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# The Artists' Books in México: Cocina Ediciones y El Archivero

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*Abstract: The artists' books transformed since the sixties and seventies the traditional condition of bookness. As Johanna Drucker says, they change its status from secondary to primary, from instrumental to originative, from common to rare, without renouncing other identities. In Mexico there was a pioneer in this conceptual dimension from the book; Yani Pecanins began to create books for looking, for touching and also books for reading. She began with a little manual printing workshop in her kitchen's house, that's why she named it Cocina Ediciones (Kitchen Editions). Then she began to make relations with artists from other countries interested in the visual presence of books, in its objectness. By this way she began to compile the most important artists' books archive and opened a gallery named The Archivist (El Archivero) during some years. Now this is a research about this archive and the mexican concept of The Artist Book and its differences with the traditional book, the alternative book and the object book.*

Keywords: Artists'Books, Visual Arts, Mexican Artists' Books

## Introduction

**T**HE ARTIST BOOK is a form of expression that enables the interaction of different languages and communication systems; it is the term that has been used since more than four decades ago to indicate the joining of genres that seemed antagonistic, in what Anne Moeglin Delcroix denominates the radical mutation that, in the sixties, affected deeply the artist's definition and the nature of his activities. (MOEGLIN-DELCROIX, 1997: 23) Morgan, a North American critic who is a specialist in the subject, points out that these books transcend in their intent to be placed outside the galleries and art commerce, transforming the book into a concept or an idea; what's true is that artists' books are visual, plastic and interdisciplinary repositories, vehicles of expression of any movement of contemporary art whose symbolic presence is an extension of that which is literary, drawn, pictorial, sculptural and graphic, merged in the semantic and the poetic. Artists' books are not books to be read from left to right and from top to bottom, they are books that connote; they are there to be interpreted and enjoyed by all the senses.

According to authors like Moeglin Delcroix, it is specifically in the sixties when the beginnings of this genre of visual arts can be established, with Dieter Roth's "dematerialization of art" samples and his stitched comic strips, or his "Literature Sausages" (Germany in 1961), and Edward Ruscha's sequence of gas station photographs (in the United States in 1962); both artists created a rupture; although it is still possible to perceive in their samples Dadaist and conceptual influences, their pretensions are not clear, what is definitive is the exploration that they make

of the possibilities of deconfiguration and reconfiguration of the book.

However, some sustain that Marinetti, in 1909, established the first precedent of the page as a space for artistic experimentation, and that Marcel Duchamp's ready-made Boite-en-Valise or some futuristic, Dadaist, constructivist, surrealist works, and particularly the works of the COBRA group, are antecedents of the artists' books of the seventies.

Garbiñe Larralde (LARRALDE, 2006: 76) makes a comparison: in the traditional book, factors intervene, such as the text's author, the owner, the editor's boss or client, the proofreader, the designer, the pre-press technician, the pressman, the bookbinder, the distributor, and the reader - final beneficiary of the entire process. In the creation process of an artist book, editing is conducted in an integral manner by the author, who develops all the tasks, from the conception to the realization of the work, which is exhibited, and the beneficiary is the spectator, or the gallery or museum visitor.

The artist book, considered a volume in space, that is, thought of in the language of art, is a territory of plastic communication whose visual narrative is autonomous and represents an alternative to poetry, which does not respond to a certain functionality in favour of the search for form or for a series of forms that fit into different structures, formats and temporalities.

## Types of Artists' Books

The taxonomic variables of artists' books are many, as they depend on formal, conceptual, creative and technical conditions. The primary classification concerns number of copies: artist books that have a



single copy, appealing to the idea of originality; some authors subdivide this section into unique artists' books, which maintain formal similitude with the traditional books while considering their plastic qualities; there are object-books whose approach is the form's volume and tridimensionality; montage-books that allude to new collage applications; and recycled books, which re-semanticize a book that has already been in circulation. On the other hand, there are the serial books that, using different artistic techniques of multiple reproduction, such as serigraphy, lithography, engraving, or the newer techniques, always controlled by the artist, manage a limited number of copies of the book. This category is frequently confused with what in bibliophily is also called artist book, a genre of books that are printed with extreme care, with fine paper, very high-quality printing and a limited number of copies, these are art books. (ANTÓN, 1994: unpagged)

Cornelia Lauf and Clive Phillpot (LAUF & PHILLPOT, 1998) make their own classification of artists' books: books and book intervention, magazines and magazine intervention, pages and page intervention, illustrated books, graphic books, visual poetry, albums and inventories, comics, fast books, reproductions and note books, documentation, scores, accounts, writings on objects, diaries, declarations and manifestos, assemblies, collages and anthologies.

Some, like César Reglero, affirm that it is not possible to propose a typology. After observing hundreds of artists' books, it is hard to fragment the concept because there are books of all colours, off all dimensions, of all formats, with all the techniques; books in the form of a night table, of a brick, books made of crystal, jam and milk skin, aluminium, marble, wood and paper, pull-down, accordion-shaped, printed and handmade, weaved and embroidered, die-stamped, engraved, waxed, and a long etcetera. Thus, every artist has his own idea and his own concept. (REGLERO, 2007: unnumbered)

### Artists' Books in Mexico

This plastic genre started with an underground, home-made character, and was at first united with the artist group-forming movement during the seventies, this way, the groups financed their projects and searched for alternative exhibition spaces for their works or for the exhibition of their countercultural manifestos; some who are worth mentioning, for their importance, are Grupo Suma, Proceso Pentagono, Mira, Marco and No Grupo, who sooner or later broke up and only some of their members managed to stand out in the commercial world of art.

All of them turned to white pages for a "solid physical and social space", considering the - at that

time - new reproduction techniques pertinent for their communications; thus emerged the modern forms of graphics: photocopies, heliographs, mimeographed stencils, according to Raquel Tibol, widely linked to conceptual art, Arte Povera, neopopulism and urbanism. (TIBOL, 1987: 271)

Among these groups, there is a strong feminist tendency integrated by an irregular number of artists who move as an informal group inside the circle of female creators; female writers, actresses, photographers and visual artists with a common objective of searching for female identity in art, and this keeps them always within a path of marginality whose formal approach are artists' books.

Typography, then, surpasses their qualities of expression of the linguistic code to acquire other commitments. The letter turns into a self-referred symbol and its functions, metalinguistic *per se*, translate and semanticize the art language, becoming symbolic configurations or retaking their most primitive representation - handwriting or calligraphy -, to express the conditions of the common citizen. (VILCHIS, 1999:57-58)

From graphics on a loose sheet of paper to graphics in an artist book, there is only one step. A plastic sequence is enough, along with the continuity of visual text reading through some indicator that can be the traditional binding, folding, or putting together with different materials.

The subject matter is the day-to-day and the imagery of middle class Mexico. The signs and their sensuality are found in the most common objects: sewers, cans, traffic lights, missing photographs, useless documents, questioning with them the commercial circles of visual art. This way, artists' books had a poetic and critical sense.

For the development of this genre in Mexico, the presence of Martha Hellion and Felipe Ehrenberg was very important, as was the influence of Ulises Carrión. The first two contributed to the concept with works that they developed in Mexico, which they would later consolidate with their publishing house in Devon and their Fluxus and Carrión-style year-books, with the theoretic manifest of the artist book (DEBROISE, 2007: 176) and the organization of one of the most important heritages of this genre in the world; Carrión established that the artist book had to be separated from the literary book, understanding their material and conceptual distances; the artist book, affirmed Carrión, resorted to the human beings' innate ability to create, understand and experiment with symbol systems, "the body of the new book is that which the more it nears the artistic object, the more it distances itself from graphic symbols, depositing tradition, history, thought or inspiration. Reading, now, is the human body, suggestive

of the book; structure as an element.” (RENÁN, 1999: 33)

Likewise, the book, magazine and poster design works of Marcos Kurtycz, Polish artist who lived in Mexico since 1969 until his death, and who named his work *Arte-Facto*, were based, according to his own words, on visceral sincerity. One of his most important deeds was the printing of an issue of artists' books in the Carrillo Gil Art Museum in Mexico City.

### **Cocina Ediciones and El Archivero**

Yani Pecanins was born in Mexico City to a Catalan mother and a German father, and grew up in a family of contrasts: openness versus closeness, discipline versus disorder, rigidity versus flexibility. Her family is a clan of women, several of them artists, from the painting grandmother to the blues-singing cousin, her family and a childhood surrounded by filmmakers, photographers, stage designers, plastic artists and important characters from the Spanish exile are an important life referent.

Yani studied linotype and bookbinding in the typography workshop of Barcelona's School of Arts and Crafts, and what she learned there, along with her frequent encounters with Alan Glass, a close friend of her mother's and aunts, who owned the most important gallery in Mexico City, *Galería Pecanins*, determined her orientation as a visual artist.

Since 1977, Yani Pecanins collects all types of objects that she acquires on Sundays in the great market of La Lagunilla, a neighbourhood in which during the weekends spreads an enormous market of old, used, intriguing, unique things, and she begins to make books along with members of *SUMA* group; in that same year she begins work in an independent publishing house. The first books that are made are shared with her closest friends.

*Cocina Ediciones* was an alternative developed by Yani Pecanins and Gabriel Macotela, who invited the collaboration of visual artists, writers, visual poets, illustrators, designers and photographers from Mexico and Spain, carrying out mimeographic copies of codexes, folders, notebooks and other variations of the artist book. They made the drawings, illustrations, prints and folding by themselves and obtained different intersubjectivities among the creator, the object and the word, materialized in apprehensible ideas whose sense was directly related to the visual and tactile properties of kraft paper, corrugated cardboard, revolution paper, adhesive paper, rubber stamps and different formats.

An important contribution of *Cocina Ediciones* to artists' books was the “*Paso de Peatones*” magazine, whose circulation of three hundred and fifty copies of a unique volume was distributed among its creat-

ors. The magazine, 5 x 7 inches, made of wrapping paper and printed on a mimeograph, made evident new modalities of the genre, such as stamps, ties and handmade seams, and assembled important artists of different disciplines and nationalities, like Guinovart and Michael Tracy.

The name of this publishing house always reflects the familiar and homey character of this alternative circle of artistic production, and Yani's artists' books since then have defined a particular brand; conceptually, they are a reflection of what she thinks of the world, the social issues and the events of her life.

The role of sexuality, the obsession with the female aspect and the social impositions on women, the exile contexts, her grandfather working in a linen factory, her other grandfather having died on the Hindenburg, while her grandmother, her father, and her uncles were saving their own lives, or the Nazi concentration camps, among other subjects, represented through the textile sphere and female handicrafts. In her work, there are clothes, fabrics, open-work, embroidery, pieces of thread, yarn and reel, locks of hair, small memories like postcards or stamps.

Yani ties things, aligns them, inserts them into small boxes, fills them with sensations and emotions, writes over things, sometimes tales, sometimes personal stories or family histories, she lets the spectator become involved, creating what she calls moments of intimacy. To make an artist book, she interposes objects transforming them in their totality, with a sense that tends to be different than their original meaning.

In 1985, Yani Pecanins, Gabriel Macotela and Armando Sáenz founded *El Archivero*, which became during the following decade the seat of artists' books in Mexico.

A publishing house, library, gallery, and finally, a collection, *El Archivero* was located in the streets of Frontera, Tabasco and in Casa del Poeta in Alvaro Obregon in Colonia Roma, and became the nucleus of relationships between artist book creators from Mexico and other countries, until disappearing in 1993.

Inspired by the concept of *Other Books and So*, opened in Amsterdam by Ulises Carrión, *El Archivero* promoted the creation and exhibition of national and international artists' books, containing different linguistic and stylistic resources; sometimes ideas were joined based on a thematic or generic unit such as mail art, postal stamps, the street, or free proposals were simply received.

Soon after inaugurating this space with all the risks involved, Yani began receiving artists' books by artists from other countries, from the most renowned, like Christo, to names that she had never heard before. Everything arrived through mail, from Aus-

tralia, Poland, France, Spain, increasing the El Archivero's collection more and more, and so she began to catalogue and protect, understanding that this was an important patrimony in which artists' books of different nature, resources and concepts were compiled, and although the physical space is no more, Yani has kept this cultural heritage, increasing it through the years not only with artists' books, but also with literature specialized on this subject.

## Conclusions

A Latin proverb says that "even a book has a destiny", and regarding the density of books, Ilin affirms, "it depends frequently on the destiny of people, cities, countries", the appearance of artists' books was not by chance, and nor are their plastic, poetic and strategic qualities, it is not for nothing that the life of books has been inseparable from man's history. Artists' books emerged during strong moments of political and socio-cultural crisis around the world, and since then they continue to be important testimonies of the visual imagery and the aestheticism of our times.

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## About the Author

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First woman in Mexico using digital resources in arts and design. Also first woman director of National School of Visual Arts at UNAM (2002-2006), has published four books about Graphic Design Theory, Graphic Design Methodology, Non-linear languages semiotics and Graphic Design Hermeneutics, 32 research papers and 18 didactic manuals. Manager from two different firms: a technologic center and a graphic design place. Teacher during 30 years, oficial tutor from postgraduate program in the lines of researching projects, semiotic and hermeneutic studies; participating in academic events in Mexico, Dominicana Republic, USA, Canada, Greece, Spain, Cuba, Peru, Holland, Uruguay, Argentina, Germany, London, Sweden, and Portugal and presentating conferences in Mexico, Panama, Cuba, Spain, USA, Lisbon, England and other countries; also, being advisor thesis from more than 120 researching student thesis works in different universities. Professional graphic designer, working in Mexico, USA and Canada in firms like BMG Entertainment, Environmental Law Institute or UNESCO in traditional and digital way. Visual artist, has exposed digital art, collage and visual poetry in 30 exhibitions in Mexico, Panama, USA, Colombia, China, Rusia, Spain, France, Greece, Palestine and Frankfurt.

Both Cocina Ediciones and El Archivero, and the heritage that Yani Pecanins cures today, are of great transcendence, unique in their genre in Latin America, and comparable with Ruscha's Heavy Industry Publications, Dieter Roth's Forlag ed, Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press, Dick Higgins' Something Else Press, Nannucci's Exempla, Ulises Carrión's In-Out Productions, Simon Cutts' Coracle Press, Felipe Ehrenberg's, Martha Hellion's and David Mayor's Beau Geste Press, and Ulises Carrión's specialized Other Books and So libraries in Amsterdam (1975), the Art Metropole of General Idea in Toronto (1975) or Sol LeWitt's Printed Matter in New York (1976).

Artists' books are important testimonies of visual culture; their condition of visual texts creates specific reading characteristics. It is very important, considering a collection of this category, to conduct a research whose analysis will result in a reasonable catalogue that may be brought to the knowledge of all those who are interested in this fragment of the universe of books.

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