

## Artists' Books: a Brazilian Perspective

Paulo Silveira  
Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul

The first possible approach to acquiring a taste for artists' publications, especially for books, will certainly be through empathy. These works are not intended primarily to provoke emotions of high enlightenment in the public, a perception of the sublime. Sometimes this can happen, but it's very rare. It's more likely we will find windows of communication based on pragmatic solutions, such as the documentation of actions, proposed readings, verbal-visual equations, reports, and textual exercises that would not be in the interest of literature, graphic and photographic essays, anecdotes about the very condition of being published and other formulations that have the page as a support. It was due to immediate and evident empathy that I approached the artistic category identified as an artist's book (and at this point I request that these notes allow for a personal note). In addition to books, I was also interested in periodicals designed and managed by artists (magazines, newspapers, newsletters, zines and related forms), ephemera and, by extension, their historical companions: film, video, records, etc. In these considerations<sup>1</sup>, I dwell almost exclusively on printed media, based on two proposed introductions to the Brazilian scenario: (1) a summary of surveys conducted for the purpose of understanding artists' books from a historic and aesthetic perspective, and (2) reporting the partial demonstration of the results of forming a collection.

The research on artists' publications, organized within academic methodologies proper to graduate programs, gained momentum and visibility in Brazil in the mid-1990s. At that time, it was necessary to register the thoughts gathered on the subject internationally, with a considerable amount of information, verifying or confirming theoretical knowledge already more or less established and an exceptional and significant artistic production, although insufficiently known. On my part, I returned to texts and events related to the modern book, with few texts in Portuguese, and about the contemporary book, with even less information. It was possible to see that the artists' book – a work of contemporary art - remained marginal. One of the first doubts

---

<sup>1</sup> The original version of this text was prepared for presentation on a study day held on December 1, 2017, in parallel with the exhibition "Livres et revues d'artistes: une perspective brésilienne", in the Cabinet du Livre d'Artiste, Université Rennes 2, Rennes, France. The exhibition ran from November 30, 2017 to February 8, 2018.

emerged: how could there be little or no knowledge if we, art historians and/or visual artists, considered ourselves well informed about the formation of contemporary art? During my first great search for information (a laborious and expensive search, eminently by mail and with very little help from Internet search tools<sup>2</sup>, then a novelty), it was necessary to identify people, institutions, events, thoughts, beliefs and conceptual doubts before dwelling on artists' books. I came across or rediscovered notable names, keepers of the border between alternative (parallel) and dominant systems. They were theorists and critics with experience and fundamental points of view for the recognition of the field. However, it should be noted that, in general, their activities were based in hegemonic countries. As for international artists, many were studied. The research effort was very well received by the interested Brazilian public. I believe that the main merit of the research (which at that moment seemed to be solitary), was perhaps the recognition and consequent contribution to the appreciation of artistic and editorial efforts starting in the 60's, which would accompany the establishment of the set of languages and procedures that we have agreed to call contemporary art. The uniqueness, I admit, was the dissemination of those insights in Portuguese language.

Briefly, some specific points of the historical context of artists' books and publications in Brazil, considered in their national specificities and in their international relations, should be remembered here:

- the identification of Wladimir Dias-Pino's *A Ave* (The Bird, 1956) as a pioneering work, perhaps the most adequate for marking a possible conscious foundation of its originality<sup>3</sup>.

- the proposition on the part of some Brazilian visual poets, artists and theorists in the '60s and '70s to refer to publications with print runs and single copies of art-like books as "book-poems", such as in the articles of Ferreira Gullar in 1960, or in "O Livro, Livre" (The Book, Free") by Roberto Pontual, and in "A Origem do Livro-Poema" (The Origin of the Book-Poem) by Álvaro de Sá and Moacyr Cirne, articles published in *Revista de Cultura Vozes*, 1971.

---

<sup>2</sup> The search engines AltaVista and Yahoo!, for example, were created in 1995. Google is from 1998, the year that I completed writing my master's dissertation, defended in January of the following year, which would be turned into the book *A página violada: da ternura à injúria na construção do livro de artista*, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> The hyphenated construction of the surname is a proposition of the artist; this use will not be found in his earlier works, such as *A Ave* and *Solida*.

- the constant practice of concrete poetry and the Poem-Process movement, at least until the 1980s).

- the closeness to international mail art.

- use of photocopies as a source of multiplication.

- events carried out outside the Rio de Janeiro-São Paulo hub, like the small exhibition *Livre Como Arte: Mostra Internacional do Livro de Artista* (“Free as Art: An International Exhibition of the Artist’s Book”) in 1978<sup>4</sup> at NAC (Núcleo de Arte Contemporânea) at the Federal University of Paraíba, João Pessoa; *Exposição internacional de livros de artistas* (“The International Artists’ Books Exhibition) in 1979 and *1ª Exposição nacional de livro de artista* (The First National Artist’s Book Exhibition) in 1983, both at the Catholic University of Pernambuco, Recife<sup>5</sup>; and the regional *Arte Livro Gaúcho: 1950-1983* (“Gaúcho Book Art: 1950-1983”), in 1983 at the Museum of Art of Rio Grande do Sul, in Porto Alegre.<sup>6</sup>

- the holding of the XVI São Paulo Biennial in 1981, under the general curatorship of Walter Zanini, which included an exhibition of mail art and an integration group of new media and traditional media, with an exhibition of international books.

- the article “O Livro Como Forma de Arte” (“The Book as an Art Form”, by Julio Plaza, a Spaniard based in Brazil, published in two parts in the magazine *Arte em São Paulo* in 1982, based on ideas established by international thinking about the subject (such as the ideas of Ulises Carrión);

- the anthological exhibition *Tendências do Livro de Artista no Brasil* (Tendencies of the Artist’s Book in Brazil), in the São Paulo Cultural Center in 1985 in São Paulo, certainly the most important exposition ever held in the country with only Brazilian artists and with wide coverage.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> The implementation of the NAC and its first activities was a direct result of the efforts of Antonio Dias, Paulo Sergio Duarte and Raul Córdula Filho; the exhibition “Livre como Arte” was coordinated by Silvino Espínola.

<sup>5</sup> The first was organized by Paulo Bruscky and the second by Bruscky and Daniel Santiago.

<sup>6</sup> General curatorship of Vera Chaves Barcellos.

<sup>7</sup> Curatorship of Annateresa Fabris and Cacilda Teixeira da Costa. In 2015 a tribute was set up at the same Centro Cultural São Paulo: *Tendências do livro de artista no Brasil: 30 anos depois*, curated by Amir Brito Cadôr and Paulo Silveira. The latter was smaller, prioritizing works recently acquired or already in the collection of the institution.

- the persistence of the book-object in the 1990s and the effort to place it in the contemporary program, an effort clearly found in exhibitions with occasional but recurring occurrences.<sup>8</sup>

- the consequent devaluation and near erasure of the artist's book by the gallery public.

- the continuing claim or dispute for the designation "artist's book" by the advocates of unique handmade or sculpture-like books.

The last assertion on the defense of the book-object has remained valid, but in a much weaker way, from the years 2000 to date. Today the Brazilian symbolic system, especially the erudite, more clearly shows the aesthetic and political importance of the artist's book. Possibly the new essays on the subject, published since 2001, and the new academic research on the subject, have contributed to the relatively high degree of publicity that artists' books have achieved. At the moment, it seems that two topics are dominant among the members of the system. The first topic is marketing-related: how to manage the high supply of publishing fairs and independent publishers that have multiplied in the main cities of the country. There are many – more than one would expect in a country facing several crises, especially the schooling and education crisis.

Among the biggest fairs, we can highlight the Tijuana Fair (officially the first and most influential since 2009, with 16 editions held in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and foreign cities such as Lima, Buenos Aires and Cidade do Porto), Feira Plana (perhaps the largest, with five editions held in São Paulo since 2013), Parada Gráfica (five editions since 2013 in Porto Alegre), Miolo(s) (four editions since 2014 in São Paulo), Pão de Forma (three editions in Rio de Janeiro since 2013), Feira de Baronesa (four editions in Curitiba since 2014), Flamboiã (two editions in Florianópolis since 2015), and SUB (two editions in Campinas since 2016), among others. The fairs are usually annual, but some have dared to go monthly, such as Faísca (with 21 editions

---

<sup>8</sup> Like *Livro-objeto: a Fronteira dos Vazios*, Rio de Janeiro, 1994, curated by Márcio Doctors, in a model similar to *Brasil: Segni d'arte, Libri e Video 1950-1993*, organized by Marcio Doctors and Lucilla Saccà, curated by Saccà, roaming through Venice, Milan, Florence and Rome, 1993; or *Livro de artista: o Livro-Objeto*, in Fortaleza in 1994, curated by Dodora Guimarães. The exhibition *Ex Libris / Home Page*, São Paulo, 1996, conceived by Ricardo Ribenboim and curated by Giselle Beiguelman and Sérgio Pizoli, integrated published books and book-objects, maintaining the emphasis on the former.

since 2015 in Belo Horizonte) or irregular, such as Papelera (small and agile, with more than 20 itinerant editions since April 2015, mainly in Porto Alegre). Others do not have a fixed frequency, betting on circumstantial opportunities. The events can seek more or less regular locations identified with an alternative spirit (such as Tijuana in the Casa do Povo in São Paulo, or the Parada Gráfica in the Museu do Trabalho in Porto Alegre), or the most varied alternative spaces, from bars to universities, from parks to cultural centers. They sell everything: alternative magazines, comic books, posters, poetry booklets, photographs, printed T-shirts and all kinds of printings in general. But the most remarkable products are the artists' books, often promoted as "printed art". One current survey<sup>9</sup> shows 68 book fairs taking place in Brazil in 2017. Therefore, it is natural for those who observe the phenomenon to ask whether there is actually a consumer market for so many offerings.

Finally, continuing the observations on the historical situation, as previously outlined, a general picture can be made of the theoretical, critical and market place of artists' books and magazines in Brazil at the moment of writing these thoughts:

- the expansion of interest in theoretical and practical expressions in university education, now based on the increase in critical resources, which offer a greater theoretical base in Portuguese (and in Spanish, a language that is read by Brazilians without major difficulties).

- the expansion of direct and indirect interest on the part of undergraduate academic research (course completion paper) and graduate research (theses and dissertations) in art history and artistic practices.

- the greater participation and approval of graphic, editorial or expository proposals in bid documents supporting cultural arts production (a mechanism of direct subsidy to the arts that is much sought after in Brazil).

---

<sup>9</sup> A survey made by Fernanda Medeiros (Fundação Vera Chaves Barcellos) for this research. The list can omit occurrences and present repetitions (such as the Feira Papelera, from Porto Alegre, which is itinerant and repeats itself), but its raw numbers point to trends: there are 15 events in the city of São Paulo (three more in Campinas and one each in Santos, São Bernardo do Campo, Sorocaba and Vinhedo, in the same state); 14 events in Porto Alegre; 10 in Rio de Janeiro (one more each in Niterói and Paraty in the same state); 4 in Curitiba; 3 in Brasília; 2 each in Belo Horizonte, Salvador, João Pessoa, Santo André and Bragança Paulista; and one in Florianópolis (and one more in Rio Negrinho in the same state) and in Natal.

- the overflowing of issues from the artistic field to subfields and related fields, including false problems, such as the renewed conceptual doubt (or lack of knowledge) of photographers, newcomers to the artistic field or not, about the insertion of a portion of photographic books in the category of artists' books.

- the expansion of graphic designers' working in and knowing the artistic field.

- the recognition of associative or collaborative work in making publications viable.

- the search for formal (legal) and political (institutional) permanence of the results, verifiable in the increased attention to the use of ISBN and ISSN codes (International Standard Book Number and International Standard Serial Number, respectively).

- the full and uncompromising use of text and image editing tools and electronic publishing, allowing the spontaneous coexistence of textual, graphic and photographic rhetoric.

- doubts about the "artisticity" of independent editorial production (whether or not artistic work), based on the recognition of the breadth of the artist's operational spectrum.

Among these and other notes that could be added, one should be highlighted: the renewed role of the university.

The second proposed introduction to the Brazilian artistic scenario concerns the possibilities of visibility of this production in teaching and research environments for the non-Brazilian public (a justification of these considerations). I believe that the first exhibition with inter-university structuring in Europe on the production of artists' books in Brazil was *Livres et Revues d'artistes: une Perspective Brésilienne*, made possible by Université Rennes 2, an area of international studies interested in Brazilian production since at least 2003. This academic dimension must be emphasized, even for instrumental reasons that will be clarified below.

The largest part of the publications in the exhibition, a proposal conceived and organized by Laurence Corbel (Rennes 2), Aurélie Noury (Cabinet du Livre d'Artiste, Rennes 2) and Paulo Silveira (UFRGS), originates from the research project *Repositório Auxiliar de Publicações Artísticas ou Especiais* (Auxiliary Repository of Artists' or Special Publications), which is based on the Postgraduate Program in Visual Arts of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul,

Brazil. The *Repository*<sup>10</sup> has existed in fact, but without registration, since 2010, the year of creation of the Bachelor of Art History course, for which it sought primary sources of research on contemporary art. Officially, it was established on January 1, 2014 (the date of registration of the research project) considering the need for UFRGS to have artists' books in its collection. This was not possible (and to a certain extent still is not), mainly because of the lack of physical space in its book collections (the sector library) and works of art (in its artistic collection).

The research has a dual basis, namely conceptual and practical, with a proactive and instrumental purpose, confident of being successful from the beginning.

One purpose of the research is to understand the difficulties of updating collections of special publications in higher education institutions of art. In its more specific commitment (endogenous obligation), it turns especially to the needs of the UFRGS Institute of Arts. Its main purpose is the operation of alternative or non-alternative means for collecting and storing primary and secondary bibliographical or related sources, such as periodical and non-periodical publications, pieces or graphic products that are auxiliary to the practice of the visual artist, and multiples with the artistic production's expressive or documentary meaning. The *Repository* provides direct information for another ongoing research project, *Obras e Dispositivos Instauradores da Arte Contemporânea: Forma, Expressão e Contexto* (Establishing Works and Devices of Contemporary Art: Form, Expression and Context), which is entirely historical and under the same coordination.

According to the documentation registered in the Research System of UFRGS, the general objective of the *Repository* is to gather theoretical subsidies and instrumental information for the study of artists' books in their relationship with the mechanisms of belonging to collections, specifically: (1) to provide teachers, students and technicians with direct access to multiple products specific to contemporary production or to facilitate access; (2) to provide the Institute of Arts with a historical and theoretical resource to support the search for solutions to cease or reduce its lost ability to collect and store editions or multiple small objects; and (3) to stimulate the visibility of the training of agents in associated procedures (especially in initiating research).

---

<sup>10</sup> In the first version of this text the word "Repositório" (repository) was kept here in Portuguese due to the difficulty of translation into French. For the English language we have "repository". It is an old word, entering in 16th-century Portuguese, meaning "place where one stores, files, and collects something"; it was once again used for libraries, often referring to the virtual (digital) place of custody of digitized articles, theses, and books.

The donations received include artists' books (with the highest funding), art magazines (single copies), theoretical books, brochures of exhibitions, posters, printouts and multiples in general and graphic and editorial production material (artworks, photolithography, printing etc.). The publication that is collected by donation to the *Repository* remains in it, either in the residence of the researcher in charge or in temporary facilities in the Institute of Arts until it can be definitively referred to the Carlos Barbosa Library (if it is a regular publication) or to the collection of the Pinacoteca Barão de Santo Ângelo (if it is a book-object, three-dimensional multiples or single works).

The number of moves from the *Repository* to the Institute of Arts library is still small, in excess of two dozen, almost always of books and catalogs included in teaching syllabuses. For the artistic collection (of the Pinacoteca), only one work has been transferred until now, after temporary custody of little more than one year. A request for space was sent to the Historical Archive of the Institute of Arts, which embraces the project and is studying a solution. In practice, almost all copies of the *Repository* are still kept under the care of the researcher, in home storage, available to students for scheduled consultation. When attending to teaching needs, copies are taken to the classroom for student use. This has become picturesque and adds to the many difficulties of Brazilian public universities, which suffer from the lack of financial resources. In classrooms and corridors, art students and their teachers often repeat a phrase (between a motto and a mantra) by Hélio Oiticica, written on one of his ponchos or capes (known as "parangolés"<sup>11</sup>): "From adversity we live." Every Brazilian theorist or artist lives or has lived with this phrase. It seems that this reality never ends. At all times we repeat: "From adversity we live."

The *Repository* emerged from adversity. Despite this, and with the contribution of a personal collection, it was possible at first to propose a list with one hundred items for exhibition. Given the space available in Rennes, the amount was reduced. Even so, more publications than needed arrived, including donations to the CLA, for a final selection to be

---

<sup>11</sup> A sentence written on a cape or "parangolé" in December, 1966. A regional word of Brazil, especially of Rio de Janeiro, "parangolé" means a conversation that leads to nothing, small talk and, by extension, cunning, behavior to deceive. For Oiticica, as a performative element the cape (and the concept he calls "parangolé") restores the "primordial mythic structure of art" (*Aspiro ao grande labirinto*, 1986, 68). On the impulse to write, he would say, "I am not a poet, but an imperious necessity leads me to verbal expression."



made immediately prior to the assembly work. An attempt was made to illustrate in the best possible way the formal presentation solutions found in current Brazilian production, together with the copies already in the CLA collection and those obtained by Laurence Corbel's research (which included a visit to Brazil). Despite gaps, all decades since the 1960s are represented.

The exhibition aims much more to offer a sampling of recent productions (more easily collected) than to seek historical titles (which would require other gathering strategies). Almost all the works on display are book editions. Only some are single copies, as it would be unfair to disregard the use of uniqueness by artists who also produce print runs and few book-objects (the flirtation with sculptural aspects seems to have lost some of its place today). The journals are all published (there is not one assembling magazine). Some are original, others are facsimiles. Of the most recent books, most meet technical and commercial requirements such as owning an ISBN code. Of the earlier works, some have already been called indigent, due to their material or graphic precariousness. There are some lavish publications, which in a hurried review would be considered impersonal coffee-table books but were designed by artists with specific purposes or strategies (sometimes books of formerly powerful publishers who were struggling with financial difficulties). Photographic books (or photobooks), of course, are numerous, because photography is a basic resource of printed page rhetoric. Also present are catalogs of (sometimes institutional) exhibitions by artists, or opportunistic publications that benefit from exhibition events, as well as practical and conceptual expression books, self-published by their authors thanks to grants or supports (always including in these comments the books shown during a seminar and then recovered, and those already in the CLA collection).

As for the thematic perspective, the variety is adequately represented. There are works in metalanguage, turned towards themselves, towards the very condition of being books (omnipresent in shows and fairs); collaborations between two or many artists, with or without a unifying theme; narrative or non-narrative photographic essays; reports of independent or university research experiences; outbursts about professional or emotional conditions; records associated with performances and activities; documents associated with gender issues; and moans or mockeries about the political and socioeconomic condition of the country, which continues to have a relationship between the dramatic and the absurd.

And finally, the most obvious information: the dominant language of the publications shown in Rennes is Portuguese, as it had to be, although some works have texts in Spanish (with a view to integrate Latin America) or English (seeking globalization). In common, everyone aspires to the same thing: to communicate.

Translation: Chris McGowan