collage, and politics. While these undertakings were not born out of immediate necessity, as some of the projects discussed in this essay, they have the power for both myself and my participants to acknowledge our position and attempt to extend our scope of authorship and viewership: to turn non-creative experiences into creative ones, integrating art and life seamlessly.

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