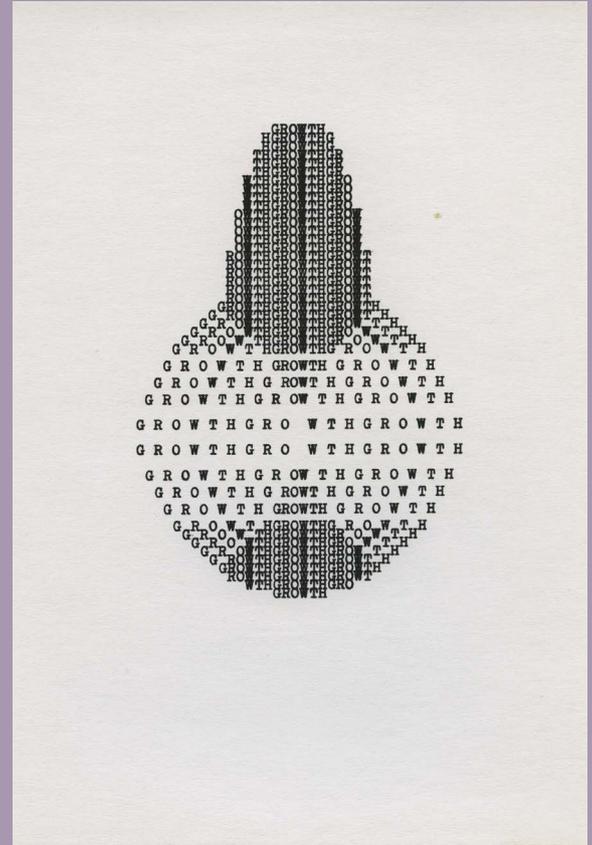


Holes in the Wall

MEG MILLER

CITY'S IMAGE

BER

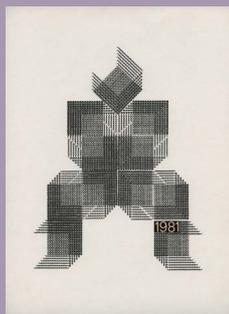


81

WORDS BY MEG MILLER
IMAGES BY CHERTLÜDDE, BERLIN

1 Growth, 1970s

At first glance, it looks like something out of a Fritz Lang movie. Like an early sketch for *Metropolis*, in which the skyscraper city sits atop the globe, or maybe arises out of it, subsuming a sizable portion of the Earth's surface. This dystopian planet is built completely out of letters – letters stacked vertically, stretching toward the sky. Letters curving into a sphere, rendered darker or lighter, spaced out or closer together, to create the illusion of depth and dimensionality. Letters that, when peered at closely, repeatedly spell out the word “growth.”



Made in 1970, *Growth* is the work of artist Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt, and is an early example of one of her many “typewritings” that she sent around the world by post from behind the Iron Curtain. Usually printed on A4 paper, these traveling works of concrete poetry carefully camouflage their political, social, or environmental messaging in order to elude censorship in the former GDR. Five decades later, *Growth* in particular feels like it could also be an encoded missive to a future Berlin.

Wolf-Rehfeldt lived and worked with her husband, the artist Robert Rehfeldt, in East Berlin, which would have borne little resemblance to Lang’s million acre metropolis at the time. Sealed off from the West by the Berlin Wall, East Berlin was reconstructed after WWII in the Soviet style, with monumental apartment blocks and the grand, tiered “wedding cake” buildings lining present-day Karl-Marx-Allee. The more modest *Plattenbauten*, mass housing slabs constructed from prefabricated concrete, were erected as a quick and inexpensive answer to the post-war housing shortage. Brown, grey and white, the apartment blocks clustered together at varying heights along the wide boulevards.

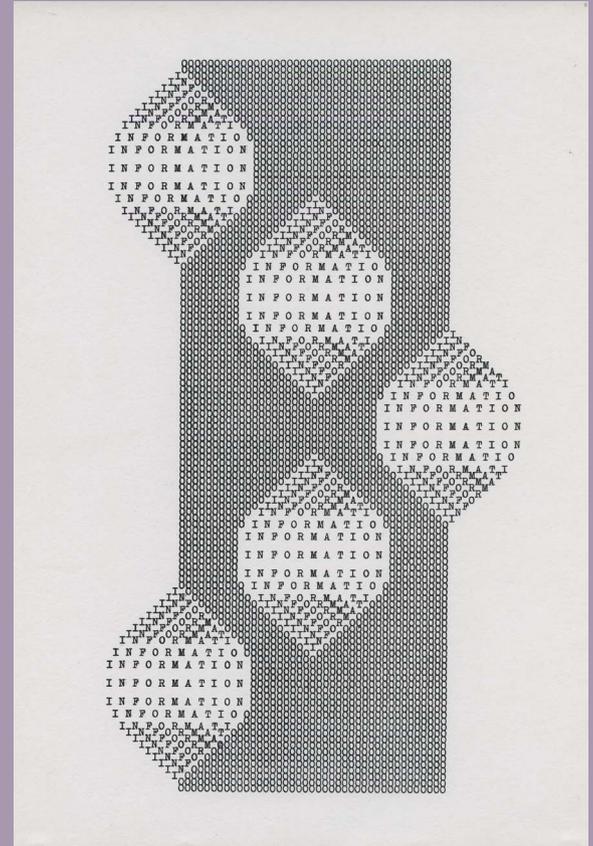
Located in the northeast neighborhood of Pankow, the Rehfeldts studio was a hub for radical artists working under the tightly-controlled censorship of the GDR. There, they could meet and find out about the goings-on of the art world abroad, beyond the confines of the Berlin Wall. As central figures of the mail art movement, the Rehfeldts sent *Kunstpostbriefe* (art letters) to artists abroad, circulating them within a world-wide network of correspondence and exchange, an exhibition across time zones and borders. Informal and inexpensive, mail art purposefully eluded the market, and for those living in the GDR, it also had the dual purpose of eluding surveillance.

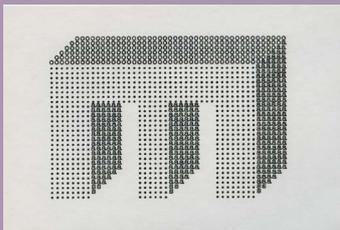
A secretary and typist by day, by night Wolf-Rehfeldt used her Erika typewriter to free the machinic, mono-

space letters from their regimented lines. In the tradition of concrete poetry, she considered language as both material and tool for building images on the page, and her witty wordplay and linguistic permutation allowed for political expression to fly under the radar. In a sketch entitled *Entwurfskizze*, for example, letters rain diagonally and indecipherably across the page until landing in their respective words: “denken” (think), “brav” (well-behaved), “zaghaft” (timid). Pen-drawn lines underneath appear like estuaries, while the hand-scrawled words “Bart” (beard) and “Ereignisse” (events), scrawled by hand and barely legible, evoke the image of bearded Stasi agents and give a sense of paranoia, censorship, and control. In East Germany, the Stasi, or state security service, kept a close watch on everyone, with dissidents put on trial and thrown into jail. Artists with views counter to the state kept a low profile; when asked years later if she felt observed by the Stasi during the years she was active as an artist, Wolf-Rehfeldt replied drolly, “Oh yes, they were present!”¹

‡

In Wolf-Rehfeldt’s *Cagey Being*, geometric figures made up of cubic cages allude to feelings of oppression living in East Germany, of being trapped. Wolf-Rehfeldt created the piece in 1989, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall in November of that year. Erected in 1961 by the GDR, first with barbed wire and later with concrete blocks, the curved 115 kilometer wall wrapped around West Berlin, which was surrounded on all sides by East Germany. But its effect was to enclose East Berliners: while people from the west could visit their friends and family on the other side of the Wall, armed border guards prevented East Germans from traveling to the west. Hints of that entrapment can also be seen in an untitled piece from 1970 that bears resemblance to the Brandenburger Tor,





These structures feel as familiar as they do fictional, like catching a glimpse of your city in an alternate universe. But Berlin's actual development at the time was also pretty surreal. An impenetrable wall ran through the center of the city in a jagged line, cleaving it in two halves. — PAGE 87

the Neoclassical city gate that stands in the middle of Berlin. Here stripped down to its basic structure and assembled out of periods, a's, and O's, the Brandenburger Tor was often viewed at the time as a symbol of a divided Berlin. Photos from the western side show the landmark sealed off from visitors, yet towering visibly above a graffitied wall.

‡

Created in the same year as *Untitled, Growth* is less spatial but no less architectural. Many of Wolf-Rehfeldt's works appear from afar as buildings or landmarks; it's only up close that you can read the discrete social and environmental messages they're composed of. These structures feel as familiar as they do fictional, like catching a glimpse of your city in an alternate universe. But Berlin's actual development at the time was also pretty surreal. An impenetrable wall ran through the center of the city in a jagged line, cleaving it in two halves. What was once the bustling, baroque city center around Brandenburger Tor was now the western outskirts of East Berlin, a kind of forgotten no man's land. New city centers were built on either side of the Wall. Pankow, where the Rehfeldts lived – which today feel like the northern out-reaches of the city center – became so closely associated as the political center of East Berlin that the name became synonymous with the GDR in the west.

Today, over 30 years since the Wall fell, only remnants of it remain, mostly as tourist sites. For decades after its demolition, odd strips of the former border went undeveloped. Sometimes you can still sense the impression it's left on the landscape: On the city's western outskirts, where Berlin meets the surrounding state of Brandenburg, a group of apartment buildings might meet abruptly with a field or farm, still holding the line of a border wall that's no longer there. But for the most part, traversing the city now, it's easy

to forget it was ever separated in two. Berlin's urban structure has changed massively in the past three decades, expanding both outward and upward. In recent years, the city's population has experienced rapid growth and, along with it, housing prices have risen sharply, pricing many out of the city proper.

‡

Wolf-Rehfeldt still lives in Berlin, some 70 years after she arrived in the 1950s. The growth she would have witnessed prior to 1970 – a city rebuilt out of the post-war rubble, then rebuilt again around a border wall – only intensified in the years after she created *Growth*. After the fall of the Wall and Germany's reunification, government officials started selling off publicly owned buildings in the former east. The Soviet slab-block buildings soon became galleries and clubs, and vacant industrial buildings were taken over by artists, DJs, and squatters. But in recent years forced evictions, rising prices, and demolitions making way for new, more modernized buildings have pushed them out. Faced with a budget deficit in the 90s and early 2000s, the German government sold more buildings to private investors, many of whom have in turn refurbished gleaming condominiums and constructed brand-new apartment complexes, circumventing housing laws in order to charge higher prices. While Berlin is still not exactly a skyscraper city, it's closer to Lang's Metropolis than it's ever been.

Yet if today's Berlin looks much different from the one that Wolf-Rehfeldt once lived in, there's a certain foreshadowing that can be seen in her typewriter works. In *Growth*, the structure seems to spell out its own demise. In the 70s and 80s, the Berlin Wolf-Rehfeldt inhabited was hastily assembled and fortified with concrete blocks, a material echoed in the square-ish grey typewriter letters that

comprise her “typewritings.” But as any concrete poet knows, the white space is just as important to the composition as the letters. Wolf-Rehfeldt believed in a future better than the bordered one she lived in, which is why she made and mailed her artwork, making the Wall “full of holes,” as curator Valerie Hortolani has put it. By 2015, when Berlin gallery Chert Lüdde brought the artist belated recognition with the exhibition *SIGNS FICTION*, she hadn't made anything new for 26 years. When the Wall fell, she stopped making art altogether. Without the ideological, censorial, and physical borders of the GDR to resist, she felt there was no longer any need. — END

1. Doreen Mende, “SIGNS FICTION: Ruth Wolf-Rehfeldt and 'HOME ARCHIVES: Paulo Bruscky & Robert Rehfeldt's Mail Art Exchanges from East Berlin to South America,’” *Art Agenda Review* (11 February 2015), art-agenda.com/features/236885/signs-fiction-ruth-wolf-rehfeldt-and-home-archives-paulo-bruscky-robert-rehfeldt-s-mail-art-exchanges-from-east-berlin-to-south-america, accessed 8 Sept. 2021.

IMGS All images courtesy of the Artist and ChertLüdde, Berlin.

COME WANDER WITH US!

SUBSCRIBE!

Be the first to receive our next issue
anywhere in the world!

DESIRED-LANDSCAPES.COM



NEWSLETTER — READING CITIES ARCHIVES

Exclusive stories, coming twice a month,
on urban ephemera and walking tours.