

# Life is Art: An Interview with Leonhard Frank Duch

Elena Shtromberg

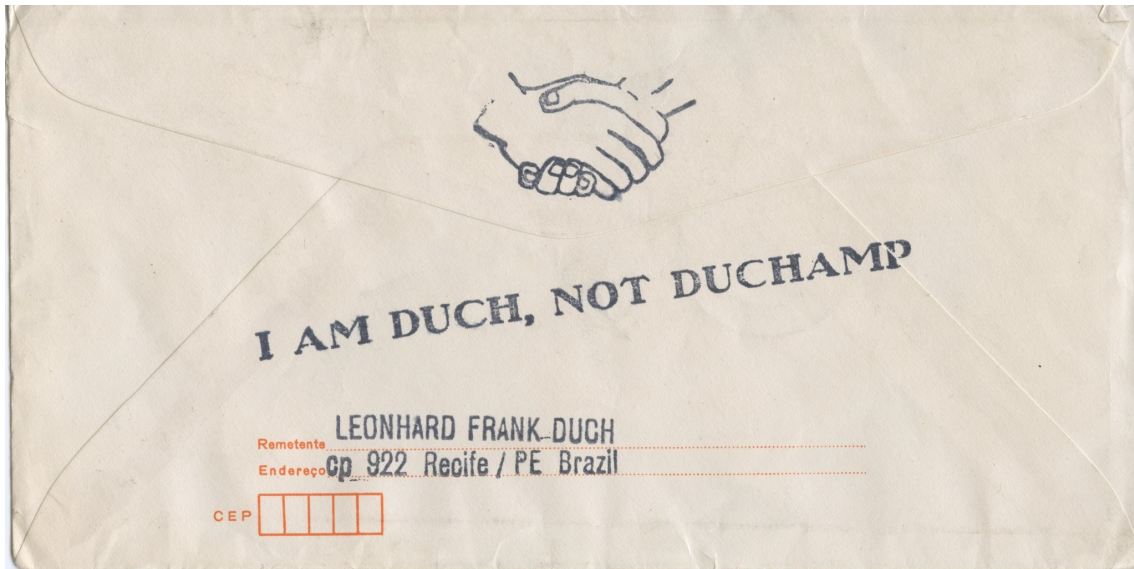
This interview is condensed from a series of conversations, conducted in Portuguese and translated into English, between the author and artist Leonhard Frank Duch in his apartment in Berlin on three separate occasions on the following dates: 5, 14 and 26 July 2022. The author and artist have been meeting since the summer of 2021.

Leonhard Frank Duch was born in Berlin in 1940 and moved to Brazil in 1951 where he lived with his family in São Paulo. In 1957, he attended the Associação Paulista de Belas Artes art school shortly before moving to the town of Recife in the northeast of Brazil in 1958 where he went on to study journalism in 1970, graduating in 1974. It was in Recife during the 1970s that he became active, alongside other artists living in the region such as Paulo Bruscky and Unhandeijara Lisboa, in the mail art movement. Concurrently, he continued to paint and won prizes for his works at the 1984 and 1987 Annual Art Salon in Recife. Duch's mail art activity is marked by a unique and often subversive blend of aesthetics, humour and biting political critique of the limits on freedoms of speech and expression experienced under the Brazilian dictatorship (1964–1985). The artist used 'Duch' in signing and stamping his signature on both his correspondence and artistic activity, and he often played with the semantic similarity between Duch and Duchamp. Duch was active in forging and promoting important global networks of circulation and display among hundreds of mail artists. His participation in the network dwindled in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and particularly after 1994 when he moved back to Berlin where he currently resides. The artist lives in a small apartment filled with boxes of archival materials, books, exhibition catalogues, artworks and decades' worth of adjacent artistic activity, and in the two summers I visited I barely made a dent in identifying the contents of the many boxes. Filled with



Leonard Frank Duch with his archive at his home in Berlin in July 2022, photo by Elena Shtromberg

ephemera and irreplaceable paper trails, Duch's holdings are a singular window into the unique context of the mail art movement and the period in which it emerged and thrived. After many unrecorded conversations since the summer of 2021, I resolved to document our meetings more formally. Our interviews were conducted in Portuguese, the language in which Duch began and conducted his artistic career.



Leonard Frank Duch, envelope (no date), collection of the artist

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**Elena Shtromberg:** Do people call you Duch or Leonhard?<sup>1</sup>

**Leonard Frank Duch:** Duch, but in Brazil it's Dudu, Duque, Duda; Duch is difficult.

**ES:** I was asking you about the first time that you participated with mail art. It was with Robert Rehfeldt, right?<sup>2</sup> Was it for political reasons or for entertainment?

**LFD:** Yes, it was with Rehfeldt in 1975. It began with circulating chain letters. When you received the chain letter there were names included from all around the world. The letters came with the addresses, too. I had to respond to the first name on the list of the chain letter and put my name and address at the bottom, so that meant I had to copy it ten or twelve times and then send to another twelve people. I found it interesting but didn't expect anything. When I began, I would respond to everyone right way, not only to the first name on the list but to everyone,

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<sup>1</sup> I have also seen him referred to as Leonardo in Brazil, with different variations on the spelling

<sup>2</sup> Robert Rehfeldt (1931–1993) was an artist who lived in Berlin, in East Germany (GDR); he was well known for his activities in mail art and in 1975 initiated the first mail art exhibition in the GDR, followed by others at the Galerie Arkade founded by Klaus Werner in 1973 – for more on Robert Rehfeldt, see his archive on the ChertLüdde Gallery website: <https://chertluedde.com/artist/mail-art-archive-ruth-wolf-rehfeldt-robert-rehfeldt/#1604318939805-49672b02-1a4a>

and among the names on that list was Robert Rehfeldt. The name at the time was just a name; he had responded 'marvellous' in German.

**ES:** Did he know you were German?

**LFD:** No, of course not. He lived in the GDR. He answered in German because that is all he spoke. We only met later, slowly... I corresponded with many Germans in English, our correspondence was visual, all poetics were visual.

**ES:** I came across correspondence between the two of you in the Rehfeldt archive located here in Berlin, which is Ruth's archive also.<sup>3</sup> How did you distinguish between correspondence and mail art?

**LFD:** The only person I truly corresponded with through actual letters was Vigo,<sup>4</sup> who was a very dear, humane and beautiful person, very affected by the dictatorship in Argentina.<sup>5</sup> He lost his son to the dictatorship. These were the circumstances that led me to feel closer to people.

**ES:** Did you know Vigo's collaborator in mail art? She published a book about mail art.<sup>6</sup>

**LFD:** Graciela Gutierrez Marx – no, I did not know her personally.<sup>7</sup> I didn't even know Vigo personally. I also corresponded with Graciela; she made good work. But that is how I began, with Rehfeldt, and then suddenly it was like an avalanche of names, names of artists from all around the world... it became very dynamic and exciting. Exciting because I received artist originals from other countries, from other people, from great artists. And I could also send them my work; it was fantastic for everyone.

**ES:** Were the chain letters of a political nature? Did you think of them as a way to circumvent the censorship imposed by the Brazilian dictatorship? And since you created politically provocative work, were you ever accused or targeted for your activities or imprisoned?

**LFD:** I took to its political possibility right away. Mail art was outside of censorship, but then the Brazilian regime discovered and denounced us, but not in court. The accusations were from the postal authorities. They figured out that there was something hidden in these envelopes. The mailman got suspicious when he realised that I didn't want him to bring my mail anymore.

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<sup>3</sup> Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt (1932– ) was Robert's wife; she was an artist and very active in the mail art movement – for more on both their work, see the archive on the ChertLüdde Gallery website:

<https://chertluedde.com/artist/mail-art-archive-ruth-wolf-rehfeldt-robert-rehfeldt/#1604318939805-49672b02-1a4a>

<sup>4</sup> Edgardo Antonio Vigo (1928–1997) was an Argentine artist well known for his mail art, visual poetry and performance works, among other artistic activity; see the Lomholt Mail Art Archive:

[www.lomholtmailartarchive.dk/networkers/edgardo-antonio-vigo](http://www.lomholtmailartarchive.dk/networkers/edgardo-antonio-vigo)

<sup>5</sup> The Argentine dictatorship, from 1976–1983, was also known as the Dirty War

<sup>6</sup> Graciela Gutiérrez Marx, *Artecorreo: Artistas invisibles en la red postal*, Luna Verde, Buenos Aires, 2010

<sup>7</sup> Graciela Gutiérrez Marx was born in 1945 in La Plata, Argentina; see 'Graciela Gutiérrez Marx' on UCLA's Hammer Museum website: <https://hammer.ucla.edu/radical-women/artists/graciela-gutierrez-marx>

I opened a postal box and would go get my correspondence myself. There were politicians saying that there was foreign infiltration in the mail. There is so much idiocy and stupidity.

**ES:** And there was also censorship in the GDR. Could you sense that in your correspondence with Rehfeldt?

**LFD:** There was one interesting instance with Rehfeldt. One day, out of the blue I received a GDR flag in the mail in an envelope. It was a paper flag and that would have been extremely dangerous for me in Brazil because the GDR was communist. So I wrote to Robert and asked him not to do that again. He wrote back to say that he had never sent me a flag! Someone, somewhere along the path from one dictatorship to another had opened his envelope and inserted subversive material, because the dictatorship was claiming that there existed a subversive international organisation of artists, something like that. So there was censorship of the mail there in Recife. I had some letters that I didn't receive in my box, instead there was a note saying I had to go to look for them at the office. This meant that the national security was involved.

**ES:** Was it the DOPS (Department of Political and Social Order)?<sup>8</sup>

**LFD:** There are so many names of agencies; national security exists in a lot of places, in Russia and China... When I went to get my mail, they gave me an open envelope with some material inside indicating that it had been tampered with. They had wanted to see what was in there, but postal censorship is prohibited in Brazil because it is a signatory of the Postal Service of Canada. There they have rules of what could be sent; I could even send glass inside an envelope by mail if I wanted to. This is all regulated, but the authorities working at the post office in Brazil didn't know that. There was so much interesting material, I was young and it was all so stimulating.

**ES:** It must have been exciting to receive so much mail from other places, it's like travelling without leaving.

**LFD:** For me, it wasn't even about the travel; for me, it was about the exchange of culture and the communication. From the US, I only got non-political things. We called it at the time 'oba oba'; it was food but nothing substantial. Some visual poetry; the majority was collage. Buster Cleveland... I think I was in contact with everyone and we exchanged work. In Canada, there were some amazing people. There were fantastic people everywhere, great artists who did mail art. I wasn't only a mail artist, but there were some who were exclusively mail artists. Many in the US and Canada did other things, painting and everything alongside mail art, because it was interesting. And this was how I met them. I had twenty to thirty mailings a day.

**ES:** Received or sent?

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<sup>8</sup> The Department of Political and Social Order was the secret police organ of the Brazilian government

**LFD:** Received *and* sent! I never stopped sending things. Everything I received I also responded to. I would stay up at night stamping and stamping, sometimes I would still be stamping until 10 or 11 at night. With each stamp there was excitement. Stamping is exciting and combining stamps makes new images.

**ES:** The rubber stamp for me is interesting; it is something I talk about in a book I wrote several years ago.<sup>9</sup> The stamp is an official government tool, but also in the hands of the artist it is...

**LFD:** It is documentary; it makes a document.

**ES:** There is also the bureaucracy of the action. The gesture of making something formally official.

**LFD:** In the Catholic church, before you could publish a book, you had to pass through the Catholic censorship of the Vatican. There they would stamp *nihil obstat*, indicating that it was approved.<sup>10</sup>

**ES:** When you were called in by the officials, what was the work that they wanted to censor?

**LFD:** I don't remember, there were so many things to keep track of. I needed a secretary or a librarian.

**ES:** And did you ever have an assistant?

**LFD:** No, it was all too much, but also fantastic. We exchanged so many ideas with artists; it was a wonderful period, a period of big discoveries. And it gave direction to many people, a path for freedom. When you make a painting, you are not free, you are tied to secular patterns, the canvas, the oil paint, the brush, the gallery, censorship good or bad. This is a bourgeois order. Mail art escaped all that completely. It was truly the only free thing. Free. I didn't need censors to approve my work before showing it, everything you sent was shown. In the US, they began to organise exhibitions, also all around Europe, so everything you sent was shown!

**ES:** Did you participate in Walter Zanini's special themed section of mail art in 1981?<sup>11</sup>

**LFD:** Of course, the São Paulo Biennial. I have the catalogue here. I even did a talk with him; I still have photos of the panel with Zanini. He was an amazing figure, too bad he died so soon.

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<sup>9</sup> See Elena Shtromberg, *Art Systems: Brazil and the 1970s*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2016

<sup>10</sup> Duch has a series entitled *Nihil Obstat* from 1976, in which the artist is seen with an irreverent gesture, cutting the nail of his middle finger while smoking

<sup>11</sup> Walter Zanini (1925–2013) was a beloved art historian and critic as well as the director of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP, Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo); in 1981, in his role as curator of the XVI São Paulo Bienal, he organised a special section dedicated to mail art in which hundreds of artists worldwide participated

**ES:** Yes, I'm glad I got to meet him. He was very generous with sharing research.

**LFD:** He was a wonderful person. And he really had exceptional knowledge of art. MAC-USP didn't want video art, but he managed to include it. Then he brought the Korean artist Nam June Paik and promoted him. Zanini was an extraordinary person. Do you know the book by him? He said that Paulo Bruscky and I were the best things in Brazil.<sup>12</sup> I'll show you. There are still things that I didn't pack because they were somewhere else. My son complains a lot, 'dad, you don't have any more room, stop already with these things!' Then we packed everything, he wanted to put everything in a container, but I didn't because then I wouldn't have access.

**ES:** Ah, this is the book; there is also a newer one, although it is already twenty years old.

**LFD:** I don't know the new one. Look at his correspondence! It has all the names of those that truly participated. Because there were people who sent postcards and said this is mail art, I made mail art, but that isn't really mail art. Here in Germany, my colleagues from the GDR, there are many who say they made mail art and call themselves mail artists. I ask them, what is your name, I've never heard of you. That isn't mail art; otherwise we can say Van Gogh was also a mail artist because he sent letters with designs on them to his brother. Mail art is not that. *Mail art is a process, it needs feedback; if it doesn't have that then it is not mail art!*

**ES:** I saw the catalogue for Zanini's exhibition in 1981 and I saw a lot of artists I recognise who I never realised were involved with mail art at some point, like Alex Flemming. But he doesn't consider himself a mail artist; he just told me that he sent a work in to that exhibition in particular.

**LFD:** That is good that he doesn't consider himself a mail artist. Alex is a painter, an excellent painter and a great artist. I met him many years ago, I was quite young; and then I met him here again in Berlin. I get along well with him, but we rarely see each other. Lately, I haven't left the house. I walk around here, sometimes I walk around the cemetery; here it is very nice. It is just around the corner. I live among three big cemeteries [he laughs].

**ES:** Going back to the topic of artists in the GDR, you knew Robert and Ruth Rehfeldt, but was there anyone else from the GDR that you knew or corresponded with?

**LFD:** Yes, of course; there was Joseph Huber, he was a great participant in mail art.<sup>13</sup> The GDR had many artists who were active. Klaus Staeck is another; he is now the president of the Academy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Zanini does, in fact, mention Duch and Bruscky briefly, applauding their work with art and communication; see Walter Zanini, *História geral da arte no Brasil*, Instituto Walter Moreira Salles, São Paulo, 1983, p 803

<sup>13</sup> For a brief biography of Joseph Huber, see the Lomholt Mail Art Archive: <https://www.lomholtmailartarchive.dk/networkers/joseph-wolfgang-huber>

<sup>14</sup> Klaus Staek was the director of Akademie der Künste in Berlin until 2015; for more on Staek's career as a politically motivated graphic artist, see Stuart Braun, 'Activist artist Klaus Staek still provokes at 80', *DW*, 28 February 2018 [www.dw.com/en/activist-artist-klaus-staek-still-provokes-at-80/a-42518822](http://www.dw.com/en/activist-artist-klaus-staek-still-provokes-at-80/a-42518822)

**ES:** The Academy of Art? I didn't know. His brother, Rolf Staeck, sent a postcard that was very critical of the GDR to Zanini's Bienal from 1981; I was impressed by his boldness.

**LFD:** Critical of the GDR today?

**ES:** No, this was in 1981.

**LFD:** I was also critical of Brazil in '81. You have to be of a dictatorship! It takes away people's freedom. People began to become comfortable with and take advantage of privileges granted by the dictatorship, but at the loss of their freedom. I have always had a completely free spirit. It is not just my body that requires freedom but also my soul. And what is freedom? We could philosophise endlessly. Liberty is a condition without the burden of guilt – that is a free spirit. Not to feel guilty about what is happening there or here. It is to be free in nature, together with nature. Only a free spirit can understand. I can also criticise Germany now, we can always criticise something. But I am no longer in the position to do so, I am old and my time of *sturm und drang* is over. I don't have that unrest and impulsivity of youth anymore.

**ES:** Well, it is impossible to maintain it throughout one's whole life.

**LFD:** I don't know if it is impossible, but I don't have it, although I could. People like to say, 'I was this or that'. They let bad things happen and then blame someone else as the guilty one, when it is all on them. I am free to say to you that I can't tolerate more, and for me it is ok to leave. To say this you need to have a free spirit, without bonds, without censorship, without preconceptions. Freedom is essential for creating art. If not, it isn't art. And if art is not made this way, it becomes a social performance. When everyone goes to see a work of art and with a cocktail in hand says 'just look at the brushstroke, the colours, look at the harmony', this is all a social performance and it has nothing to do with freedom, nothing. I actually hate all these activities that have nothing to do with creativity.

**ES:** Do you follow the art world? Do you still go to see art in museums today?

**LFD:** No, I was passed over by it. I don't get to see art anymore. I see mountains of crap. What I seek in art is love and respect – principally, harmony and affection. When I see a painting by Monet, what surfaces is a great happiness in my soul, a tranquility and love. What you see today is cheap aggression. Maybe I am wrong. That is why I said I was passed over by it. I live in a different era, maybe one from fifty or sixty years ago. Maybe I exaggerate – but thirty years ago, in the 1980s, that is when I stopped. I think it was good to stop in the '80s because there was still a wealth there. There were many good artists then, some great Spanish ones that I still like, but after them, it feels like...

I don't need to go out to see art. I have everything I need here in my computer. And going to museums now is complicated by the Coronavirus restrictions. You have to register. I am happy here in my house, in my own world. I'm going to exaggerate, but Picasso used to say 'why travel the whole world when the whole world comes to me?' In this little room there is so much

treasure, so much of my energy that I find fantastic. This is something that I discovered in my solitude. But solitude isn't the right word, it's as if I was in a sailboat on the high seas, alone and sailing. Mine is also a small space to live in but like the ocean, which is always the same, but the waves keep changing with the wind. This freedom I have is as if I were sailing. Often, I come here as if it were my cabin. I have everything nearby, I don't need to mess with it, I have what I need.

**ES:** And do you look at your older works? Or do you only seek them out when people come to see them?

**LFD:** Only when people come to see them. Today I paint. A work is never done, I just put it away. I create space for new works, always new. This year I have already sold eight works and I don't miss them. They have their own life, their own path and I have the means to create new ones. It's a wonderful experience to make a mark on a white page, that's all you need just to make a mark, which is the beginning. And sometimes I just want to end with this mark. The work is ready, it is done.

**ES:** When I was meeting with Alex (Flemming), I asked him about these rugs he made, very beautiful ones, and I wanted to know if he had an idea of what he would paint when he began a work. He told me he had the whole image in his head and all he had to do was transcribe it. What is the process like for you? Is it like Alex's?

**LFD:** That's not how it is for me. The first step for me is that I feel the urge to paint.

**ES:** You mean the desire to make something?

**LFD:** A great desire, and affection too. That is why I sometimes need my pipe. People laugh but that is also a cultural act, of cultural affection. After I make the first marks, the first drafts, they indicate how to continue, not me. It is the work that tells me how to proceed and be in harmony with it: 'here there is a circle missing, here something else, and so forth'. That is how it begins to form. The most important condition of painting is to know how to see. Making the mark is exciting, because in that mark I can already see things.

**ES:** Did you feel the same way about creating mail art? Did you follow a similar process?

**LFD:** Mail art is different from painting. Painting is a creative process inside of a space, or paper... Mail art is absolutely free. For example, I can send an envelope to you without anything inside. Whether you understand or don't, that is no longer my problem. If you understand that the art is the envelope, then great. Why does art have to be inside? Art can be on the outside too.

**ES:** That is interesting because I have a student who wrote about the envelope in the work of Unhandejara Lisboa. And my student is saying exactly that about the envelope in Lisboa's work *Reverso Inútil* (The Useless Reverse, 1977).

**LFD:** In Japan, there was an exhibition I found fantastic [the Paperball Project, 1983, Tokyo].<sup>15</sup>



Poster for the Paperball Project exhibition in Tokyo, Japan in 1983, courtesy of Leonard Frank Duch

**ES:** You travelled there or you sent work there?

**LFD:** I sent work, of course; I sent paper balls. I gathered paper and crumbled it into a ball, sealed it and sent it. I still have the poster of the exhibition. In mail art, we made operas, sounds; people sent sounds on a cassette from the Netherlands. If you look, there is everything here. Mail art is not traditional like drawing or engraving. It is everything, it is free, you can put sand in an envelope and the censors can think it is cocaine, but that is their problem. You have the freedom to express yourself. Sure, it has to make sense; it can't be nonsense. The Americans made a lot of work at this time and some of it was nonsense, bullshit. They sent a cutout of a boot, silly

<sup>15</sup> This was a mail art exhibition held in Tokyo, Japan in June 1983; the poster shows a picture of each of the artists' submissions

collages. Anyway, for me it had to make sense, why am I doing this? What is my message? What is the response that I am waiting for? But freedom also prevents you from expecting an answer. It isn't necessary. You give love without wanting or needing reciprocity. Mail art is that. I gave away all of the originals, because everything I sent was an original. I always sent stuff, but I also received originals from others that they never saw again. So I don't have a lot of my works anymore, I always sent everything away. Some of the pieces I still have are there because people returned things for me to make an exhibition and the catalogue. That was the case with *Buracoarte* (Hole Art, 1979), for example, which I still have.<sup>16</sup>



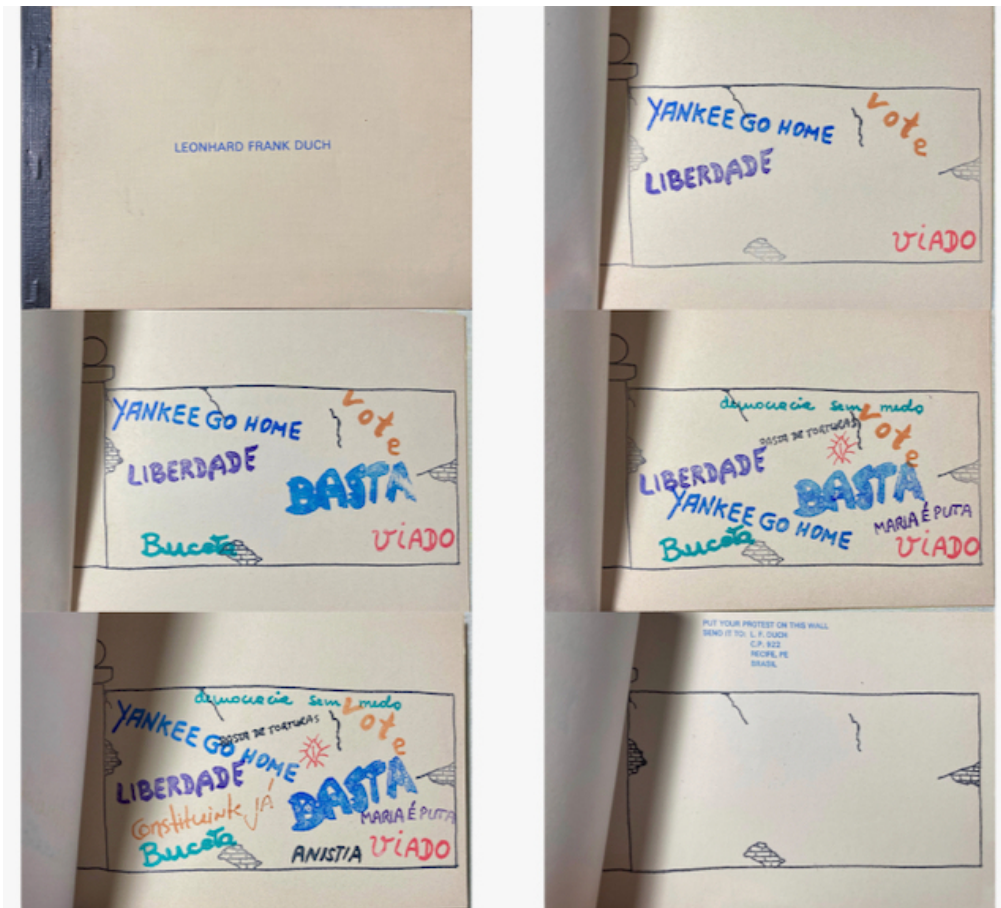
The Xeroxed *Buracoarte* catalogue (1979) that was sent to all the project participants, on the right is a page from the catalogue; courtesy of Leonhard Frank Duch, photo by Elena Shtromberg

**ES:** And you made two different holes for the *Buracoarte* project, why did you do it twice?

**LFD:** The two versions were part of the same exhibition. In the catalogue both versions of the hole are included, I don't remember exactly when it was, maybe 1976. One was with a round hole and the other with a rectangular hole and I sent them without making prior selections, because I had both types printed. The objective was... well, that I was living in a hole in the Brazilian dictatorship. When I worked on the wall, in *Protestbook*, [another project from 1979], that was different. There I wanted to post people's protests, so I photographed several walls with statements like 'yankees go home', 'Freedom', 'Vote', etc... Then I made rubber stamps with the

<sup>16</sup> In *Buracoarte*, Duch sent the roughly 300 artists in his network a postcard with a hole in it and asked them to return it to him with something in the hole; he exhibited the returned cards and later made a Xeroxed catalogue of the works included which he sent to participants

slogans I had photographed and put a different stamp on each page of the catalogue. The last page was a blank wall and that was the one the recipients were supposed to return to me with their protest slogans, because there is always something to protest, always, whether it is banal or serious. In mail art, there was nothing in the process where the work told me how to continue, it was me who said: Listen here, things are going to be the way I want them!



Leonhard Frank Duch, *Protestbook*, pages with graffiti stamps, 1979, courtesy of the artist, photo by Elena Shtromberg

[We look at some of the documents Duch has gathered]

**LFD:** My life in Recife started here [points to folder]. I don't have the documents from São Paulo anymore.

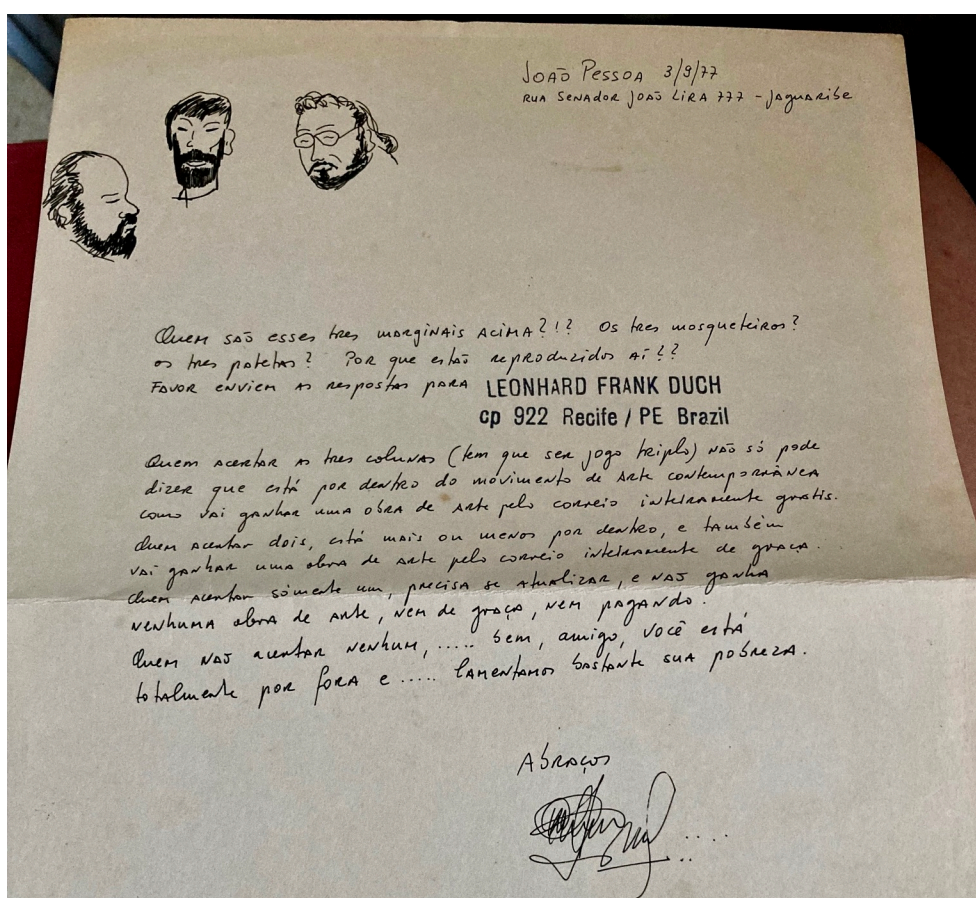
**ES:** There is a drawing here that says Duch the photographer.

**LFD:** Because I was also a photographer. I really liked photography, I didn't like video but photos... in São Paulo, I did fashion photography.

**ES:** I remember seeing an ad in which you were a model for a watch.

**LFD:** That was in Recife; but that was it, I was more of a photographer than a model. I wanted you to see this here [shows a box of files]; I did this work which was a drawing of

Paulo Bruscky, Unhandeijara and me and it said the following ‘Who are the three marginal figures above? The Three Musketeers? The 3 Stooges? Why are they reproduced here? Please send your response to Leonhard Frank Duch, Caixa Postal 922, Recife, Brasil.’ Whoever guessed all three would be able not only to say they are in the contemporary art world but would also win a work of art by mail, all for free. Whoever guessed two, was more or less in the art world and would also win a work of art by mail for free. Whoever only guessed one needed to get updated and would not win a work of art, not for free or for pay. And if they didn’t guess anyone right – well, they were totally outside of the art world. Here I didn’t sign it, I was always timid unlike other people; I signed with a moronic signature.<sup>17</sup>



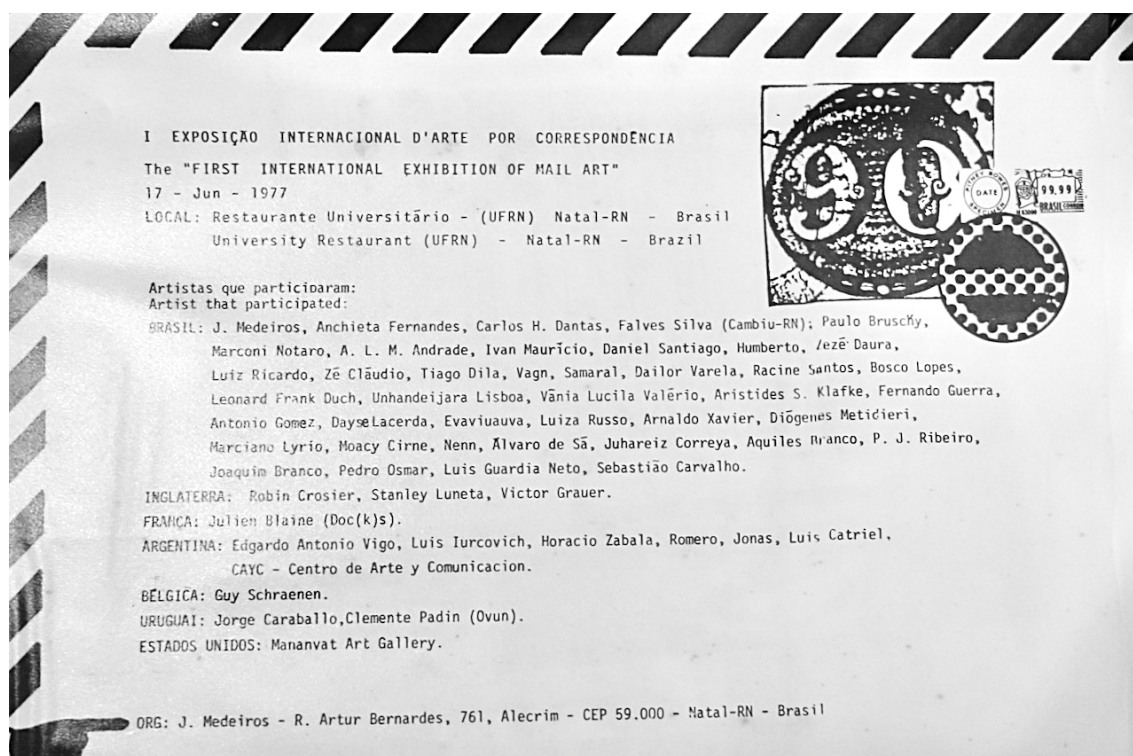
Leonhard Frank Duch, mail artwork: ‘Who are the three marginal figures above? The Three Musketeers? The Three Stooges? Why are they reproduced here?’, 1977, courtesy of the artist

**ES:** I love the three options. And, well, the signature is the rubber stamp, right?

**LFD:** It is. These old works were only published much later. Because, look, last time we talked about what was going on before mail art. In Rio, there was Samaral... do you know Samaral? In Rio he made zines, like these. In Natal, the ‘Primeira Exposição Internacional da Arte por Correspondência’ [the ‘First International Exhibition of Mail Art’, organised by J Medeiros in

<sup>17</sup> Both Paulo Bruscky (1949– ) and Unhandeijara Lisboa (1949–2020) are well known for their activity in the mail art movement and often collaborated with Duch

1977] was held at the university restaurant. At the time, everyone in Recife and the northeast wanted to be the first to organise an exhibition of mail art. Paulo Bruscky actually organised the first show of mail art in the northeast in 1975. I didn't know about it, I only saw the invitation later. I haven't seen any more information on it, but it was held in a room where he worked... that is, where he was employed, he never really worked. He always put on his coat and went to make art. A civil servant, so corrupt. He put up an exhibition in one of these rooms that you can lock. I didn't participate. But that one was actually the first international exhibition.



Poster for the 'First International Exhibition of Mail Art', June 1977, University Restaurant, Natal, Brazil, organised by J Medeiros, collection of Leonhard Frank Duch, photo by Elena Shtromberg

**ES:** I like this classified ad: 'An art was lost around there. Anyone who finds it please send to Leonhard Frank Duch and we will both be gratified.' I remember the classified ads Bruscky made but I have never seen yours, I didn't know you made them too.<sup>18</sup>

**LFD:** And there is that word 'too'. He was the one who made them 'too'. Unhandeijara Lisboa, from João Pessoa, was like me... he made art and had good ideas. Paulo Bruscky took ideas from him, too. Once I said, Nandi be careful, and he said 'no no, he is a friend', until one day he also found it too much. It's all too much. Because at Nandi's house in João Pessoa, we would often meet; there are still photos of us there, I have them. And Nandi had great sculptures. Did you know that he made sculptures, too?

**ES:** No, I only know of the graphic work.

<sup>18</sup> Duch placed the ad in the *Jornal do Comercio*, Sunday, 6 September 1977



Leonhard Frank Duch, classified ad placed in the *Jornal do Comercio*, Sunday, 6 September, 1977: 'There was art lost somewhere around there. Anyone who finds it please send to Leonhard Frank Duch and we will both be gratified.' Courtesy of the artist.

**LFD:** I made some with him there. He made sound sculptures that we could strike and make different sounds. We made sculptural musical. But since we are not like others, we don't have documentation of these things. There are so many undocumented things. We were so active, Elena, it really was an impressive time.

**ES:** Yes, I believe you, I like to read about this time, because in a way it was a time that was more real than what we have today. Today is more complicated.

**LFD:** It was a group of people who met at the right time and place; it is impressive. But I forget a lot of the names. I remember my mother when she was 82 or 83 and would say in German, 'I forget all the names' and I would say 'mom, don't worry, when I am your age I will also forget', and now I am that age!

**ES:** I also often forget and I am not in my eighties!

**LFD:** My collages, I hung many of them in the Livro 7, do you know it? It was very important in Recife. It was Tarcísio's [Tarcísio Pereira] bookstore, where we always met – not only mail artists but also poets, painters and all types of intellectuals would get together there. We would meet and drink a beer and have many conversations. Livro 7 was very important for the cultural life of Pernambuco.

Paulo Bruscky, he did a lot of things with communication. Once he had a turtle race... these kinds of things, it is interesting. He is interesting. The only thing that is uncomfortable is that he manipulated facts and appropriated ideas that were global ideas. We were there at Livro 7, drinking beer, a group of us chatting and saying 'lets do this, we could do this or that', group ideas... and then the next day....

**ES:** He would do it?

**LFD:** Not only would he do it, but he would go to the newspaper and say that it was his idea! This is terrible. If it was once or twice, ok, but with Paulo Bruscky it was all the time. It was a great talent that he had to do that. The project, *A GAVETA*,<sup>19</sup> wasn't his, it was another group's, a fantastic group that we had in Natal, João Pessoa and Recife, but Bruscky went to the newspaper...

I was studying journalism in Recife at the Universidade Católica de Pernambuco and became friendly with the Dean. We organised an exhibition of mail art there that was part of the 1st Festival do Inverno (the Winter Festival), with painting and other art all throughout the space. Bruscky made it seem as if he were the organiser. Maybe after the event he organised something, but the idea and the permission were... ah, it doesn't matter, let's just leave it.

We had great people, J Medeiros and Falves Silva in Natal. In João Pessoa, at the time, it was only Unhandeijara. We called him Nandi; it's too bad that he passed away. I was really sad when I learnt of his death, very, very sad. He died young, he was much younger than I am.



Some of the artists well known in the mail art scene in Brazil; from left to right: Leonhard Frank Duch (from Recife), Falves Silva and J Medeiros (from Natal), Unhandeijara Lisboa (from João Pessoa) and Paulo Bruscky (from Recife), photo courtesy of Leonhard Frank Duch

<sup>19</sup> *A GAVETA* was the first magazine for mail art in Brazil, it ran to twelve editions

Last time we talked about DOC(K)S and about Julien Blaine, who I consider the best editor. DOC(K)S was really important. When we wanted to free Caraballo and Padín, everyone only talks about Padín, but Caraballo was also really active and we were able to free them both. It was an incredible story. They say that there were more than ten thousand mailings, postcards and personal letters to the government in Uruguay and so they had to let them go, they couldn't just disappear them. If it hadn't been so public, they would have just disappeared.<sup>20</sup>

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**ES:** You were born in 1940, so you were five years old when the Second World War was over? Did it mark you?

**LFD:** Yes, I remember everything. Not only do I remember, I am still traumatised by it. The Russians, when they entered Berlin, the tanks, the noise of the tanks, they made a particular noise, then the cannons, the cannons would fire.

**ES:** And did you want to leave for Brazil when you moved there with your family, or did you want to stay in Berlin? Do you remember?

**LFD:** Before going to Brazil, I was sent to Spain as a war victim. I was with a family who were quite well off and it was the best period of my life. It was the first time I tried a banana, the first nude girl that I ever saw... everything there was a first. When I came back to Berlin I didn't speak German anymore, only Spanish; I had completely forgotten German and had to relearn it. And when I started to relearn it, we emigrated to Brazil.

**ES:** Was it a work opportunity that brought your family to Brazil?

**LFD:** Yes, for my father; he was an engineer at Siemens. He was the manager in Brazil, so we lived well, economically really well.

**ES:** And your mother? Did she also work as an engineer?

**LFD:** No, she was a housewife. It is a long life that I have had, a long, long life.

**ES:** This magazine that you organised with all the postcards, you made several copies, right?

**LFD:** I made as many copies as there were people who sent something and they all received a copy.

**ES:** So, many people have a copy?

**LFD:** If they kept it, but most people don't keep things.

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<sup>20</sup> Jorge Caraballo and Clemente Padín were imprisoned for their mail art activity during the dictatorship in Uruguay (1973–1985); the mail art community galvanised internationally to bombard the government with letters of support to free the artists

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Our interview ended with going over the materials Duch had gathered for me. He was animated by the news of a new publication focused on his life by Jorge Bucksdricker in São Paulo, titled *I AM AN ARTIST: Leonhard Frank Duch and Mail Art* (2022), which coincides with a more heightened awareness about his pivotal role in the mail art world.

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