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Chloe S. Kozal

Bowling Green State University, ckozal@bgsu.edu

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# “Communication from Afar”: The Role of Subversive Mail Art During the Argentine Dirty War, 1976-1983

Chloe S. Kozal

**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the role of mail art by Argentine mail artists Edgardo Antonio Vigo and Graciela Gutiérrez Marx in subverting Argentine fascism and censorship during the Argentine Dirty War from 1976 to 1983. La Guerra Sucia, or “the Dirty War,” was a seven-year period of right-wing military dictatorship in Argentina, following a coup on 24 March 1976, against the government of President Isabel Perón. The U.S. coordinated with the junta and the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, or Triple A, and the dictatorship “disappeared” and tortured thousands of so-called enemies of the state. Meanwhile, American and Argentine artists maintained fluid communications, empowering resistance to the regime. Vigo and Marx created the boldest work of Argentine mail art with wide distribution in the form of an “artistamp”, helping spread awareness of the disappearance of Vigo’s son, Abel Luis. By using the postal system as a means of communication with the outside world, Marx and Vigo informed other civilians about the disappeared peoples of Argentina and spread anti-nationalist and anti-government ideology. By taking a closer look at Vigo and Marx’s mail art correspondence with Ohio mail artist Harley Francis, this paper investigates mail art as an understudied aspect of lower-level international political resistance against the Argentine military regime.

*Keywords:* Argentine Dirty War, mail art, human rights violations, protest

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Chloe S. Kozal  
B.A. History, Art Minor  
Bowling Green State University  
e-mail: ckozal@bgsu.edu

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The Argentine Dirty War began with a coup d'état on 24 March 1976, usurping President Isabel Perón's leadership and installing the military dictatorship or junta, in which Argentine military leaders including General Commander of the Army Jorge Rafael Videla, Naval officer Emilio Massera, and Commander in Chief of the Air Force Orlando Ramón Agosti established the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional [National Reorganization Process, PRN] (Delli-Zotti 49). The junta also worked alongside the far-right Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (AAA, or Triple-A) to make dissidents "disappear". The main targets of AAA were Jewish Argentines, Peronists, communists, indigenous Patagonian Argentines, and those opposed to the military dictatorship. Human rights violations committed under the PRN and AAA included disappearing their victims, the creation of concentration camps, and the torturing, drugging, and throwing of the victims' bodies into the Atlantic led to the official deaths of 10,000 to 15,000 victims, yet most human rights organizations estimate that the official toll of Argentine victims is 30,000 (Finchelstein 1). Tactics such as disappearing dissidents and disposing their bodies into the Atlantic were also employed in 1973 in Chile. The Argentine Catholic Church and state were aligned during the Dirty War, as the PRN was supported by much of the Argentine Catholic Church, and many fascist members of the PRN, AAA, and their supporters were Catholic.

Argentine fascism began to play into politics with the elections of Juan Perón in 1946 and 1973, who called himself a "student" of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, sympathized with Nazis, and allowed former Nazis into Argentina. Jewish Argentine historian Federico Finchelstein argues that Argentine fascism influenced Argentine politics of Peronism, but fascism during the Dirty War included "extreme and exclusivist nationalism, racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism" (7). Finchelstein also argues that while the foundations for Argentine fascism presaged transnational fascism, Argentine fascism manifested itself both publicly and clandestinely,<sup>1</sup> often under the guise of Catholicism. Catholicism and fascism were leading ideologies of el Movimiento Nacionalista Tacuara [Tacuara Nationalist Movement, MNT], which was a neo-fascist organization that emerged after World War II and was a form of "Christianized fascism" supported by Catholic intellectuals and leaders (Finchelstein 97). Christianized fascism was also present in publications like *Cabildo*.

*Se trataba de apoyar a los sectores militares más extremistas, dispuestos a impulsar hasta sus últimas instancias la lucha antisubversiva; pero además, el antisemitismo conspirativo les proveía de argumentos para completar su bagaje ideológico, conformado para enfrentar el (para ellos) amplísimo espectro de la amenaza revolucionaria (Saborido 221).*

[Cabildo] sought to support extremist military sectors, willing to promote the anti-subversive fight to the end: but also, conspiratorial anti-Semitism provided

arguments to complete its ideological grounding, formed to face (for them) the vast spectrum of the revolutionary threat” (Saborido 221, author’s translation).

The Movimiento Nacionalista Tacuara evolved into AAA, which explicitly stated its motivations to an American citizen and temporary clandestine detainee, Mercedes Naviero Bender, by describing itself as a “Nazi-Fascist and anti-Semitic organization dedicated to combating subversion, leftist elements, American cooperation and capitalism, as well as the Jewish plot to control [the] world” (U.S. Embassy Argentina). As Jorge Saborido proves, Cabildo was a major source of promoting this faux purported Judeo-Marxist “plot” (213).<sup>2</sup>

Many opposed Argentine fascism during the Dirty War, but three groups were especially prominent. Primarily, they were Jewish themselves, such as activist Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer. Secondly, they were relatives of those who disappeared, like the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who protested frequently in the main square in Buenos Aires against the disappearance of their children and the kidnappings of their grandchildren. Third, Argentine mail artists protested el Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (PRN) and AAA, subverting state censorship by mailing information on the regime’s human rights violations and those who had disappeared. International mail art correspondence provides a new and more developed perspective to understanding the civilian experience and resistance against the Argentine regime during the Dirty War, through personal letters and artistamps. Therefore, notwithstanding the importance of the first two groups of Argentine activists, this paper will focus on the role of mail art as a form of protest.

This study will first address the origins of nationalism and imagined communities in the Argentine Dirty War, and diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the PRN. Second, this paper will discuss the origins of subversive mail art against censorship and repressive regimes. Third, it will discuss the role of Marx Vigo’s artistamp “Set Free Palomo” and Vigo’s “A Propósito De Las Utopías Realizables” in communicating human rights violations and subverting censorship. Finally, this study will then discuss the broader imagined mail art community and its opposition against governments.

## ***Imagined Communities: Nationalism and the Argentine Dirty War***

Finchelstein argued that “Anti-Semitism, anticommunism, and the idea of the internal enemy as a non-Argentine ‘Other’ were key elements in the ideology of the junta” (Finchelstein 123). A generation earlier, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* remarked “the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism” (Anderson 141). Anderson also says that “racism and anti-Semitism manifest themselves,

not across national boundaries, but within them. In other words, they justify not so many foreign wars as domestic repression and domination” (Anderson 150). This nationalism, as manifested by racism and anti-Semitism, informed two main causes of the Argentine Dirty War. Using Anderson’s discussion of how nationalists justify domestic repression and domination, it is apparent that el Proceso de Reorganización Nacional used this same nationalist ideology and “Othering” to justify the domestic repression and killing of Argentine civilians. The junta’s philosophy continued former Argentine nationalism beginning with Juan Perón against the Patagonians and anti-Semitism against Jewish Argentines and combined it with Cold War fear of communists.

Anderson’s concept of imagined communities also applies to mail artists in multiple ways. Mail artists used the world’s postal systems to form an international community, with some artists like Colectivo 3 from Mexico who claimed that mail art created *solidaridad sin fronteras* or solidarity without frontiers (Camnitzer 1). Pursuing this transnational solidarity enabled mail artists to transcend the borders of their own countries, where they were subjected to the rule of repressive regimes. Mail artists like the Mexican-Dutch Ulises Carrión also created their own fictional postal systems to subvert censorship and to facilitate international travel without surveillance. Another aspect of imagined communities relating to mail art pertains to the circulation of discussion, as shown in the cultivation of communal discourse when mail artists like Colectivo 3 or Carrión created collective mail art “feedback pieces” where artists submitted mail art artwork about politics and art based on prompts from the organizer, used later for a mass collaborative exhibition. This shared dialogue through “feedback pieces” created *solidaridad sin fronteras* amongst artists, cultivating the mail art community.

A subset of mail artists even created their own imaginary countries, most importantly Harley Francis II and E. F. Higgins III. Harley, a Midwestern American mail artist, remained in constant communication with mail artists like Edgardo Antonio Vigo and Graciela Gutiérrez Marx. He created his own fictional country of Terra Candella—a focus for much of his mail art. New York mail artist E. F. Higgins III took a more direct approach, pushing the boundaries of imagined communities further by creating his own postal code. Overwhelmed New York City postal workers eventually began to deliver mail art letters with his imaginary zip code, thus “proving” the reality of Higgins’ imagined country (Prior). Though mail artists’ approaches to imagined communities ranged from subversion to satire, they created a transnational community that challenged national and international borders, political leaders, and elitism in the art community.

## **The United States and its Role in the Argentine Dirty War: Ford, Carter, and Reagan**

American foreign intelligence anticipated the military overthrowing Isabel Perón. In early March 1976, the American ambassador to Argentina, Robert F. Hill, sent a telegram to Secretary of the Interior Rogers Morton stating that it was simply a matter of time before the Argentine military would eventually take over the government. As recorded in this telegram, Argentine Admiral Emilio Massera disclosed that the military was “fully aware of the need to avoid human rights problems should they have to take power. He said Argentine military intervention if it comes will not follow the lines of the Pinochet takeover in Chile” (Hill). Massera expressed that if the military took over that they would handle political enemies lawfully; and reported they “had no intention of resorting to vigilante-type activities, taking extra-legal reprisals or of taking action against uninvolved civilians” (Hill). Massera’s predictions in his conversation with Hill about the future military dictatorship became true in terms of how the coup was conducted. It is uncertain if Massera believed the information he relayed about human rights since his statements stressing the importance of avoiding human rights problems and actions against civilians proved to be extraordinarily incorrect. After the military junta achieved success in overthrowing the previous government, they immediately expanded their fight against terrorist and subversive enemies to include innocent civilians.

In contrast, the Carter administration after January 1977 used “quiet diplomacy”, focusing on spreading awareness of human rights violations in the Southern Cone. The BHRHA Assistant Secretary of State Patricia Derian and Carter’s Secretary of State Cyrus Vance “presented Argentine officials with a list of seventy-five hundred persons [disappeared] in November 1977 and urged the government to make all of its prisoners’ names public”, demanding that U.S. officials investigate human rights violations in Argentine and other Southern American prisons (Cohen 218). This list of those disappeared and other foreign policies starkly contrasted with the Ford administration, since the Carter administration publicly condemned human rights violations and halted all military aid. Carter’s administration upheld several core principles on human rights in conjunction with other American interventionist ideas, and strongly opposed Kissinger’s proposed “linkage” argument which “held that human rights promotion jeopardized other American foreign policy goals” (Cohen 216). Consequently, Carter’s intervention on behalf of human rights predictably strained U.S. diplomatic relations with the countries that he criticized.

In the PDB on 19 July 1978, CIA Director Stansfield Turner wrote that the military dictatorship became “increasingly irritated by U.S. criticism of Argentina’s human rights practices” and that American and Soviet diplomatic relations with the PRN could be strained due to “their conservative political bias... and their fears regarding potential subversion” (CIA 6). However, the Carter administration’s “quiet diplomacy” went silent after the 1980 Grain Embargo. This embargo by the Carter administration attempted to target the USSR, yet it ended up economically damaging the U.S. and created one of the most disastrous farm crises since the Great Depression. It also more closely united the PRN and the Soviet Union as trading partners and created a diplomatic crisis with both countries simultaneously (Gilbert 10). Attempting to repair diplomatic ties with Argentina, the Carter administration decreased its condemnations of the PRN’s human rights violations.

Many human rights advocates saw the election of Ronald Reagan as a step backwards in human rights legislation, relative to the Carter administration. Reagan made Kissinger his National Security Advisor, bringing back his approach and ideology to foreign policy and international relations. The Reagan administration’s diplomatic concerns concentrated again on Argentina and reverted to the policies that Kissinger promoted in the early 1970s. In 1978, Reagan called the Carter administration human rights officials like Derian “minions” who caused diplomatic strain with “Argentina, a nation with which [the U.S.] should be close friends” (Schmidli 183). Argentine military officials saw Reagan’s presidency as favorable to Argentina both diplomatically and militarily. The Argentine Minister of the Interior, General Albano Eduardo Harguindeguy, believed Reagan would “applaud the Argentine government tactics in the ‘dirty war’ and encourage such tactics in Argentina and elsewhere” (Schmidli 183). Reagan’s election reverted U.S.-PRN relations back to where they had been during the Ford administration. The administration also allowed Argentina to receive international loans again after the Carter administration had blocked economic aid to countries committing human rights violations (Schmidli 183). Furthermore, Reagan’s administration began the process to allow the PRN to receive U.S. military aid in March 1981, but was only allowed arms sales in December 1983, after the military dictatorship ended and President Raúl Alfonsín was elected to office in November (Reuters).

## **Mail Art and Dadaism**

New York artist Ray Johnson is often credited for inventing mail art and officially starting mail art as a movement in the late 1950s (Camnitzer 4). Despite the origins of mail art beginning two decades earlier, the peak of mail art as a political and revolutionary movement occurred from the 1970s until

the 1990s, and mail art still exists in the 21st century. While Johnson invented mail art in the U.S., Vigo established Argentine mail art by organizing the first mail art exhibition in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1975, with mail artist Horacio Zavala (Gutiérrez Marx 149). Mail art varies in style and media, though several unique movements within mail art occur such as artistamps, fictional mail art countries, and underground postal systems.

Mail art has often been misunderstood and ignored in the art historical community. For example, art historians Jan Baetens and Michael Kasper argue that mail art is “close in spirit” to early Surrealism because one of the first surrealist serials, *Correspondance*, was mailed by its three French writers, Paul Nougé, Camille Goemans, and Marcel Lecomte (Baetens 117). Conversely, despite the postal distribution and exchange of the serial, *Correspondance* is not the origin nor a representation of mail art because of the extreme differences in artistic discussion. Simply put, mail artworks are not serials. Some artwork acknowledged as mail art never utilized official governmental postal services. Ulises Carrión’s method of hand-delivery (Erratic Art-Mail International System, or EAMIS) exemplifies mail art subverting conventional postal systems. Baetens and Kasper’s misunderstanding of the origins, ideology, and methodology of mail art stems from their condescending view of mail art itself, believing it to be “inbred” (109). Their commonplace beliefs conform to elitist art historical opinions, as mail art consistently remains ignored in postmodern art historical conversations. Nonetheless, mail art provides valuable additions to the worlds of art history and history as a whole.

Mail art better parallels and finds origins in the avant-garde Dadaist movement of the 1910s–1920s, not Surrealism. While Dada, Surrealism, and mail art all played with the concepts of reality, Surrealists ignored the present-day issues that Dadaists and mail artists frequently called into question. Arguably, Dadaist Marcel Duchamp’s *LHOOQ* represents a more relevant predecessor to mail art than *Correspondance* because it challenged pre-existing ideas about art and played with the concept of translation and humor. Vigo later asked similar questions and played with humor in his mailed puzzle *Nubes*, or *Clouds*.

Counter-culturalism and rejecting elitism were major characteristics of mail art in the 1970s and 1980s. Mail artists accomplished this rejection of art elitism’s exclusivist pedestal, inexpensively allowing the recipient to own mail art. Latin American mail art theory of the 1970s often focuses on mail art counter-culturalism when it discusses its aestheticism and rejection of former elitist artistic canons.

Que el denominador común de toda esta creatividad estriba en que la obra se separa radicalmente de los cánones ortodoxos... no son producciones “bellas”. En muchos casos este mismo rechazo de lo “bello” por parte de los artistas les



ha permitido formular proposiciones—tanto en forma como en contenido—en contra de la dependencia cultural.

The common denominator of all this creativity comes from the word that separates radically from orthodox canon...they are not “beautiful” works. In many cases, this same rejection of the “beautiful” for some of the artists has allowed them to create propositions- so much in the form within contention- in contrast to cultural dependency (Ehrenberg, 1978, author’s translation).

This quote, originally written by Mexican mail art theorist Felipe Ehrenberg, reflects a similar theme to art critic and historian Robert Hughes, who argues that art must confront the sensitive citizen and focus on political topics because “the idea of “quality” in aesthetic experience is little more than a paternalist fiction designed to make life hard for black, female and homosexual artists” (7). This paternalist fiction applies to the gatekeeping that the art elite perpetuated. Mail artists abandoned these traditional elitist art values such as the aesthetic experience and gatekeeping, instead focusing on making art for the sake of creativity and collaboration. The source behind these artists’ search to reject the orthodox capitalist canon, elitism, and the ‘cultural dependency’ of the art world rejected war and nationalism as well. Dada and mail art’s use of alternative counter-cultural political art to oppose marginalization of all kinds allowed artists to unify across international borders under a common artistic goal.

Mail art allowed the artist to communicate with like-minded artists and discuss the little joys in life, experiment in an art form that was independent of being sold, and collaborate with friends internationally. In a letter to Harley on 4 April 1988, Vigo said:

I devote my time and energy to hand made creativity, not as a medical therapy only but this makes me feel free... All of us are close to their mail friends by telling them habits of their own country, the family, anecdotes, how is going to new work and so on, all this lets the far friend to be warmly connected (Vigo a).

## The Postal Service as a Surveillance State

Mail art censorship was common under repressive regimes during the late 20th century. According to Uruguayan artist and critic Luis Camnitzer, mail art epitomized subverting censorship and governmental surveillance in Latin America:

In countries under dictatorship, mail art was useful because of the comparative anonymity it provided to its authors and because of the inexpensive nature of the works’ materials. It was a means to circulate political expression while eluding censorship. Furthermore, the medium was in keeping with the political conceptualism taking hold in Latin America at the time, and it became a meeting place for visual artists and poets engaged in activities that opposed

military repression (5).

Mail artists like Vigo and Marx often used easily circulatable media, such as printmaking with relief woodblocks and lithography. This inexpensive, rapid-paced art form consistently generated political discussion, spreading ideology and news of the disappeared. Some mail artists' ideology and artwork centered on subverting the surveillance state of postal systems. Carrión's EAMIS project united international mail artists and aided in subverting their own postal services. EAMIS functioned when mail artists traveled abroad, where they could deliver mail and packages in person without the censorship of governmental post offices (Fuenmayor 6).

Unconventional methods of transmission like Carrión's delivered art to the recipient, and the ideology behind their art still makes their works a type of mail art. Mail artists traveling as part of EAMIS added a different significance to their international travel: one of political protest and opposition to state postal services. Other mail artists viewed mail art as means not only to subvert their governments but also common ideological viewpoints, and to offer an alternative to capitalist, communist, and socialist state art (Baroni 160). Carrión viewed the traditional postal system as an oppressive feature of state surveillance, akin to an Orwellian Big Brother, or as he described, a "Big Monster". He noted that destabilization of the postal service was "knocking at the Monster's door" (Varela 4). His ideas influenced Marx and possibly Vigo, who also viewed mail art as a vehicle to turn the artist into an activist and subvert the Argentine dictatorship to promote his own socialist and anarchist views (Gutiérrez Marx 149). Vigo once said:

Mail art should not only transgress the regulations of the post office, it should also create counter-information, transforming its practitioner into an active combative participant who denounces the aberrations of national and international systems that enslave men (Museum label).

## **"Set Free Palomo"**

Vigo's combative approach to mail art arose from the fight for his son. Abel Luis "Palomo" Vigo, one of the first victims of AAA, disappeared on July 30, 1976, barely four months after the junta took power. The loss of his son spurred Vigo to action, and the topic of his son's disappearance recurred through his art during and after La Guerra Sucia. Since palomo means dove, Vigo's artwork about revolution, freedom, and the disappeared featured doves. One of the earliest discussions of his son's disappearance came through collaborative work between Vigo and fellow mail artist Marx. Vigo and Marx often worked together as mail artists and entered an "aesthetic marriage" in the first year of La Guerra Sucia in 1976 that lasted until 1983 (Gutiérrez Marx 150). A marriage of artistic

solidarity, Marx Vigo's artwork presented a unified front against the military dictatorship and "represented [their] chance to continue being active and to reconstruct [themselves] metaphorically amid a horrific political landscape" (Gutiérrez Marx 150).

G.E. Marx Vigo collaboratively created three separate artistamps about Palomo. Artistamps mimic the style of official national and international stamps but were often meant to be a symbolic artist's signature. Artistamps frequently focused on political topics or represented stamps from an imaginary mail art country, like Harley, who frequently made his own artistamps about his own imagined country of Terra Candella (Prior). The first and most widely circulated Marx Vigo artistamp had a simplified portrait of Palomo with the date of his disappearance (see Fig.1). Some art historians only credit Vigo as the creator of these artistamps, but Marx also deserves credit for creating this iconic artistamp that activated sympathy for "living disappeared" Argentines and their disappeared loved ones. G.E. Marx Vigo collaboratively created three separate artistamps about Palomo. Artistamps mimic the style of official national and international stamps but were often meant to be a symbolic artist's signature. Artistamps frequently focused on political topics or represented stamps from an imaginary mail art country, like Harley, who frequently made his own artistamps about his own imagined country of Terra Candella (Prior). The first and most widely circulated Marx Vigo artistamp had a simplified portrait of Palomo with the date of his disappearance (see Fig.1). Some art historians only credit Vigo as the creator of these artistamps, but Marx also deserves credit for creating this iconic artistamp that activated sympathy for "living disappeared" Argentines and their disappeared loved ones.

**Image 1: Set Free Palomo  
Artistamp by G.E. Marx Vigo.**

Image courtesy of the Oberlin College Mail Art Collection, Clarence Ward Art Library, Oberlin College. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International License.



Figure 1 illustrates a book of four of the original Palomo artistamps sent from Vigo to Harley. Created with woodcut relief blocks and letterpress, when all four artistamps assemble into a square formation, the white lines that go diagonally underneath Palomo's face connect to form the Marx Vigo logo and signature. The artistamps purposefully communicate liberty and freedom with a simple red, white, blue, and black color composition. Additionally, an arch in black with horizontal lines frames Palomo's face. While the symbolism of the arch remains unknown, this same arch reoccurs in other Vigo works that focus on the topic of human rights, the disappeared, and freedom. Finally, below the two black horizontal lines, Palomo's date of disappearance appears in a big, bold red typeface. In face of censorship, this simple yet powerful artistamp was Marx Vigo's most dangerous mail artwork because it publicized and widely circulated the fact that Palomo and other Argentines were disappeared. Marx Vigo's artistamp did not merely publicize these disappearances; its message evolved into a rallying cry for justice amongst mail artists as the Dirty War continued. In 1981, Vigo demanded direct confrontation against the military dictatorship in Umbrella, a mail art international publication, as he and Italian mail artist Bruno Talpo urgently asked mail artists to "send Special Delivery Letters, Telegrams of Appeal directly to Presidente Eduardo Viola, Casa Rosada, Buenos Aires, Argentina for the liberation of Palomo-Abel Luis Vigo and to denounce the situation of arresting people and making them disappear" (Hoffberg 125). The notion of these special delivery letters to Viola himself as well as the Marx Vigo "Set Free Palomo" artistamp were extraordinarily bold in Argentina's political climate during the military dictatorship.

Argentine mail artists like Vigo and Marx recognized that art traveling out of Argentina often faced censorship and destruction. Vigo discussed censorship during the Dirty War and the Argentine postal service in a letter of 9 November 1981, to Niels Lomholt of Copenhagen, Denmark, saying: Argentine mail artists like Vigo and Marx recognized that art traveling out of Argentina often faced censorship and destruction. Vigo discussed censorship during the Dirty War and the Argentine postal service in his letter to Niels Lomholt saying:

In arriving to the destin[ation] they have suffered all kinds of rough treatment, post officials do not hold the envelopes gently. Sometimes packages get lost, others are open[ed] or destroy[ed] by accident or on purpose. And do not forget censure. Poor envelope (Vigo b).

All mail art leaving and entering Argentina received censorship from the PRN and the postal service. According to mail art historian Vanessa Davidson: All mail art leaving and entering Argentina received censorship from the PRN and the postal service. According to mail art historian Vanessa Davidson:

American mail artist Anna Banana “alerted Gutiérrez Marx and Vigo about their letters being censored in a letter sent on November 8th, 1979. Writing on a photocopy of an envelope sent by the two artists, she highlighted portions that had been excised before delivery. She writes: “I think you should be careful with your artistamps...It seems that Argentine authorities have little sense of humor about such activities... Maybe you should keep your stamps inside the envelope? (Davidson 2) American mail artist Anna Banana “alerted Gutiérrez Marx and Vigo about their letters being censored in a letter sent on November 8th, 1979. Writing on a photocopy of an envelope sent by the two artists, she highlighted portions that had been excised before delivery. She writes: “I think you should be careful with your artistamps...It seems that Argentine authorities have little sense of humor about such activities... Maybe you should keep your stamps inside the envelope? (Davidson 2)

Argentine authorities may well have destroyed some of the Palomo artistamps since Marx Vigo were publicly spreading information on the disappeared and human rights violations. Two other artistamps explicitly discussed the actions of AAA, with one artistamp simply saying “Set Free Palomo”, and another that featured the same phrase with prison bars and handcuffs. Despite their blunt message, these two Palomo-related artistamps were not as widely circulated as the original “Set Free Palomo” artistamp.

### ***“A Propósito De Las Utopías Realizables”***

Political symbolism dominated Argentine mail art artwork, often discussing the disappeared or political beliefs; one such symbol, bearing a P above V, which signifies “Perón Vive” or Perón Lives (Cara). This Peronist sentiment was commonly found in Argentine political street art in the 1950s and resurfaced among Peronists and left-wing sympathizers like Vigo (Ryan 108). Peronist sentiments like “Perón Vive” and the mention of Juan Perón were outlawed by the de facto Argentine military president Pedro Aramburu in the late 1950s (Ryan 108). Vigo occasionally used the Perón Vive symbol, most notably in a polyptych work called “A Propósito De Las Utopías Realizables”, or “On Achievable Utopias”, sent to Harley about Palomo in the 1980s (see Fig. 2). The resurfacing of this popular phrase recalls the censorship of Argentine artists and civilians during Vigo’s early adulthood, and the repression that they experienced again under the rule of the PRN. The true date when this artwork was created and sent to Harley remains unknown. It is presumed that this artwork was made in 1986, based on the text featured in the work and the fact that Vigo revisited the subject of his son’s disappearance ten years later.

Regardless of its official period of origin, this work provides a unique look into much of Vigo's perspective on the junta and his son's disappearance.

**Fig. 2. “A Propósito De Las Utopías Realizables” by Edgardo Antonio Vigo.**



Image courtesy of the Oberlin College Mail Art Collection, Clarence Ward Art Library, Oberlin College. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

This polyptych work is a mixed media work with four panels that are rubbed with red and green chalk pastels. Red and green together provide a dramatic contrast since they are complementary. On top of the chalk pastel rubbings, Vigo printed with relief blocks sets of soldiers marching in a row on the top of the panels. Hand printed onto the chalk pastel background; these relief block soldiers were uniformly stamped onto the paper. On the first and last panel, two large hands reach over the panels towards the viewer, perhaps to seize them and make the viewer disappear as well. These adjustable hands add a 3D aspect to the work and further expand on this idea of disappearance. The original Palomo artistamp and the Perón Vive symbol intentionally appear below the stamped soldiers. Featured among these two symbols resides the unknown symbol of the arches that relate to human rights, as well as the popular phrase and name of the CONADEP report on the disappeared after the war: Nunca Más, which means

Never Again. “A Propósito De Las Utopías Realizables” also features a block of text typed by Vigo. This block of text mentions Achieved Utopias and the fact that Palomo is alive. In this text, Vigo says that:

*Pero el acto creativo propone una realidad-abandonada basada en ir más allá del hecho y en base a esta interpretación un nuevo hecho pasa por la realidad abandonada.*

But the creative act proposes an abandoned reality based on going beyond the facts and on the basis of this interpretation a new fact passes through the abandoned reality. (Vigo c, author’s translation).

While Vigo chose to visually depict A.A.A. and reference the disappeared, this block of text discusses Vigo’s utopia in which his son lives. Even though he has disappeared, Palomo lives on in his artwork where Vigo used mail art as a therapeutic tool to hope, surpass fact, and abandon reality. While Vigo chose to visually depict A.A.A. and reference the disappeared, this block of text discusses Vigo’s utopia in which his son lives. Even though he has disappeared, Palomo lives on in his artwork where Vigo used mail art as a therapeutic tool to hope, surpass fact, and abandon reality.

## **Poema Colectivo Revolución and The Reagan Administration**

The mail art community in the 1970s-80s was a sizable collective, with some mail artists like Harley having almost three thousand contacts in the mail art community (Francis 1). Mail artists such as Harley and Carrión imagined a subversive international mail art community, one that frequently discussed political opinions and revolutionary thoughts relating to politics, identity, and art. The mail art community circulated conversations frequently through mass calls for responses to a topic, or during artistamp exchanges. In 1981, civilian mail artists quickly displayed distaste and unease toward the Reagan administration. A display of this distaste appears in an international mail exchange in 1981 called Poema Colectivo Revolución or Collective Poem Revolution coordinated by the mail artist group Colectivo 3, or the artists Aarón Flores, Araceli Zúñiga, Blanca Noval Vilar, and César Espinosa Vera. In this collective poem, some 250 artists from 32 countries discussed the idea of revolution. Vigo, Marx, and Harley all participated in this collective poem. Despite the political issues in their own respective countries, many mail artists focused on Latin American revolutions, American intervention in Central and South America, and the Reagan administration.

One discussion of the U.S. revolved around many artists' distaste of Reagan's policies. Both the information sheet sent out to mail artists with the prompt for the collective poem and one collective poem submitted by mail artist Mata include a quote by Popular from 1981 that says "¿Cómo se llama el cerdo? El cerdo se llama Reagan", or "What's the pig's name? The pig's name is Reagan". In another work in *Poema Colectivo Revolución* by Italian artist Nicola Frangione, a collage uses found images of a revolver and places a photo of Kissinger between two images of Adolf Hitler, critiquing Kissinger's role in El Salvador. Both works by Mata and Frangione clearly show their opinions of Kissinger, the Reagan administration, and American interventionist policies in 1981.

## Conclusion

Both G. E. Marx Vigo's "Set Free Palomo" artiststamp and Vigo's "A Propósito De Las Utopías Realizables" give a voice to those who were disappeared by AAA. By sharing the ground-level reality of the Argentine Dirty War, Marx Vigo and other artists publicized what governments attempted to censor. While mail art as a means of international protest is routinely ignored, mail artists were able to use the art movement as a means of spreading political ideology and protest against human rights violations under a repressive regime. International communication about these violations "further activated the mail art network, causing a strong public pressure and even the review of lawsuits against artists persecuted by the dictatorships," and the story of Vigo's disappeared son Palomo circulated throughout the mail art community (Freire 52). Much of this awareness that mail artists raised was through international artiststamp exchanges that Harley or Vigo conducted, where mail artists would frequently send a hundred or more artiststamps to the exchange coordinator. After this, the artiststamps would then be widely distributed to the participants in the transnational mail art community.

This mail art community is an imagined community, but nonetheless impactful. Anderson's concept of imagined communities can be extended to the mail art community. Anderson theorizes that communities are imagined when they involve connections to people who have never communicated face-to-face but are united by "indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship" (6). Beyond mail artists forming an international community, subverting censorship, and challenging the concept of countries themselves, artists in the imagined mail art community unified under kinship to spread awareness about political violence and suppression.



## Notes

1. See more of Finkelstein's research into T.N.M. and Argentine-Catholic fascism in *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War: Fascism, Populism, and Dictatorship in Twentieth Century Argentina*, for a closer look at public and clandestine fascism and anti-Semitism during the Dirty War, see Emmanuel Kahan's *Memories that Lie a Little: New Approaches to the Research into the Jewish Experience During the Last Military Dictatorship in Argentina*, which can be found in Adriana Brodsky and Raanan Rein's compilation of *Jewish Argentine Studies* essays in *The New Jewish Argentina: Facets of Jewish Experiences in the Southern Cone*.

2. For further insight into Cabildo and its perpetuation of the faux Judeo-Marxist plot and other manifestations of Catholic fascist anti-Semitism in Argentina, see Jorge Saborido, *El antisemitismo en la Historia argentina reciente: la revista Cabildo y la conspiración judía*, particularly his fourth section, *La conspiración Judeo-Marxista en la Argentina durante la década de 1970*. Gelbard, Timerman y Gravier.

## Glossary of Abbreviations

**AAA:** Alianza Anticomunista Argentina [Argentine Anticommunist Alliance] or Triple-A

**BHRHA:** Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs

**CIA:** Central Intelligence Agency

**CONADEP:** Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas [National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons] 1984.

**DOS:** The United States Department of State

**EAMIS:** Erratic Art Mail International System

**MNT:** Movimiento Nacionalista Tacuara [Tacuara Nationalist Movement]

**PRN:** Proceso de Reorganización Nacional [National Reorganization Process]

**PDB:** President's Daily Brief

**USSR:** Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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