

Stamps in a Time of Epidemic

by Estrella de Diego

First things first: as a matter of hygiene – important, at a time like this – perhaps we had better start by talking about an epidemic. When we use the word "pandemic" we give the thing a lexical solvency and a modernity it does not deserve, especially since our current repertoire of responses is no different from how people attempted to deal with the flu a century ago: open the window, wash your hands, restrict movement and wear a mask. All the rest is just sloganeering and verbiage. Sheer laziness. Furthermore, the epidemic has not made us better, or even any different. It has brought to the fore the most befuddled aspects of our nature. Confusion is not a good counsellor – and politicians and their ever-changing squabbles and catchphrases are no help at all.

And yet the pandemic has led some of us to imagine new forms of community – international community, at that – and even to do so by way of a beautiful, modest object which has fallen into disuse, one that has at times been assigned a heroic role in commemorating great events: the postage stamp. The stamp has also been an agent of rebellion against the unique work – as in the 1970s, when it was active in the service of mail art, closely associated with Fluxus – and a site of intense yet ghostly love in Kafka's letters to Milena.

In fact, it is extraordinary – and thrilling, too – that the project conceived by Sandra Antelo (founder in 1995 of the non-profit organization *TRANS*>) should have turned its attention to the postage stamp when at the start of the epidemic it set itself to creating something to hearten and pat tribute to a Latin American community – which includes New York City, of course, so strongly Hispanic – that the epidemic has hit very hard. The tribute, as *TRANS*> made clear (<http://transmag.org/project/these-times>), is a homage

to the solidarity, the love and the pain we have lived and are living through in these times. So she called the project *These Times*. And the stamps are the warm-hearted and colorful message which reminds us that, in spite of it all, we must continue to build together. We must, above all, explore new / old formulas and modes of communication through an act of affection: sending a letter.

The “sheet” of stamps – digital and printed – is a combined effort by institutions and artists as different as ARCO, PROA, Cristina Iglesias, Ernesto Neto, Santiago Sierra, Zona Maco, Leda Catunda, Beatriz Milhazes and Regina José Galindo, to name just a few of the 50 participants in the project, and the print version will be distributed in the October issue of *Frieze* magazine. The stamps, fifty little universes of care and comfort for difficult times, are a discreet commitment to different ways of doing. The idea is that we peel them off and stick them next to the official postage stamps on our letters. And that we start writing letters again at a time when life has slowed down a gear or two. It is, then, a delightfully unexpected form of mail art for a time of epidemic – these days. It is also, and even more, a collective reflection on all the things we can do together from a place as unassuming as a postage stamp.

Translated by Graham Thompson