Introverse Arrangements: Rediscovering the Typewritings of Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt

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Introverse Arrangements: Rediscovering the Typewritings of Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt

A Thesis Presented
by
SAVANNAH CHAMPION

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

September 2022

German and Scandinavian Studies
Languages, Literatures and Cultures
INTROVERSE ARRANGEMENTS: REDISCOVERING THE TYPEWRITINGS
OF RUTH WOLF-REHFELDT

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis came together gradually and with generous support from a number of friends and mentors at every stage, and I am enormously grateful to all those that helped.

Professor Karen Kurczynski supervised the independent study on East German art that first brought Mail Art to my attention. Our discussions, held at a distance during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, inspired me to investigate further. Lutz Wohlrab, a longtime friend of Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, provided access to materials that enabled me to pursue this project despite travel restrictions. Seth Howes of the University of Missouri and Isotta Poggi of the Getty Research Institute both generously shared their time and expertise in researching visual cultures of the GDR with a young scholar they did not know.

My graduate program’s close relationship with the DEFA Film Library has been essential to my research, and the team there was enormously influential in shaping my approach to GDR studies. Mariana Ivanova, Skyler Arndt-Briggs, and Hiltrud Schulz shared indispensable knowledge and advice. I owe thanks to every friend that listened to me talk through ideas as I wrote, but I am particularly grateful to Sydney and Mish, who gamely read through a full draft and offered intelligent feedback. The brilliant cohort of graduate students in my program was another key support network as I worked.

My committee members, Mariana Ivanova and Sara Jackson, guided my graduate studies with more grace and generosity than I ever dreamed possible, both individually and as a team. Our meetings were key in bringing this project to life. Mariana’s seemingly endless patience and leadership as my advisor was a ballast, and Sara’s dedication and creativity spurred me forward. I am honored that they believed in my work and in this project, and I cannot thank them enough.
ABSTRACT

INTROVERSE ARRANGEMENTS: REDISCOVERING THE TYPEWRITINGS OF
RUTH WOLF-REHFELDT

SEPTEMBER 2022

SAVANNAH CHAMPION, B.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
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Directed by: Professor Mariana Ivanova

This thesis aims to understand Wolf-Rehfeldt’s place in the unofficial art world of the GDR by examining her work in light of her status as a clerical worker with social rather than professional ties to the art world. She stands out within the East German Mail Art context, not just for her inventive use of a typewriter to create abstract figurations, but for the way she used it to interject considerations of gender and power into a network of artists overwhelmingly dominated by men with her open-ended Typewritings.”

Through historical research and close readings of her work, this study uncovers how Wolf-Rehfeldt's Typewritings indicate that Mail Art was a space to share stylistic experiments, and her sophisticated treatment of feminist and abstract themes. My research reveals that the record of who was involved in the GDR’s experimental art scene is incomplete, with still more to be found. A deeper look at Wolf-Rehfeldt’s background confirmed that she was more enmeshed in Mail Art than the historical record indicates, suggesting the need for further study on the influence and involvement of women in the movement.
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CHAPTER 1.

THE WOMAN AND THE TYPEWRITER

1.1. INTRODUCTION

In a 2016 profile for the German art magazine *Weltkunst*, the artist Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt divided her experience of the world into two distinct “Seinserfahrungen,” or experiences of being: the inner and the outer. The outer experience is defined by communication and noise; the inner encapsulates silence and concentration. Seeing as Wolf-Rehfeldt is best known for the art she sent across the world as part of the highly communicative Mail Art movement, it may come as a surprise that she indicated a preference for the inner experience. When considered in light of her cerebral and exacting art, not to mention her relative obscurity until recent years, this focus on the internal takes on a new significance. The profile in question was published 30 years after Wolf-Rehfeldt ceased to distribute her art, and it belongs to a wave of belated accolades for the artist in recent years. That this artist is now receiving widespread recognition only after the fact is a riddle that cannot be easily puzzled out by pointing to her proclivity for introspection without attention to her social environment.

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt (born 1932 in Wurzen, Germany) and her husband, Robert Rehfeldt (born 1931 in Stargard, Germany, today Poland), were actively involved in the art scene of East Berlin’s Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood from the late 1950s until Rehfeldt’s death in 1993, and they frequently hosted informal artists’ gatherings at their apartment and in their shared studio space. Their basement studio near the centrally located Alexanderplatz became a flashpoint for the neighborhood’s growing reputation as a home to the artistic underground. Prenzlauer Berg was known as a cultural hub for East German
artists seeking an alternative to the state-sponsored art world of the GDR (the German Democratic Republic, the East German state that existed 1945-1990) due to the social network of artists strengthened by informal events like those hosted by the Rehfeldts. Wolf-Rehfeldt and her husband were socially connected to the filmmakers, poets, musicians, performance artists, and other experimental artists of Prenzlauer Berg, but these neighbors were not their primary collaborators. Their collaborative networks were instead formed through the international Mail Art movement, which nurtured artistic networks that extended beyond East Berlin by mailing art across the GDR and abroad.

While working as an industrial clerk at the state-owned Academy of Arts in East Berlin in the 1960s, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt began to use her typewriter to create graphic artworks and visual poems, which she referred to with the English coinage “Typewritings.” Before interrupting her studies to become a clerk, Wolf-Rehfeldt studied philosophy at the Humboldt University in East Berlin, where she developed an interest in linguistics and semiotics. This fascination shines through in her Typewritings, which play with tensions between linguistic and visual meaning. At first a private artistic experiment, the Typewritings were distributed to an international public through Wolf-Rehfeldt’s participation in the Mail Art movement of the 1970s and 1980s in the former GDR.

Though she was recognized by other prominent Mail Artists from Poland to Brazil, Wolf-Rehfeldt continued to work as a clerk, and she hardly registered as a presence in the official, state-sanctioned art world of the GDR. Wolf-Rehfeldt was an artistic autodidact whose Typewritings demonstrate the artistic innovation possible for a non-professionally trained artist in the GDR, but discussion of her work has too often been relegated to footnotes in studies of her husband’s work, the graphic artist Robert Rehfeldt. This thesis
will uncover Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt’s contributions to domestic and international Mail Art projects and her significance in the unofficial art scene of East Berlin in the late GDR. In her Typewritings, Wolf-Rehfeldt dismantles the boundary between aesthetics and poetics, making way for a liberated artistic approach that both articulates the democratizing impulse of the Mail Art movement and marks her work as distinctive amongst her peers. It is therefore worth exploring the social complexes that informed her output.

The international Mail Art movement was an active network of collaboration wherein artists would send their work across borders, often inviting recipients to add to a piece and send it along to another artist. Mail Art first emerged as early as the late 1950s in Western Europe and the US, when notable names of the international avant-garde like Robert Filliou, Ray Johnson, and Joseph Beuys began exchanging art with each other in the mail. These correspondents only expanded their reach as time went on, and Mail Art soon arose as a possibility for international interaction and experimentation in the restrictive artistic circumstances of the Eastern Bloc, as it allowed artists to collaborate outside their state-sanctioned art worlds. Wolf-Rehfeldt came to Mail Art as a form and movement through her husband Robert, who himself became interested in the movement as an opportunity for contact with other artists in the early 1970s, and rough their strong ties with the experimental art circles of East Berlin, the pair helped spread awareness of Mail Art throughout the GDR.

Though East German artists could not easily travel to the West, Mail Art enabled them to exchange art and ideas with artists abroad. By the 1970s and 1980s, Mail Art had become an established avenue of expression for artists on the margins of the East German art world. The projects involved ranged from distributing copies of artworks like sketches
or Wolf-Rehfeldt’s Typewritings to instigating a collage by mailing an unfinished work with instructions to add something and pass it to the next recipient. To be involved, an artist needed access to the supplies required to create, duplicate, and send their art. This presented a significant challenge for many East German and Eastern European artists who did not have access to many resources to support their work unless they were employed as artists by the socialist state. Members of the East German Union of Fine Artists (Verband Bildende Künstler), or UFA, were allotted such permissions, but Wolf-Rehfeldt did not gain UFA membership until 1978. Even then, she was never employed by the state as an artist, positioning her as more of an outsider to the official art world of the GDR than other Mail Artists such as her husband.

Until recently, what little has been written about the GDR’s Mail Art scene has focused on Robert Rehfeldt’s role in initiating collaborative projects, maintaining contact lists, and coordinating exhibits, mostly outside the GDR.¹ Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt was an active participant in the Mail Art network as well. She first sent her Typewritings to other Mail Artists within and outside the GDR in the 1970s and continued until the end of the GDR and German unification in 1990. Her visual poems and Typewritings are distinctive

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in style, and she was a popular correspondent among other Mail Artists, even participating in exhibitions in Krakow and Wrocław in Poland. Though she did not work as an artist professionally, Wolf-Rehfeldt’s signature Typewritings were popular within the established network of Mail Art correspondents in the 1970s and 1980s. A non-exhaustive list of her Mail Art contacts included artists in Eastern and Central European communist countries like Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine, extending to other continents, with friends in the USA, Brazil, and Chile, and at least one contact in Japan. This level of success was remarkable for an artist in the GDR with no state-endorsed artistic training, but regardless of this Wolf-Rehfeldt has been overlooked or marginalized in scholarship on East German art until very recently. Exhibitions on Mail Art in the early twenty-first century in Germany and internationally brought newfound attention to Wolf-Rehfeldt’s previously overlooked work.

A retrospective of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s Mail Art contributions organized at the Weserburg Study Center in Bremen on the occasion of her 80th birthday in 2012 was the first solo exhibition of her work since the dissolution of the GDR, and it prompted a wave of rediscovery. Wolf-Rehfeldt’s distinctive use of the typewriter as a creative tool and her inventive methods have proven alluring to the modern art world: Jennifer Chert and Florian Lüdde of the ChertLüdde Gallery in Berlin purchased her catalog and have exhibited it numerous times since. This rekindled interest in the last decade has therefore brought her art to the attention of a broader public more than three decades after her most prolific period of production ended. The sheer craft and dedication involved in the planning and execution of these intricate designs which astounded a new generation of admirers is evident in the three exemplary Typewritings included below.
Figure 1. *Architecture*, 1978, Typewriting by Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt

Figure 2. *Try and Error*, 1975, Typewriting by Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt
1.2. INFORMAL NETWORKS AND RUTH WOLF-REHFELDT

By the time Wolf-Rehfeldt began experimenting in artistic production, the official organization of the GDR art world was an entrenched structure with a reach that extended even to artists peripheral to it. There existed a system of education and employment that meant that visibility to the public in the GDR was achievable almost exclusively to artists who received artistic training at one of the state-sponsored art academies. This education afforded the artists who undertook it opportunities and a level of artistic autonomy otherwise inaccessible to those that did not. My discussion of the “official” art world of the GDR is merely a delimitation of the conditions under which art was produced and exhibited, namely, within the state-run artistic education, opportunities, and resources. Artists who worked within these institutions benefited from the financial support of the state as well as the ability to exhibit their work for a broad public. Membership in the East
German UFA, which was difficult to obtain without a degree in art from an approved university, was a prerequisite for accessing art supplies, selling art, and taking part in the mainstream exhibitions organized through the state. I refer to the cultural life that existed through these channels as the “official” art world simply to acknowledge the state’s involvement in the avenues through which an artist conventionally makes a living. Working as an artist in the GDR necessitated participation in the official art world, and it is important to note that artists went through these steps regardless of any alignment with the ruling party’s ideology or lack thereof.

When I stress Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt’s importance in the unofficial art world, I am describing her connection to artistic activities occurring on the margins or even outside of the officially constructed public. The “unofficial” art world of the GDR was an alternate sphere, made up of the social networks built by artists departing from the mainstream. Reasons for this departure varied, and just as participation in the official art world did not indicate political allegiance to the state, the choice to work in the unofficial sphere was made for a variety of reasons, be they political, logistical, or personal. Artists were able to work on their own creative and organizational terms outside the state’s institutional apparatus by creating their own system of producing and sharing art, usually in private spaces away from state-sponsored venues. These networks allowed artists to explore experimental artistic expression independently, connecting with like-minded artists by organizing clandestine exhibits in private apartments or collaborating on projects like Mail Artists often did.

Most of the artists engaged in this informal, alternative art world were simultaneously UFA members, and they alternated between their state-approved practices
and their more individualized artistic experiments. Many of the social networks significant for the experimental art of the GDR originated through official channels. The EIGEN+ART gallery, one of the most important independent art spaces of the 1980s, was founded by artists who first met one another as students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Leipzig, and the radical Auto-Perforation performance art collective met as art students in Dresden. The contacts formed in the official art world became the basis for an experimental underground, and the financial support that the state provided to officially employed artists to sustain independent activities as well.

For many if not most participants, the unofficial art world was contextualized by a university education at one of the GDR’s state-sponsored art institutes and steady work through official channels. As a self-taught artist with a clerical job, Wolf-Rehfeldt was not party to the social and educational bonds of the art academy. Due to her unconventional educational and professional background, her opportunities in the official world were limited. She instead gravitated toward the unofficial world and became enmeshed in the unofficial scene to pursue her artistic aims. Regular social gatherings for the artists of Prenzlauer Berg took place in her home, and through her Mail Art she exchanged artistic outlooks and ideas with artists from several continents. Still, it is noteworthy that she has been marginalized in art history regardless of her prolific output and extensive contact with others in the unofficial art world. Though she became a UFA member eventually, her connection to the official art world was arguably more tenuous than that of a university-

2. The name “EIGEN+ART” is itself a declaration of artistic independence: translated, it means “OWN + WAY,” playing on the common idiom “to go one’s own way.” That “Art” carries a different but relevant meaning in English is a welcome coincidence.
trained artist. It is this peculiarity, along with her positioning as a working woman in the experimental art scene, that I am interested in investigating.

This thesis aims to understand Wolf-Rehfeldt’s place in the unofficial art world of the GDR by examining her work in light of her status as a clerical worker with social rather than professional ties to the art world. She stands out within the East German Mail Art context, not just for her inventive use of a typewriter to create abstract figurations, but for the way she used it to interject considerations of gender and power into a network of artists overwhelmingly dominated by men with her open-ended Typewritings. I will connect my own close readings of her work to a survey of the art world Wolf-Rehfeldt inhabited, namely that of experimental artists in Prenzlauer Berg, later extending to friendships with Mail Artists farther afield, such as the avant-garde Clara Mosch group in Karl-Marx-Stadt (today Chemnitz) and others abroad. In viewing these networks, I will pay particular attention to the disparity in how official, state-employed artists and amateur, untrained artists such as Rehfeldt are remembered. I use this contrast to also discuss gender: as a working woman lacking formal artistic training, the official art world in the GDR remained closed to her, but Wolf-Rehfeldt was able to find an alternative arena for her work in the Mail Art scene. Studying a woman artist’s trajectory also exposes the pitfalls of the GDR state's proud proclamations of gender equality. Case studies like my study of Ruth Wolf-

3. Clara Mosch was an artists’ union which operated an independent gallery from 1977 until 1982. The group was built on the friendships of a group of artists who had met as art students in Leipzig and relocated to Karl-Marx-Stadt. In addition to running the gallery, Clara Mosch was known for the collaborative and social activities they organized with like-minded artists. See Kaiser, Paul. “Symbolic Revolts in the ‘Workers’ and Peasants’ State’: Countercultural Art Programs in the GDR and the Return of Modern Art”. The Art of Two Germanys, ed. Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann, pp. 170-185. Harry N. Abrams: 2009.
Rehfeldt expose the reality of under-appreciated women artists who often had to fight for a fraction of the recognition given to male partners and colleagues. I will highlight the biases that lead to women artists being marginalized in scholarship despite their active involvement in avant-garde movements like the Mail Art movement.

What follows is an exploration of Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt’s artistic output over the 1970s and 1980s through close readings of her work. I have selected an assortment of Typewritings created over this period, and I will use each work to illustrate the complexes that form Wolf-Rehfeldt’s place in the GDR art world and contribute to her significance. This assemblage showcases works spanning the two most active decades of her artistic practice, the 1970s and the 1980s, allowing me to trace how these complexes are reflected across her oeuvre.

First, I will look at her education and training, comparing her challenges and experiences as a Mail Artist with those of professionally trained artists in the same circles. Many of the social and intellectual connections in the experimental art world of the GDR were formed among art students and through the academy, and while Ruth worked for the Academy of Arts Berlin (Akademie der Künste) as a typist, she was not trained there. This leads me to the second complex explored in this thesis, that of artistic networks. Much of the experimental art world was built on personal relationships. I consider what it means to be an “unofficial” artist, and how Wolf-Rehfeldt would fit in the constellation of artists’ affiliations both within the GDR and internationally, through the Mail Art network. Central to my argument is the consideration of the social role of women. This role is my final complex, one which is deeply entangled in the two that precede it. I will discuss the mutual implications of her status as a woman and an autodidact and how these both informed her
work, with her use of the Erika typewriter, and informed the way her work was received, or, more often, sidelined. I will conclude my study with a consideration of the reception of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s work in recent years. Why did an artist like Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt not receive more attention while she was active? And what drives interest in her work now?
CHAPTER 2.
LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

My analysis of Wolf-Rehfeldt contributes new insights that establish her significance as a subject for further study of the role of women and autodidacts in the networks of GDR’s experimental artists. There is a dearth of academic scholarship dedicated to the rediscovery of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s work, and this thesis aims to address that lacuna. I achieve this by approaching existing publications on the experimental art of the GDR not only as sources of knowledge on the social and political realities faced by GDR artists, but as models of how to navigate those realities and situate Wolf-Rehfeldt’s place within them. I draw on the scholarship of Sara Blaylock, Seth Howes, and Anna Horakova, three leading scholars who have shaped the recent course of the field with their publications and who are in conversation with one another in defining experimental art in the East German context. I also rely upon the earlier German-language scholarship of Kornelia Röder, who published her dissertation on East German Mail Art in 2006. This dissertation provides extensive and well-researched information about Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt’s artistic activities, including about her movements within the GDR and abroad, when and where her work was exhibited, and the extent of her contact with other artists. Substantiated by primary sources, Röder traces the development of contacts between artists in Central and Eastern Europe and challenges the notion that Mail Art and conceptual art was an idea communicated from west to east. Drawing upon this German-language scholarship allows me to situate the space that Wolf-Rehfeldt occupied in the art world of the GDR and make the findings of this German-language dissertation available to an English-speaking
Building on these sources, my close analysis of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s works and career guide an investigation into the circumstances of women artists working without state sponsorship in the GDR.

As there is a clear connection between Wolf-Rehfeldt’s use of her typewriter, a tool of labor typically associated with women, and her artistic practices that occurred primarily in her private residence, Sara Blaylock’s distinction between public and private spheres of artmaking informs in important ways my approach. Sara Blaylock’s 2022 monograph *Parallel Public: Experimental Art in Late East Germany* offers a new history that positions East Germany’s experimental artists as a foil to the state’s attempts to engineer a public life for its citizens. She categorizes the alternative artistic practices of these artists as a “second,” or parallel, public sphere, advocating for a view of experimental art that accounts for the fact that many of these artists enjoyed state endorsements and success in the “official” public sphere while also creating their own artistic networks. In a chapter about the Erfurt Women Artists Group (Künstlerinnengruppe Erfurt), Blaylock emphasizes the importance of meetings in private residences and utilizing traditionally feminized forms of culture from weaving to sewing in their own self-fashioned feminist collective.

Blaylock has greatly influenced my understanding that there was no strict boundary in the GDR between “unofficial” artists, or artists who worked in private spaces and away from officially endorsed venues, and “official” artists who were state-sponsored and thus more visible. As Blaylock demonstrates, these artists were often one and the same, participating in both public spheres. *Parallel Public* therefore offers a useful analysis of artists who moved through these spheres after following a path to professionalization through a state-run institute of higher education, acknowledging that such an education
afforded artists greater autonomy. I interject in Blaylock’s construction of the parallel public by presenting Wolf-Rehfeldt, an artist who had to navigate this sphere without the advantage of such an education. Considering her experimental practices further complicates the question of how artists, particularly women, pursued their art without state sponsorship.

While my approach to positioning Wolf-Rehfeldt in the GDR art world is informed by the problematics Blaylock raises about using terms like “official” and “unofficial” artistic production in conversations about the art of the GDR, my discussion of the differences between art that carried the state’s imprimatur and art that operated outside this system draws largely from the way Seth Howes discusses experimental art with respect to the GDR system of control. Howes’ 2019 book on experimental film in the GDR, *Moving Images on the Margins: Experimental Film in Late Socialist East Germany*, provides a clear overview of how the institutions that comprised government-controlled artistic production in the GDR functioned, and how the independent films he takes as his subject were made on the social and institutional periphery of the East German film industry and art system. Using Howes’ proposal of viewing experimental artists as on the margin, or periphery, of that system allows me to emphasize the significance of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s status as a working woman without a professional art degree in shaping her art and its impact.

Seth Howes dedicates a chapter to GDR Mail Art, extensively engaging with the career of Robert Rehfeldt and contextualizing his role in the international Mail Art movement. He offers a valuable historic overview of the network’s domestic and international development, rightly stressing the importance of Mail Art as a valuable means of artistic correspondence for those who were not trained professionally as artists. Though
the chapter offers detailed analysis of Rehfeldt’s life and work, Wolf-Rehfeldt’s involvement is not discussed. Reintroducing her in this history will enrich Howes’ history of East German Mail Art by accounting for the as-yet unstated role of Wolf-Rehfeldt and her art.

It is important to trace the way that other experimental artists formed relationships and moved between official and unofficial spaces in order to locate Ruth Wolf Rehfeldt’s place in the unofficial art public. I am interested in the relevant relationships among artists across this and other divides, drawing, for instance, a connection between Wolf-Rehfeldt’s Typewritings and the visual poetry of poets who lived in close proximity. Anna Horakova’s work challenges these boundaries and prompts us to reflect on a reciprocal relationship between Wolf-Rehfeldt’s work and that of these younger poets.

Horakova’s 2016 doctoral dissertation, which examines Prenzlauer Berg poets of the 1980s and demonstrates the overlapping relationships of East German experimental artists, provides another useful vantage point from which to view Wolf-Rehfeldt. Horakova’s argument that these poets “simultaneously appropriate and assail official East German language—a discourse comprised of official media, Party slogans and related paraphernalia” by combining poetry with collage is informative in considering Wolf-Rehfeldt’s visual poetry and her social and intellectual involvement with these influential poets. Key to this consideration is how Horakova both draws from and resists how Wolfgang Emmerich classifies generations of GDR writers, challenging generational boundaries to focus on intergenerational socialisms and destabilizing hierarchies.

According to Emmerich’s generational classification, Wolf-Rehfeldt, born in 1930, would belong to the generation preceding the most active Prenzlauer Berg poets.

There is only one English-language piece of scholarship focused entirely on Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, and it was published this year: a testament to how often important women artists are overlooked. Sarah James dedicates a chapter of her 2022 monograph *Paper Revolutions: An Invisible Avant-Garde* to Wolf-Rehfeldt’s approach to creating her Typewritings. My own research differs in my focus on the role of gender and other social factors that informed Wolf-Rehfeldt’s works, but I gained valuable insight into Wolf-Rehfeldt’s intellectual activity through James’ chapter, and the rationale she provides for her method of “horizontal art history” provided clarity for my own project of social art history. To date, this chapter is the only published scholarship dedicated solely to Wolf-Rehfeldt, and James worked with Wolf-Rehfeldt’s private Mail Art archive along with her personal notes to build the chapter about the theoretical underpinnings of her art. Her research centers Wolf-Rehfeldt’s archiving practices and her personal archive of her notes and how they undergirded her philosophy of art, connecting this (artistic) labor with a Marxist project of art as part of the everyday.

James partially frames her scholarly approach with a critique of art historian April Eisman, whose scholarship on the Leipzig painter Bernard Heisig contributes to my understanding of how artists were professionalized through the art academies of the GDR. Though Eisman cites the social art history of Michael Baxandall as influential, James argues, her writing on Heisig instead follows a more conservative “emphasis on the
biographical, stylistic, and chronological” in its methodology. While I owe a debt to Eisman’s groundbreaking research, which challenges traditional art historical methodology by using it to uncover value in the much-maligned Leipzig school, and view her project as anything but conservative, I agree with James’ assessment that a forward-thinking art history should account for the social factors that shaped the art and artist without imposing western frameworks of understanding. In fact, Baxandall’s 1974 volume *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*, which frames art history as social history and calls upon the art historian to understand the social and economic situation of the artist, was a formative influence in my own approach. My analysis of how an untrained, experimental artist like Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt fit into the GDR art world is shaped by the work of the GDR scholars mentioned above, but my approach to interpreting her work also incorporates scholarly methods pioneered by art historians who worked outside the field of GDR studies.

I will focus my discussion of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s art by foregrounding the social and material factors that informed not only her art, but how and by whom that art is seen. Here, I am inspired by Baxandall’s notion of the ‘period eye,’ an art historical method situated in a social history framework arguing that economic relations and cultural conditions are “concretely embedded” in a work of art. In analyzing Italian Renaissance painting, Baxandall interprets the paintings’ geometric proportions as indicative of the value that these mathematical principles held for that period’s merchants, suggesting that artists who


mastered this skill were rewarded by their wealthy patrons. Baxandall advocated for viewing a work of art as a material of social history, arguing that the study of an artwork must consider the contemporary values and institutional priorities that informed the artist’s stylistic choices. Substituting the Quattrocento period eye for that of an East German clerical worker, I will consider the social and economic factors in Wolf-Rehfeldt’s artistic practice, namely that she used the typewriter, the tool of her non-artistic labor, to create her art, and that her art was not how she earned her living. Like James, I am also inspired to think beyond Baxandall’s model, which is limited by a failure to consider the importance of gendered relations in a social art history. Understanding the significance of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s social and economic position in the GDR as a woman and unofficial artist will help us not only understand her work, but why it has been erased.

My feminist reading of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s work draws inspiration from Julie Johnson, whose scholarship deals with forgotten women artists of the Viennese Secession in 2012’s *The Memory Factory: The Forgotten Women Artists of Vienna 1900.* Informed by memory studies, Johnson highlights the work of important women artists who were active in the Secession but absent from history. She frames hers as a project of rediscovery correcting an absence in the historical record. Similarly, in this thesis I aim to discover and reconstruct a record of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s work as an artist to testify that she was directly

7. The Viennese Secession refers to the 1897 formation of a group of Austrian artists and designers after resigning from the Künstlerhaus Association, Vienna’s main artist institution, in protest against its conservative influence. The Secession was closely related to the concurrent Art Nouveau movement and included prominent artists like Gustav Klimt and Otto Wagner as well as Elena Luksch-Makowsky and other forgotten women uncovered by Johnson. For more on the Viennese Secession, see Johnson and Schorske, Carl E. *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture.* 1st Vintage Book ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1981.
involved and integrated with other active Mail Artists. Inspired by Julie Johnson, I emphasize that she was not in a separate sphere but operating alongside other experimental artists in the parallel, or marginal, public of the GDR, and that my study of her work corrects a memory gap, as Johnson would phrase it.

Drawing on this rich and varied body of literature, my exploration of the selected Typewritings intervenes with my own questions intended to expose Wolf-Rehfeldt’s involvement: How should one conceptualize the work of the artists in these groups who remained outside of state sponsorship and yet were able to successfully distribute their work, domestically and internationally? In what ways did gender dynamics inform the art, its production and exposure of these unsponsored artists? What did it mean for women to be part of the experimental art world of the GDR alongside men who received more recognition? I argue that studying unofficial artists like Wolf-Rehfeldt more closely will reveal the importance of women in the Mail Art scene despite their relative absence from the official record.
CHAPTER 3.
CLOSE READINGS

3.1. THE ARTISTIC AUTODIDACT: EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Departing from childhood dreams of becoming a fashion designer, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt trained as an administrative clerk for the sake of securing a stable income. She learned to operate a typewriter among other clerical skills in preparation for her Abitur, the qualifying exam taken upon completion of secondary education in Germany. After completing this training, she pursued her own interests by studying philosophy at the Humboldt University in East Berlin beginning in 1951, taking particular interest in the philosophy of language and how meaning is attached to symbols. Four years later, she discontinued her enrollment without earning a degree to take a job as an office clerk in East Berlin. While studying at Humboldt she had met and married Robert Rehfeldt, and her transition from student to clerical worker came mere months before the birth of their son René.8 Seeing that women faced difficulties in establishing themselves in the official art world, the young mother instead opted to take a job in a field with a reputation for hiring women.9 Though the challenges she faced as a woman without a university degree led her


9. Though some women were employed as art professors or artistic functionaries, artistic institutions in the GDR were overwhelmingly dominated by men, particularly in higher positions of power. This inequity was also present in inofficial settings: among the known Mail Art participants in the GDR, only 10% were women. Schwabe, Stephanie. “International Contact with Mail Art in the Spirit of Peaceful Coexistence: Birger Jesch’s Mail Art Project (1980–81)” in Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989).
to an administrative career not pertinent to her academic or artistic interests, she did not lose the creative desire that had driven her interest in fashion design, nor the interest in linguistics that had been ignited during her discontinued philosophy degree.

Never abandoning the artistic impulse that drove the early dream of being a fashion designer, Wolf-Rehfeldt began writing short and shrewd poems as early as 1959. She took inspiration from her social circle, including a diverse group of East Berlin artists and several women, and began to experiment with painting, drawing, and collage during the 1960s. However, it was not until the early 1970s that she found footing with her signature Typewriting style and felt satisfied enough with her work to share it.

Wolf-Rehfeldt’s typewriter was an Erika, a standard-issue machine manufactured in Dresden and used in offices across the GDR. The poems she wrote during the 1960s were typed on this keyboard, and she played with unconventional spacing and formatting to alter the visual effect of a poem. Her increasingly experimental formatting choices and departure from the conventions of poetry led to the graphic artworks that she would call “Typewritings.” Predictably punctuated poetry was traded for striking uppercase letters arranged in increasingly abstract figurations. An experimental and playful spirit guided her as she explored what she could achieve by typing in an arranged pattern. Using only the graphemes and special characters available on the Erika’s keyboard, she invented visual marvels.

By using her typewriter to spin symbols into new designs, she had finally found a way to fully integrate her fascination with language into her work as an artist. The first public display of her work occurred in Poland, at the 1972 Biennial of Graphic Arts in Krakow, an international exhibition that welcomed artists both expert and amateur. This
trip proved to be a turning point for Wolf-Rehfeldt, as the connections she made with Polish Mail Artists and the overwhelmingly positive response to her work inspired her to begin sending and receiving her first works of Mail Art shortly thereafter. Typewritings were painstakingly planned and typed out on a single sheet, then copied through lithography and distributed.

Despite the long stretch between her departure from higher education and her arrival on the Mail Art scene, Wolf-Rehfeldt remained intellectually active in her life and art. Even after leaving Humboldt University, she continued to study linguistic and philosophical theory on her own time, as revealed by the assiduous personal notes she kept parallel to her artistic practice.¹⁰ The fascination with wordplay as the axis of artistic meaning echoes the “linguistic turn” of twentieth century Western philosophy, a radical reconceptualization of philosophical problems as being rooted in the logic of language. Wolf-Rehfeldt never thought of herself as belonging to one school of thought, instead drawing from a range of texts to inform her thinking. She cross-referenced theories of poetry from the Belorussian-Jewish psychologist Lev Vygotsky and other Marxist thinkers with poems from the American E.E. Cummings, and she pursued knowledge about social movements from the international anti-nuclear movement to the American Civil rights movement. Her self-directed study in art theory prominently featured references to the design theory of German expressionist Paul Klee, who emphasized the power of artists to tell stories with their art using abstract forms and figurations.

¹⁰ Credit is owed to Sarah James for her excavation of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s extensive archive of personal notes in her research. James, Sarah E. Paper Revolutions: An Invisible Avant-Garde. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2022.
Wolf-Rehfeldt’s extensive engagement with art theory and philosophy did not lead to a familiarity with the contemporaneous Western concrete poets who worked with typewriters until much later, and she was not consciously following the example of such artists.\textsuperscript{11} She instead chose her instrument because of her own experience working as a typist and incorporated that part of her life into her artistic practice, at once flattening the distinctions between private and personal; labor and art; text and image. Wolf-Rehfeldt’s transgression of traditional artistic genres and media put into practice the dematerializing and anti-hierarchical principles of her then-new network of international Mail Art contacts. Her years of experience and education in using the typewriter as a tool for day labor gave her a command of its potential to create intricate formations that she carried over to her work as a Mail Artist. This familiarity with her instrument that originated with her work as a typist and her self-determined interdisciplinary theoretical background made her work distinct.

Wolf-Rehfeldt’s intellectual engagement with the theory of language and geometry in art is evident in the evolution of her Typewritings. Additionally, her training as a typist made it possible for her to execute her vision. The influence of her clerical training as a typist and her academic interest in linguistics and philosophy are equally important in her art. That her artistic education was stitched together in this uniquely piecemeal fashion set her apart from experimental artists who received official artistic training in the GDR. As an autodidact, Wolf-Rehfeldt shaped her artistic expression to highlight the interplay of the linguistic and the visual with a typist’s precision.

3.1.1. INFORMATION

By the time Wolf-Rehfeldt finished *Information* (Figure 4) in 1981, she had already been producing art with her typewriter for roughly a decade. The short poetry that was the focus of her earlier creative endeavors was not abandoned, but instead transfigured into a new and more visual form. Some Typewritings, like *Information*, include legible words or phrases to build the work and shape its meaning, while others are more abstract in how the

Figure 4. *Information*, 1980, Typewriting by Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt.
characters are arranged. With her Typewritings, Wolf-Rehfeldt found a way to playfully upend the boundaries between poetics and aesthetics, allowing the tension between linguistic and visual idioms to complement or contradict one another. Wolf-Rehfeldt had translated the skills she learned in her professional training as an office worker into her own artistic language. The typewriter became a tool that opened a world of artistic possibilities.

*Information* is a structured composition that privileges Wolf-Rehfeldt’s penchant for playing with words in her Typewritings. Its design is simpler than many of the ambitiously formatted abstract shapes she worked on in the early 1980s, but it is skillfully formatted so that the word it takes as its title becomes its nexus of meaning. Wolf-Rehfeldt often used multiple layers of strategically spaced typed characters to cluster the symbols into new lines and shapes, but with *Information* she opted to operate in one dimension. She typed a single layer of characters, allowing enough space for each typed component to be legible. The entire print is composed only of typed iterations of the word ‘information’ and the letters that comprise it.

Many of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s Typewritings take a single word as both subject matter and means of conveying that subject, featuring typed instances of the word prominently in the design. In *Information*, the word is stylized in five geometric repetitions, or units of *information*, to take inspiration from the artist’s facetious spirit. These units are set against a uniform backdrop consisting of a claustrophobic series of *O* s typed densely in an array to form a sturdy rectangle. The units of *information* are arranged as an arrow piercing through the right side of the rectangle, with some rows of *O* s disrupted by the intruding arrow. All five follow the same form, beginning with an *i* and adding a letter with every
line that follows until the full word emerges, then receding back, letter by letter, creating a kind of visual palindrome. The only legible lexeme in the work is that which is found repeated thrice at the center of each palindrome, *information*, and every other symbol on the page is a letter from this word.

English and German use the same word and definition for *information*, and Wolf-Rehfeldt’s chosen uppercase typeface prevents us from easily identifying which of the two she had in mind with this work. It may seem natural to assume that an East German artist would default to German, but Wolf-Rehfeldt moved fluently between the two languages in her Typewritings and enjoyed playing with linguistic ambiguity, and Mail Artists frequently used English as a lingua franca for their far-reaching projects. It makes no semantic difference whether she was writing in German or English, as the meaning is the same regardless, but Wolf-Rehfeldt assuredly chose *information* over some other word because of its bilingual potential. The mere awareness of this possible double meaning evokes the circulation of information across linguistic barriers.

Information is further staged as a point where disparate parts overlap through the shape of the units of *information*. The letters are staggered to form the shape of a lens that comes to a sharp point with the *Is* at two vertical poles, with the ink on each *M* smudged just enough to create a vertical arc. Each unit resembles the perfect intersection of two logical sets in a Venn-Diagram, positioning *information* at the center of unity between two unseen elements. As with the bilingual connection, Wolf-Rehfeldt uses this geometric allusion to set theory to establish information as a point of communication and common ground. The artist’s interest in the philosophy of language, dating back to her time at Humboldt University, is clearly present in her use of multiple layers of meaning to convey
the message of *information* as a conceptual intersection. Combining her skills as a typist with Paul Klee’s notion that an artist can use abstract lines and shapes to craft a narrative, Wolf-Rehfeldt uses techniques of design to tell a story with *Information*.

That story comes to life with her placement of the *information* units, or lenses, against the solid block of *Os*. Her choice to compose this background with a single character provides a uniform background against which the lenses are nested, and the character she chose has a twofold advantage. The roundness of *O* lends the rectangle a suggestion of depth when it appears repeatedly, and the areas where the rows of *Os* are interrupted to give way to an *information* lens create a vertical curve, giving the impression of a cylinder with a one-dimensional shading technique that does not sacrifice legibility.

Moreover, using a letter which appears twice in the word *information* allows Wolf-Rehfeldt to perforate the seemingly sturdy background; at the borders where the lens meets the *Os*, it appears as if the word and its background are bleeding into one another with the *Os* warping around the lenses. If the viewer accepts the subtle suggestions of depth from Wolf-Rehfeldt’s typography, the *information* lenses appear to be either folded away or unfurled from the *Os*. With the titular word being *Information*’s only departure from abstraction, Wolf-Rehfeldt leaves a certain ambiguity to the relationship between the lenses and the *Os*. Are the lenses standing in front of a rectangle, or are they piercing the shape? If that shape is a cylinder, is it a container for these units of information? Her engagement in wordplay and her skilled use of typographic shadow and spacing provoke reflection on how information is circulated and received.

Working with the Erika required precision: ink is unforgiving, and one misplaced character would mean starting from scratch. In order to achieve the exact result that she
envisioned, Wolf-Rehfeldt needed to plan each Typewriting in advance, mapping out her ideas by drawing them before sitting down at the typewriter. That she was able to successfully produce these and complex geometric patterns with a typewriter is a testament not just to her patience, but to high levels of knowledge and expertise in typography and mathematics. There is more to be said on typography as a feminized skill when I address considerations of gender in more depth. Proof of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s sophisticated system of communicating ideas through her work, *Information* affirms her engagement in theory like that of Klee and her philosophical preoccupation with linguistic meaning, as well as the importance of her professional training in communicating these ideas.

3.2. ARTISTIC NETWORKS

Wolf-Rehfeldt’s lived experiences as a working woman in the GDR undoubtedly influenced her creative process and output. Having explored the role of her education and professional training, I now turn to her social contacts and the impact that her background, particularly her lack of an officially sanctioned art degree, had on her position within the unofficial art world. She was a unique artist as an autodidact with extensive ties to experimental artists both abroad and domestically, and her Typewritings reflect that she was familiar with a number of artistic networks and approaches. While the works that she sent to her Mail Art contacts were in the collaborative spirit of the movement, Wolf-Rehfeldt maintained a steadfast commitment to her own artistic vision even in the shared project of postal exchange.

Here, I offer an integrated view that accounts for Wolf-Rehfeldt’s peculiar position as a woman who was intimately familiar with the GDR’s experimental art world, even
hosting the country’s well-known intellectuals, authors, and artists in her apartment, yet was without the ease of mobility between official and unofficial spheres that many others had. After becoming a UFA member in 1978, several years after she first dedicated herself to her Typewritings, she was guaranteed some income and privileges such as the ability to print her own copies and exhibit her work, but her art never became her livelihood. Far from the only woman in the GDR forging a path as an artist without formal training, Wolf-Rehfeldt’s choice to focus on collaborative art was, characteristically, both conventional and unconventional: many women in her position chose to collaborate, but the more common choice was to do so through participation in domestic women’s collaborative movement such as the Erfurt Women Artists Group, rather than working with international contacts through the mail.12

As her creative activities became increasingly enmeshed in the Mail Art network over the course of the 1970s, her art became more conceptual, a development which cannot be attributed solely to the influence of the communication-focused German Mail Artists. Attention to her movement through the creative circles of other experimental artists reveals that, in addition to her social connections with other experimental GDR artists, she was familiar with Polish conceptual and modernist art through her own travels and postal exchange with Polish artists. Acknowledging these connections is an affirmation of the ties

between GDR Mail Art and international contacts that broadened Wolf-Rehfeldt’s social horizon beyond Prenzlauer Berg.

Beginning in the late 1960s, when Wolf-Rehfeldt had not yet united her experimentations in poetry and visual art, she made several trips to Poland with her husband. The couple visited Poland to take advantage of one of the party-sanctioned opportunities for making international contacts in the art world by attending the aforementioned Biennial of Graphic Arts in Krakow and similar exhibitions. During their trips of the early 1970s, Wolf-Rehfeldt and her husband were able to connect with Polish artists both experienced and amateur. This inclusion of artistic autodidacts in sophisticated artistic exchange was an immense step for her as an artist who painted during her free time outside of her office job and wouldn’t be approved as a member of the GDR’s UFA until 1978.

Also in attendance at the 1978 Krakow Biennial was the East German artist Carlfriedrich Claus, a founding member of the Clara Mosch group and gallery. Claus and the other Clara Mosch artists based in Karl-Marx-Stadt built a friendship with Wolf-Rehfeldt and her husband, sensing a kinship as active participants in their respective cities’ independent art scenes. Rehfeldt and Wolf-Rehfeldt made several trips to participate in the informal Plein Air gatherings that Clara Mosch organized. These Plein Airs were considered a “high point” of Clara Mosch’s activities by the founders themselves, and they hosted artists from Dresden, Berlin, and Leipzig to take part in leisurely communal walks,

13. The Rehfeldts’ connection to Clara Mosch was collaborative as well as social: Seth Howes has written about the Super-8 films created collaboratively by Robert Rehfeldt and Carlfriedrich Clauss. See Howes, Seth. Moving Images on the Margins: Experimental Film in Late Socialist East Germany, NED-New edition, Boydell & Brewer, 2019.
painting sessions in nature, and film screenings.\textsuperscript{14} The Plein Airs certainly gave artists the opportunities to exchange ideas, but they were primarily social events, and extremely popular at that—Gerhard and Christa Wolf were among the many attendants over the years.\textsuperscript{15} Amateur artists could brush arms with veritable celebrities at these events, further indicating that the official and unofficial art worlds were deeply interconnected.

The two worlds became further entangled in the Rehfeldts’ Berlin Studio. In addition to their poetry readings and exhibits held in their studios, the Rehfeldts hosted parties and entertained their fellow East Berlin artists socially, entertaining guests such as the film star Manfred Krug and singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann. They opened their home to their Mail Art contacts as well, hosting visitors from Czechoslovakia and Japan when these friends were able to visit the GDR. The Mail Art network was just as much a social network as a creative one. As such, many of the East German participants in the movement were friends that Wolf-Rehfeldt and Rehfeldt had met at some gathering, be it their own or one hosted by Clara Mosch. Of the friendships Wolf-Rehfeldt maintained with other artists in East Berlin, her fellow East German Mail Artist Karla Sachse is noteworthy. Sachse received a PhD in visual arts from Humboldt University and is known for her work on installations that take public space as a theme, but she also worked with visual poetry. None of the visual poems written by Sachse depart as radically from poetry in its traditional sense


as Wolf-Rehfeldt’s Typewritings, but she may have come closest to sharing Wolf-Rehfeldt’s vision of Mail Art. Little is known about Sachse or her relationship with Wolf-Rehfeldt, and the clear artistic affinity shared by the two is an area ripe for exploration.

By 1980, graphic works that dispensed with artistic renderings of English or German words in favor of abstract or figurative shapes formed the bulk of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s artistic output. Like the Mail Artists she met from East Berlin to Krakow and beyond, Wolf-Rehfeldt prioritized the act of exchange and communication as definitive for her art. Even so, the grid-like and elegant abstract forms found in her later Typewritings are stylistically dissimilar from the aesthetic and conceptual qualities prioritized by other GDR Mail Artists. That Wolf-Rehfeldt’s method of creating Mail Art was heterodox even within her own subcultural context, is effectively demonstrated by contrasting a piece she sent to her Mail Art colleagues with a piece of correspondence from her husband, the most well-known Mail Artist in the East German national context as well as her closest companion.

Wolf-Rehfeldt shared her husband’s passion for the Mail Art network and even collaborated with him at times, but there are clear differences in the pair’s individual Mail Art projects. One instance of the couple collaborating is the mock-newsletter written in English and distributed to their shared contact list, entitled “CONTART NEWS”. Even though these mailings were often signed “Robert and Ruth,” most accounts attribute the concept to Rehfeldt, and he is seen as the contact point for these communiques. The CONTART coinage was of Rehfeldt’s own design (CONT short for CONTACT), and it was his way of placing emphasis on the communicative nature of Mail Art. Many of the pieces he mailed featured CONTART slogans that captured his socially oriented theory of Mail Art, such as “OUR IDEAS HELP OTHER IDEAS" or “KUNST VON MORGEN
IST HEUTE ANTIKUNST”. To represent the importance of “CONTART” to Rehfeldt’s Mail Art ethos and show how his Mail Art differed from that of his wife, I examine a 1981 New Year’s card signed only with his name. *Concrete Shoe* (Figure 5) is presented as a foil to the holiday card not only because it was one of the more well-known works from her most active period as a Mail Artist, the late 1970s and early 1980s, but for its artful illustration of her aesthetic philosophy of Mail Art which differed from that of her husband in meaningful ways.

### 3.2.1. CONCRETE SHOE

![Concrete Shoe](image)

Figure 5. *Concrete Shoe*, 1980, Typewriting by Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt

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Like her fellow Mail Artists, Wolf-Rehfeldt felt that art should both originate from and extend to every aspect of everyday life. As a clerk, she spent the majority of her day working with a typewriter, and she saw its potential to bring art into the world. The way her Mail Art thematized language visually and prioritized the meaning found through interpretation set her apart from her peers. Her artistic style was focused on experimentation with visual meaning, and her attitude to collaboration was communicating these ideas. *Concrete Shoe*, tentatively dated to 1980, represents Wolf-Rehfeldt’s exploration of the possibilities and potentials that the typewriter holds as a creative tool. Its use of a distinct, typewritten shape to communicate an idea was a signature by which other Mail Artists recognized her work. Her interlocutors could also expect that her pieces would use the typewriter’s status as a facilitator of written communication to her creative advantage by constructing a visual metaphor that stops short of explicit linguistic messaging, enticing the recipient to participate in the process of meaning-making.

Unlike the deliberate but gestural *Information*, the shape here is carefully ordered in a sequence that results in a distinct figurative symbol. Though the resultant shape is more an abstract grid than an illustration of an organic object, in its shape, and, crucially, in its title, the viewer recognizes the blunt form of a high-heeled shoe. That the title of the piece informs our reading of the typed object is an elevation of Wolf-Rehfeldt’s insistence on incorporating language in her art as a system that interacts with the aesthetic to guide the formation of meaning. Choosing *concrete* as a descriptor for the shoe is a sly use of wordplay on the artist’s part; she uses the double meaning of the English word to suggest concrete as a material used in architecture and concrete as a descriptor that could qualify an idea or action. It is also a nod to concrete poetry, indicating that by the time it was
printed Wolf-Rehfeldt had become aware of this visual poetry movement and paid homage with the double meaning of the *Concrete Shoe*.

Language is further enmeshed in the symbol’s design with the choice of characters that build the shoe. The abstraction is made of a swarm of Cs, Os, and Ns knit in a pattern that creates depth and shadow, shading in the spatial dimension by using the linguistic. Another possible layer of meaning lies in these letters’ resemblance to her husband’s coined term CONT-ART. This shoe is an image constructed out of letters from its own name, meaning that the item’s name is wholly constitutive of its being in a very literal sense. Given Wolf-Rehfeldt’s background in philosophy and the sharp humor she often covertly showed in her Typewritings through wordplay, it is certain that she intentionally opened a question about the importance of linguistic symbols in shaping their own meaning by designing this *concrete* shoe with letters from the word *concrete*. *Concrete Shoe* offers a simple, abstract design in form, but, using her typewriter and her ironic manipulation of semantic meaning, Wolf-Rehfeldt used this minimalist structure to make language visible as a structure that organizes and confers power.

Another dimension of double meaning unfolds in the shoe’s sturdy and almost architectural design. Though the typed object clearly reads as a shoe, it is built in a way that recalls concrete public buildings, unfolding further connotations for *concrete*. This uncovers a tension between interpretations of the form; the classically feminine heeled shoe meets a more masculine reading of the shape as an architectural structure. The title enables both interpretations, while the formation of the Typewriting itself empowers them. Wolf-Rehfeldt constructs a site for these different readings to come into conversation using the interplay of language and image.
There is room for further reading into the meaning of the shoe, from the aforementioned feminist consideration of it as an apparent woman’s high heel to the constrictions of its design hinting at strictures on movement in the GDR and the artist’s desire to overcome them.\textsuperscript{17} For my purposes, this interpretation of \textit{Concrete Shoe} is most significant. Continuing to embrace the idea of open-ended art carrying traces of its creation that she first put forth when she started making Typewritings, Wolf-Rehfeldt extended the continuum of moments captured in each artwork to include not only the artist’s process of creation, but the moment of reception and interpretation by an audience. Of course, this moment was already present in the ambiguous \textit{Information}, but \textit{Concrete Shoe} develops its treatment of the moment of interpretation to make it a focal point.

The multiplicity of meaning that results from the complex interrelations of form, process, and genre is an ever-present theme running through Wolf-Rehfeldt’s work. In using a writing tool to create a visual effect, the Typewritings activate an intricate interplay of linguistic and aesthetic elements. Her designs expose the mechanical production of the art, and with it the artist’s material conditions. Though the Typewritings are more abstract than was typical of Mail Art, Wolf-Rehfeldt embraced the movement’s broader objective of bringing art into the everyday by using a common typewriter as her instrument and by drawing the audience into the creative process through interpretation. While her desire to convey artistic meaning through unconventional means connected her with her Mail Art colleagues, her strategy of arriving at multiple meanings was entirely her own.

3.2.2. LETTER FROM ROBERT REHFELDT

Figure 6. Letter from Robert Rehfeldt, 1980-12-30.

In addition to his work as a graphic artist, Robert Rehfeldt dabbled in filmmaking, painting, and printmaking, and gatherings at the couple’s studio would often feature his impromptu poetry readings or guitar noodlings as icebreakers. His priority at these events was always human connection, and he was enormously successful in building these social bonds. Similarly, he saw Mail Art as an opportunity for building these connections, particularly with artists in other socialist countries. He initiated interactive projects, often requiring participants to contribute their own additions to a drawing or collage and pass it on to another artist. In the late 1970s, he used the Mail Art Network to activate a campaign to free imprisoned Uruguayan artists. Several of his exhibitions in Poland featured postcards and stamps that had passed through hands around the world before finding their final form. He was of the mind that art should be something that is lived and enacted in the everyday, and the pieces he mailed emphasized efforts to achieve this through contact and collaboration above all else.
While Wolf-Rehfeldt shared her husband’s enthusiasm for the possibilities that the network enabled, and the pair even collaborated at times, her way of using the Mail Art network was entirely her own. His Mail Art contributions consistently prioritized interpersonal connection and consciousness raising over aesthetically achieved meaning, as seen in the New Year 1981 card he sent to the Danish artist Nils Lomholt (Figure 6). Examining this piece will serve to illustrate what was typical of Mail Art, and how extraordinary Wolf-Rehfeldt’s detailed experiments with the visual element of her work were in this context.

The bubble letters above his message announce this postcard as “CONTART NEWS,” indicating that it is part of the ongoing conversation enabled by that newsletter. Signed only by Rehfeldt, this holiday missive was a way of maintaining unity across borders with a tongue-in-cheek officiousness. His attitude about speaking to other artists took inspiration from the Dadaists, and both influences come through in what almost seems to be an example of automatic writing.18

Though language and visual art come together on this postcard, this is more a greeting to a friend than it is an aesthetic experiment. The crowding together of words on this postcard is not in service of constructing an overarching shape, though the unmargined and haphazardly segmented text recalls the appearance of a media collage, a common form of Mail Art. His unregulated text serves the purpose of communicating the spontaneous and humorous tone of Rehfeldt’s written message and fitting everything he had to say on

the card without sacrificing the abstract doodles that seem to seep onto the page. Even in this dispatch, Rehfeldt enacts his belief that art is a forward momentum that should bleed into every aspect of life.

It is important to emphasize that this New Year’s card is not representative of Rehfeldt’s overall artistic oeuvre, nor do I intend to represent it as such. He worked in highly visual media from Super-8 film to multimedia collages and followed the experimental impulse in his freelance work in Berlin. What the postcard to Lomholt represents is the role that Rehfeldt took on in the particular context of his Mail Art, namely that of a mediator. The works he chose to send in the mail were primarily calls to action or bulletins like the one above, suggesting that his role as the organizer of contact lists was the focus of his Mail Art, even superseding the media experimentation that appeared in the works he did not mail out. The socially oriented spirit of postal collaboration was also important to Wolf-Rehfeldt, but equally important in the Typewritings are the experiments with the limits of what can be conveyed in a visual medium.

### 3.3. PLEASE CONSIDER THE WOMAN BEHIND THE TYPEWRITER

In keeping with her affinity for ambiguity and linguistic abstraction in her work, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt did not make overt feminist statements with her Typewritings. Rather, she confronted gendered experiences and advocated for women’s dignity on multiple levels, from her chosen medium to the themes she visited. In making her skills as a typographer a focal point in her work, she showed the artistic worth of a traditionally feminized skillset. Her typewriter’s role in producing the final product always remained visible through the distinguishable keyboard characters, and whether the shapes she typed
were figural or abstract, she often created designs that reflected upon the experience of womanhood. Wolf-Rehfeldt’s rendering of a woman’s shoe brings societal expectations to mind in *Concrete Shoe*, and in *Memory*, the final Typewriting under examination in this thesis, she used abstract symmetry to gesture toward public perceptions of women and women’s labor. In a cultural landscape where feminism was not a social movement with a strong presence, her art commented on women’s lives and the limitations they faced in a sophisticated way.

East Germany did not see a sexual revolution, nor was feminist activism the sociopolitical force in the 1960s that it was elsewhere. Rather, the evolution of sexual norms was gradual, and feminism was widely seen as redundant in a state where women were empowered through working for wages. Indeed, the state’s strong rhetoric of women as equal counterparts to men in the workforce was supported by job training programs in professions dominated by men, strong childcare and maternity leave infrastructure, and the 1965 ratification of a law codifying an equal responsibility for household tasks and childrearing for men and women. These efforts brought about significant progress in the legal and financial emancipation of women in the GDR, with the high participation of women in the workforce and high divorce rates both seen as indicators of increased freedom for the women of the GDR. At the same time, the lived experiences of these women belie the notion that these advances rendered feminist action unnecessary in East Germany.

Women entered nearly every sector of the workforce through job training programs, but most of those women remained in entry-level and subordinate positions, with few advancing to higher income positions.\textsuperscript{20} The absence of women in positions of power extended to the arts, with the women who did participate often relegated to the margins, for instance, only five women ever directed a fiction film for the DEFA film studio.\textsuperscript{21} Without women in seats of power and with no measures to enable upward mobility, most legal and political decisions, including those regarding women’s freedoms, were made without a woman’s voice in the room.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the legal standards intended to assure gender equality were frequently found wanting. Despite the 1965 decree that men should contribute equally to housework, studies found that women continued to dedicate more time to household chores than their partners.\textsuperscript{22} This meant that many women bore what is often described as the “double burden” of wage labor and domestic labor, expected to do most of the work in the domestic sphere in addition to their compensated labor. Policies designed to distribute the responsibility for childcare more evenly had some success in easing the domestic burden for women with children. However, this, too, was a domestic task that fell to women more often than not. Moreover, the fact that most of the rhetoric and policymaking surrounding gender equality was related to childcare and motherhood

\textsuperscript{20} Kranz, “Women’s Role in the German Democratic Republic and the State’s Policy Toward Women,” 75.


\textsuperscript{22} Kranz, “Women’s Role in the German Democratic Republic and the State’s Policy Toward Women,” 73.
inadvertently reinforced a view of women as mothers and primary caregivers above all else.\textsuperscript{23} In spite of progress and a predominating narrative that gender equality had been achieved, traditional gender roles still survived in the GDR.

Many women were frustrated by the double burden they were expected to bear and their relative powerlessness at work, and while forthright feminism was rare, an increasing number of East German women organized to voice their concerns and desires in the final years of the GDR. Some women formed local feminist affiliate groups over the course of the 1980s, and women in the experimental art world expressed solidarity with one another by forming collaborative creative networks. A representative example is the founding of the Erfurt Women Artists Group in 1984 by Gabriele Stötzer, a multimedia artist and avowed feminist. Active through the early 1990s, this group was an amorphous collective of women who worked together on creative collaborations ranging from Super-8 films to performance pieces. Collaborating allowed these women to overcome the supply shortages faced by unofficial artists, and, crucially, it provided a space for them to work with artforms and tools often dismissed in art circles dominated by men. Ceramics, sewing, and other feminized forms of handiwork were common endeavors for women’s collaborative networks.

Gatherings like those hosted by the group in Erfurt offered space for women to voice their dissatisfaction through art. Here, forms of culture and labor that were disregarded by an art history written by men were wielded and transformed, and weaving workshops led to collaborative multimedia projects. Wolf-Rehfeldt maintained friendships

with other women involved in the Prenzlauer Berg art scene, but she did not collaborate with a women’s group like the one led by Stötzer. Her primary avenue of artistic exchange was her Mail Art, and in the Typewritings she sent to her international and mixed-gender network, she emphasized the craft and transgressive artistic possibilities of the work she did as a woman. While all Typewritings articulated the comment on feminized labor inherent to their medium, some, such as *Memory* (Figure 7) were designed to confront women’s concerns directly and uncompromisingly.

### 3.3.1. MEMORY

![Figure 7. Memory, 1974, Typewriting by Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt.](image)
Memory was typed in 1974, the same year that saw Wolf-Rehfeldt’s first contributions to Mail Art. This loosely symmetrical shape is an early venture into typographic art, representing one of her first experiments in combining the written word to her visual art. With its ridged angles and fluid refiguration of linguistic symbols, the viewer experiences the kinetic and indeterminate quality that made the Typewritings a rich site for Wolf-Rehfeldt to experiment with the dimensions of spatial and linguistic meaning. The parallelism and ambiguity of the structure is at odds with the linear and narrative conception of time connoted by the word memory. Furthermore, the use of unfilled space creates a shape resembling a yonic icon, bringing forth the gendered dimensions of what is considered worthy of memory.

Because the artistic process and, by extension, the artist behind it are built into the style and design elements of the Typewriting, the viewer’s experience of Memory must open to include consideration of the woman behind the typewriter. Wolf-Rehfeldt arranged the characters with enough space that Memory was unmistakably designed using a typewriter. In comprehending the mechanical process, the viewer comes to view that process as vitally important in shaping the meaning of Memory alongside wordplay or symmetrical design. The transparent process prevents the appearance of a finished product’s polished veneer. The written word is so disjointed and removed from legibility in a traditional sense that the meaning of memory itself is abstracted, rendered anew, and ultimately left for the viewer to determine. Situated between poetry and visual design, Memory uses the stylistic devices of both genres to explore and test the limits of a word’s coherence.
As is typical of the Typewritings of the early 1970s, *Memory* only uses characters that already carry their own symbolic weight, in this case, the letters that spell the work’s titular word. Her choice of the English *memory* over the German *Erinnerung* is an initial act of translation in a work that thematizes the search for meaning. Wolf-Rehfeldt introduces *memory*, both the word and the notion it stands for, into the aesthetic realm, where she breaks it down into its component parts. Upon deconstructing *memory* and all its potential meanings, the artist pushes the disassembled letters into action by using them as the building blocks in her visually augmented reconstitution of the idea of memory. By segmenting the word and its attached meaning and stretching out its parts into a quasi-legible design, the artist transcends the border between the language arts into the visual arts, letting the tensions of their juxtaposition play out.

*Memory* arranges its letters to form abstract structure, with spatial depth achieved through the alternately dense and sparse placement of the typeface. In the simplest of terms, *Memory* is drawn with six vertical chains of typed characters, all of which are built with the repetition of one of the six letters in memory. Each chain begins with an inward slope toward the center of the image before jutting back out at an acute angle, repeating the jagged motion and continuing to weave in and out until the chain terminates at the bottom of the page at the same latitude as its point of origin. In each checkered chain the same letter is typed over and over in a bunched array, organized to make the word *memory* legible from left to right at any point along the horizontal axis. *Memory*’s letter chains work together to form a layered and oblong diamond that opens out at its vertical poles, resembling a vase or a mirror or, as suggested above, a vagina. All readings offer rich
possibilities for interpretation, but the latter is privileged by the emphasis Wolf-Rehfeldt places on women’s handiwork through her aesthetic choices.

Unlike the cleaner aesthetic achieved by the neat geometric lines of *Concrete Shoe* and *Information*, the contours that form *Memory* are rough-hewn and somewhat lopsided. Symmetry is achieved through repetition rather than precision, and the strings of letters run together like interjections to produce a certain sense of desperation, as though they were typed in a rush. *Memory*’s harsh and jarring aesthetic is not a consequence of inexperience, as confirmed by several mid-1970s Typewritings that used the advanced shading techniques so notably absent here. Characters are used as sparingly as possible while still achieving visual effect, creating the vaginal negative space and drawing attention to the typed characters, every one of which is distinguishable in this piece. Wolf-Rehfeldt’s typography is as unmistakably a part of *Memory* as it is of all Typewritings, but here it is used to imitate another form of women’s labor.

The symmetrical but imperfect design resembles a cross-stitch pattern or some other form of needlework, with the craggy serifs of the *M* and *Y* calling to mind the stitches one might see in an informal sewing circle like the ones organized by Stötzer. In a tribute to her fellow women working in underappreciated media, Wolf-Rehfeldt used her own craft to mimic the effect of a needle and thread. If the yonic shape is built with this doubled invocation of feminized labor, memory is relocated from masculine institutions to the domestic sphere. For the double-burdened women of the GDR, the home was a site of domestic labor, a type of work that was frequently dismissed or forgotten by the men in their lives. Women who developed the skills learned through domestic or compensated labor into artistic forms of expression were similarly sidelined by artistic institutions.
Through the abstract vaginal imagery, Wolf-Rehfeldt acknowledges the overdetermined role of motherhood in shaping how women are perceived and remembered and, in the same stroke, rejects it. Wolf-Rehfeldt recognized that the repeated underestimation of women’s work would result in a memory gap, and thus configured memory as an amalgam of symbolic references to the vibrant creative activity she observed from her peers in the experimental art world. Memory is a defiant gesture of resilience in the face of an art history that so often silences and essentializes women.
CHAPTER 4.

CONCLUSION

Documenta 14, held in the spring of 2017, included an array of Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt’s Typewritings in the highest-profile solo exhibition of her work to date. The degree of recognition and critical engagement that came with participating in one of the contemporary art world’s preeminent exhibitions was unprecedented for Wolf-Rehfeldt, who had ceased producing and sharing her Mail Art after the end of the GDR, claiming that with the dissolution of her state, the need to transcend borders with her art became obsolete. Her work was met with effusive praise from a number of media outlets that covered the exhibition, with comments on her freewheeling approach to symbolic meaning and unorthodox use of the typewriter. I was among the new admirers who learned of the Typewritings thanks to this wave of exposure, and I became fascinated by the question of how and why such an inventive artist could have gone relatively unnoticed for so long.

When I embarked on this project, my knowledge of the official East German art world led me to believe that Wolf-Rehfeldt was marginalized in studies of GDR artists because she did not participate in the state’s pedagogical and professional system. It soon became clear that, while this was certainly a contributing factor, the truth was more complicated, as suggested by two main indicators. Firstly, I learned that Wolf-Rehfeldt’s position vis-a-vis the official art world was more ambivalent than my initial research had indicated, because while she did not attend an art academy or exhibit her work in state-run galleries and exhibits, she did have UFA membership as of 1978, and her social circle included artists more involved in the official art world. Secondly, and perhaps more tellingly, when I conducted research into the Mail Art of the GDR, I found that Wolf-
Rehfeldt was nearly always absent from what had been written. Even in studies that specifically addressed the Mail Art movement and the nontraditional artists who participated, Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt was disregarded, and often only mentioned in relation to her husband.

Seeing how she had been doubly erased—first from scholarship that privileged the official GDR art world, and again from the very movement in which she was active—inspired me to think of the erasure as the result of a number of social complexes, not least of which being her gender. It became clear that her choice to pursue a professional trade and later enter the art world as an amateur typifies women’s labor in East Germany, and that both her gender and professional path shaped her relationship to the state’s art apparatus and to her fellow artists. My research confirmed that the East German network of experimental artists was built upon social connections, often friendships formed at art school. Wolf-Rehfeldt had friends in the East German art world, but she was not part of an identifiable group or movement such as Clara Mosch, instead affiliating with a more nebulous and international network. This, together with Mail Art’s relatively understudied status and a gendered bias toward her more famous husband and against her as a woman without formal training, has made her easy to overlook in East German art history. The same complexes that informed her philosophy and shaped her unique typographic approach to Mail Art were the factors that led to her marginalization in art history.

It is all the more important to pursue the study of an artist like Wolf-Rehfeldt to reveal the extent to which women and other artists with nontraditional backgrounds in the GDR were involved with experimental art movements, whether domestically or abroad. This thesis already touches upon the friendship between Wolf-Rehfeldt and her fellow East
Berlin Mail Artist Karla Sachse, but beyond a postscript Sarah James includes in her epilogue, not much has been written about this relationship or Sachse’s contributions to Mail Art. Wolf-Rehfeldt’s Typewritings indicate that Mail Art was a space to share stylistic experiments, and her sophisticated treatment of feminist and abstract themes. My research reveals that the record of who was involved in the GDR’s experimental art scene is incomplete, with still more to be found. A deeper look at Wolf-Rehfeldt’s background confirmed that she was more enmeshed in Mail Art than the historical record indicates, suggesting that the influence and involvement of women in the movement demands further study.

Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt once likened herself to a spider, proclaiming a desire to “spin her threads everywhere on earth.” By mailing her Typewritings to contacts around the world, she invited the recipients to join her in complicating the limits of genre and questioning what it means to make visual art. Her art challenged convention, and with every design she played with interconnectedness and disjunction, the tensions of complementary or contradictory usages of symbols, and the entanglement of lived experience with artistic expression. Through the continued circulation of her work, the spider spins on.
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