

Dear Correspondent,

From *Windows on Fire (the Alphabet of a Volcano)*,

*there is a poem burning in the fire.
to save it is to kill it. . . .
why?
because there is no poem
outside the fire*
Guido Vermeulen¹

During the years from 1996 to 1998 before *Renegade Library* was exhibited at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, the image of a pile of burning but incombustible books emerged from a correspondence that I was sharing with Brussels based artist and poet, Guido Vermeulen. A mutable metaphor, the fire represented a site of irresistible allure and poetic spectacle: books burning with unsuppressed creative energy, rather than from destruction. It was a generous metaphor that fed off a number of tangents including, the 16th century burning of martyrs in Belgium that were directly linked to my family history; the enduring grief of Nazi pillage, murder and destruction of Flemish lives and lands; the purification and renewal characteristics of prairie fires; and, the mindful centering enabled by a single flame from a candle or torch at night. We explored the flame as a site of both mourning and renewal. During my pre-exhibition travels in early 1997 to visit artists² in Belgium and England, Vermeulen suggested that we make a purifying fire in honour of the young victims of Marc Dutroux. Near to the time of my visit, *White Mars (White March)*, an unprecedented street demonstration in which over three hundred thousand Belgians marched, had protested the state corruption surrounding the Dutroux case.³ *FIRE or the secret conversation*⁴, documented this Brussels performance and the ideas that were burning alongside of it in the lead up to the exhibition.

Through the correspondences and occasional in-person visits, *Renegade Library* was a performance that I shared with Guido Vermeulen and more than seven hundred other contributing artists. Also performing were a multi-generational assembly of gallery visitors in Brandon who broke summer attendance targets. During their repeated visits they enacted the accessible nature of the project (unusual by most gallery standards): handling the items on display without the obstruction of gloves or vitrine covers, copying out the readily available addresses of artists whose work appealed to them, spending time in the workshop space that was set up within the gallery to make their own mail-art items, and it appears in a couple of instances, taking a few of the objects away with them. The gallery administrators, staff and volunteers had enormous "supporting roles" to play in such an unwieldy and unpredictable performance. Also, the postal networks, which included employees in mechanized and technologized ways of working, were—as in any mail art project—the stage upon which the entire production was set.

The performance of *Renegade Library* lingers as its most meaningful attribute in the way that Shannon Jackson highlights the meaning behind the supporting relations of socially engaged art practices,

Performance experimentation is, to some degree, the management of competing claims of inconvenience (it is often 'in the way' of the person who makes it). At the same time, to work in performance is to remember, and then to forget and to remember again, that such inconvenience is the price paid for being supported. Because so many relational art practices and so many new social models debate their willingness to ride that paradox, it seems important to ask what we can learn by foregrounding performance as a series of supporting relations, relations that sustain entities that are, for all intents and purposes, a living.⁵

As a performance, *Renegade Library* made evident the supporting relations that had developed from thirty or forty years of activity referred to as "Eternal Network", a term Robert Filliou used to refer to ever-evolving correspondence and distribution practices amongst artists engaged first in Fluxus and later in the growing networks of mail art.⁶ By the 1990s, mail art had an historic trajectory that was often referred to on mail art objects⁷ and was recounted by practitioners in Chuck Welch's *Eternal Network: A mail art anthology* (1995)⁸. The visual display of new and old interpersonal exchanges in 1990s mail art

reflected pre-internet social networks that anticipated both social media and what is now known as socially engaged art practice. The performance of mail art, with its pseudo-bureaucracies and its loose codes of conduct, put the management of social relations into the foreground in order to make evident the reliance on others that was part of making a life in art.

This box is the residue of mail art activity during the years 1996 to 1998. In keeping with the project theme, all of the items meet two criteria: the creators identified them as "books"; and, their creation was enabled by some kind of "collaborative" process. Each book item is labeled with a catalogue number that corresponds to information about it in the box's index, as well as in the original exhibition catalogue.⁹ The twenty boxes making up this edition of *Renegade Library* include the items of the original exhibition that survived its years as a mail art lending library (1998 to about 2002), and additional items that were contributed immediately following the exhibition.¹⁰ These boxes are being located in publically accessible collections of artist books throughout Canada and other countries.

Guido Vermeulen passed away last year (March 6, 1954 – September 24, 2014). His passing leaves a gaping void in the overall performance of mail art, which he nurtured for over twenty years through his thematic projects, zines, travel notebooks, visual poetry, paintings, collages, book works, long letters, found objects, and much, much more. As with his numerous contributions to *Renegade Library*¹¹, his mail art was always insightful, mysterious, beautiful, and generous. Though he participated in public and community art projects, mail art and alternative publishing were the primary sites for his practice. He is deeply missed by many mail art correspondents, collaborators, and admirers of his expansive art practice.

I dedicate the library's distribution to Guido Vermeulen: to his memory and to the collaborative ideals that he modeled for so many of us. For him, collaboration—what he took to calling "renegade" once the *Renegade Library* project was underway—was more than just reciprocal. "Renegading" was respectful, generous, liberating, and politically charged. It was unpredictable and outside of the usual operations of the art world, including mail art. Because he approached collaboration in such an unbounded way, his projects often spawned publications and more mail art actions. He was aware that spaces of true exchange and dialogue were rare, and worthy of time and effort.

In the spirit of unbounded collaboration and open distribution, this box, from the final edition of twenty boxes, is now a new act in the *Renegade Library* performance. It is hoped that in its new home it will be inviting of visitors who linger and consider their role—as spectators, participants, or "renegade" collaborators—in the living performance of art.

Yours sincerely,

Lois Klassen

¹ Guido Vermeulen (text) & Bernd Reichert (wood cut prints and binding). 1998. *Windows on Fire (the Alphabet of a Volcano)*. *Renegade Library* catalogue # 0409/GV.BR.

² Don Jarvis, Dawn Redwood, Baudouin 'Pigdada' Simon, Denyse Roos, Julia Tant, Patricia Collins, Jose Vandembroucke, Robert Varlez, Annina Van Sebreeck, Luc Fierens, Garcia Pedro, and others.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_March

⁴ Lois Klassen & Guido Vermeulen. 1998. *FIRE or the secret conversation*. *Renegade Library* catalogue # 0500/GV.LK.

⁵ Shannon Jackson. 2011. *Social Works: Performing art, supporting publics*. New York: Routledge. Page 42.

⁶ Ken Friedman. 1995. "Forward: The Eternal Network." In Chuck Welch, ed. *Eternal Network: A mail art anthology*. University of Calgary Press.

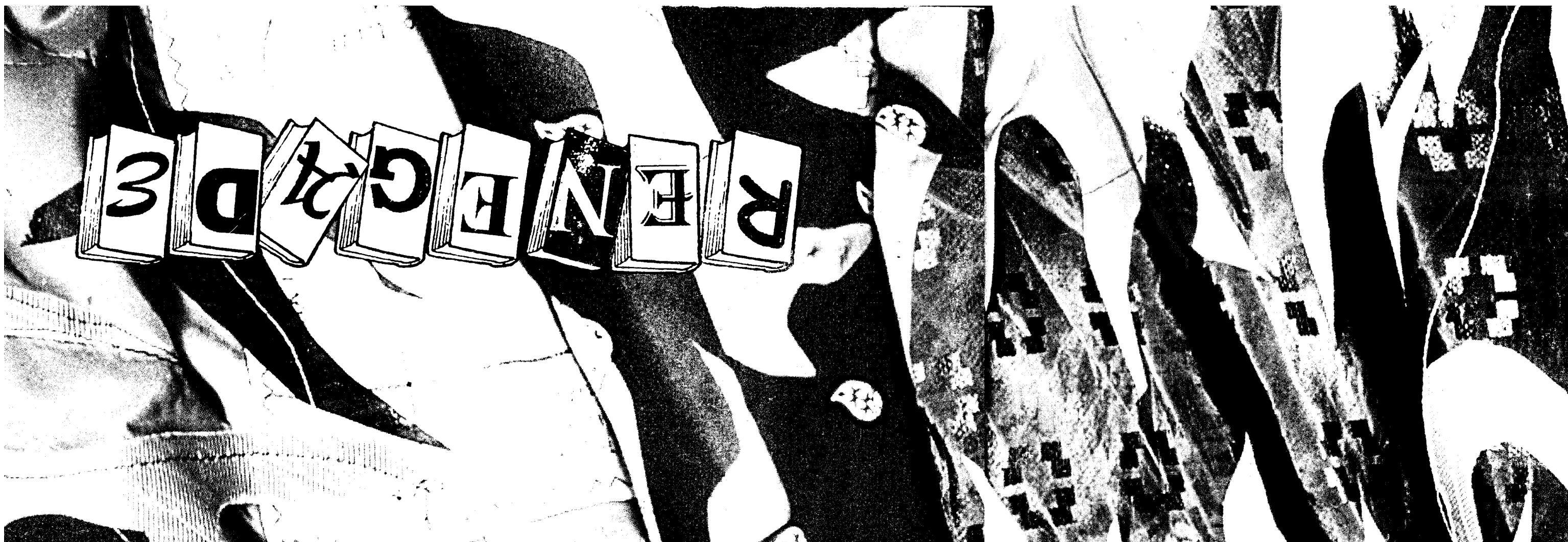
⁷ See for example, Luc Fierens (Belgium) & others. *Postfluxusbooklet* series. *Renegade Library* catalogue # 0700-series/LF.

⁸ Chuck Welch ed. 1995. *Eternal Network: A mail art anthology*. University of Calgary Press.

⁹ Items that were submitted to the library after the exhibition during its use as a mail art lending library are included in the box's index only.

¹⁰ The original items have catalogue numbers in the 0001-0599 series; the later items are numbered in the 0700 series.

¹¹ Guido Vermeulen contributed so many books to *Renegade Library* that they formed their own section: "True Renegade Books – Guido Vermeulen (TRGV)". See, Lois Klassen. 1998. *Books on Fire: the documentation of the Renegade Library*. (Catalogue), page 22. *Renegade Library* catalogue # 0600/LK.AGSM.



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