

# ENGLISH SUMMERY

Leszek BROGOWSKI

## QUADRATURE OF THE CIRCLE OF A UNIQUE POLE : PAWEŁ PETASZ (1951-2019)

In 1974, Paweł Petasz (1951-2019) moved to Elbląg - a small town in the North of Poland, known to artistic circles thanks to the El Gallery founded in 1961 by Jürgen Blum. Petasz led the institution as its director from 1974 till 1977 – and in that year he organized there a big exhibition of Mail Art: *In the Circle '77* (more than 130 participants). Existing conditions of the gallery's financial insecurity and of the authoritarian regime which limited one's liberty in expressing political views contributed to Petasz's discovering Mail Art of which he became one of the noted actors, known and collaborating with numerous artists internationally..., yet not in Poland where he was – and still is – virtually unknown. Various manners in which one was able to practice Mail Art allowed Petasz to outplay the constraints of the Polish context at that time: facilitated transport, relative freedom of correspondence, and above all the characteristics of print which might avert destruction or confiscation of copies. What is more, to Petasz being a mail artist essentially meant being a publisher: “the REAL participants of *Commonpress* [are] publishers, isn't that a scoop?!” he wrote. Certainly, the introduction of the photocopy technology was belated in Poland, but the artist printed many of his works in offset, unofficially of course, ‘under the counter’ (corruption was part of the Polish resourcefulness); and he was mainly known by his *rubberstamps*: rubber matrixes cut in erasers or linoleum plates. Thus, one cannot establish a hypothesis according to which publishing remained a domain reserved for the state and therefore few Polish artists at that time practiced small publications; if there were reasons for this disinterest, we must seek them elsewhere.

Petasz made contact with artists active within the Mail Art network in 1975, perhaps a little earlier, and soon he became one of its famous actors, or even a ‘star.’ This network stretched over the whole globe; artists from the Soviet Bloc countries and Latin America were particularly involved. Catalogues of Mail Art

exhibitions - true almanacs of the network - were sent to all participants. And so Petasz made himself many artist friends, such as Ulises Carrión, a Mexican artist who in 1975 established his own pioneer bookshop - Other Books and So - in Amsterdam, or with György Galántai who in 1979 co-founded with Júlia Klaniczay the Artpool Research Center in Budapest, and to whom, respectively, Petasz entrusted responsibility for the fifth and the fifty-first issue of his journal *Commonpress*. With time Petasz acquired an international reputation within artistic circles of Mail Art thanks to this journal, functioning as a rotating responsibility, which coordination he ultimately confided to a Canadian artist Gerald X. Jupitter-Larsen in 1983 when censorship and impaired functioning of the Polish post, since martial law was introduced there in 1981, made this task impossible for the journal's founder to pursue.

This periodical publication, like many other prints he authored, made him adopt the aesthetics of material and formal poverty associated with the practice of issuing low-cost artistic publications – *cheap artists' books, small press, petites publications, artists' prints, other books* etc. – formally modest publications, often self-published with the use of means at hand, either artistic or semi-industrial, such as offset or photocopying. Petasz was one of the very few Polish artists to have been using, since the beginning of the seventies, this radical medium - as mentioned in the introduction to this dossier - which partly explains the nearly total silence regarding his work on the part of the critics as well as artistic and heritage institutions in Poland, whereas succeeding generations of artists were swept away by the spirit of conquering the art market, after the political regime had changed in 1989.

Petasz was fully conscious of both artistic and political concerns of Mail Art, an experimental practice structured around the essential value of contacts made and maintained by artists of many different countries by means of postal exchange without any middlemen. Art is a way of life. "Artist is no a profession. This is the attitude of mind and depends on one's choice," he wrote in *Ten Theses 1*. Thus, the article analyses some elements of his conception of art and the type of exchanges which gave rise to his artwork: the economy close to that based on donations, the Arriegarde editorial structure, the practical experience in making artists' books, etc. A certain part of the analysis is also devoted to an event that took place in Budapest on the occasion of the publication of the no. 51 of *Commonpress*, entitled *Hungary Can Be Yours*, in 1984. This episode reveals actual limitations concerning the

utopian strategy of Mail Art bypassing constraints linked to the political context surrounding the artists who lived under authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. As György Galántai wrote, "the greatest loss suffered by Hungarian art was not the confiscation of a great amount of mail, but the destruction of common human relations caused by the active surveillance network - its systematic practice (and this was happening for decades) of disruption, disinformation and denunciation methods." As a matter of fact, the exhibition of the no. 51 *Commonpress* content at Artpool came as an opportunity for agents of the Hungarian secret police force to intervene; a report from this intervention is published here in English.

The paradoxes arising from the practice of publishing artists' books are put to analysis based on the example of three publications by Petasz: *Ten Theses 1* (1978), *Ten Theses 2* (1979) and *Transparent Self Portrait* (1979). The latter, a brochure of about twenty pages, includes a protocol, printed on the cover, which asks the reader to tear off three pages (the content of which consists of religious symbols), then to look at the book against the light to discover the portrait of the artist. Realization of the piece is based on the partial destruction of the book, which does not come without any problems or questioning the meaning of the gesture. This publication is a protocol, a metaphor, a book and an artistic piece - all at the same time – a clash of paradoxes typical for what is an artist's book, a cheap artist's book. *Ten Theses* concerning theory of art, of which there are two editions and several prints, develop some fundamental principles concerning Petasz's concept of art, mostly in reference to the practice of Mail Art in. He claims in particular that in an *ideal* situation art can do without common spectators, since experiencing art is more interesting and richer when one is a spectator and at the same time an artist. The ninth thesis from 1978 says it openly: "[The] ideal situation: everyone is [an] artist – everyone is [a] receiver." And it simply describes the reality of Mail Art. What Mail Art teaches us, according to Petasz, is that not only one understands art differently when one encounters it through the experience of its production; we also learn that producing art implies grasping the meaning of its production, which confronts us with the political question of alienation, as if saying: "reality can be yours."

On the seventh page of *Ten Theses 2* there is a table where Petasz brings together approximately twenty graphic symbols that one can find in his various prints: a

page of a book, Decalogue tables, a diagram presenting the hyperbolic acceleration of “progress” in art, an envelope, animal copulation, a spiral, a black square, etc. As books of theory *Then Theses* are also books of symbols to explore and decipher by an interpreting mind. The last thesis of the book confirms it – while specifying what might seem hidden, and therefore remained to be discovered, also to its author. Thus, in the Mail Art spirit of exchange, Petasz invited artists to contribute to completing his theses: “EVERYTHING YOU WILL SEND I WILL PRINT IN THE NEXT ISSUE OF THESES. TRY TO BE NICE AND LACONIC. SAVE MY CUTTING.” This wink highlights the laborious side of preparing text mockups engraved by hand. Self-publishing practiced by Petasz, complemented by the Mail Art network being his method of distribution, were to him the two fundamental and compatible principles of art: to provide himself with the means, however derisory they may be, in order to assert his skills in taking charge of his own destiny.

Early in 1988 Petasz questioned computers’ usefulness for artists. One of the questions remaining to be addressed in order to better understand the art of Paweł Petasz concerns the motives behind his research on the subject, as well as the answers he provided. The title of the article refers to that: the 1977 exhibition of Mail Art was entitled *In the Circle '77*, whereas the workshop devoted to art and computers, which Petasz organized in 1988, was called *Square '88*. Did he consider computers potential tools for self-publishing?

Translated from French by Katarzyna Podpora