

# Artwork or document? Latin American materials at the Study Centre of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA)

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The Study Centre at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona has, since its inception in 2007, amassed a wealth of material relating to Latin American art. Its collecting policy addresses the relationship of contemporary works of art to their documentation and aims to compensate for the lack of a tradition of public collecting of documentary and bibliographic material relating to 20th-century contemporary art practices. The collection now includes influential artist publications such as concrete poetry, magazines, mail art, books of photography and even fiction written by artists, as well as special materials from letters to photographic negatives, alongside information from galleries, cultural spaces and artistic centres.

The MACBA Study Centre opened its doors in December 2007, its founding aim being to broaden and enrich MACBA activities by establishing a strong link between the museum's exhibiting programme and the study and production of knowledge on all aspects of contemporary art. With its creation, MACBA expanded its scope and consolidated its research profile, having boosted its educational programme two years earlier with the launch of the Independent Study Program.<sup>1</sup>

Two facts were decisive in the creation of the Study Centre. Firstly, the conviction that, since the beginning of the 20th century, and especially from the 1950s, artistic production could not be understood through artworks alone, since the 'document' (in its various and varied meanings) had become part of the language of contemporary art that makes up complex cultural production. Quite often in contemporary art the original artwork vanishes as a referent, while the document remains as its only manifestation, creating an ambiguity in the nature of the artwork-document. In fact, the conception of some contemporary artistic works

admittedly uses this duality in an attempt to transform a document from a humble record into an autonomous element able to function in multiple spaces of art. In such cases, document and artwork are one single thing, and become valuable as collectable or exhibition material alike.

The second motive was the awareness that, in our Spanish context, documentary holdings had so far received little attention, because of the absence of a tradition of public collecting, and a lack of recognition of their role as essential components of the general cultural heritage and, in particular, of the artistic heritage.

With the establishment of the Study Centre, MACBA reacted to both facts, providing itself with the means and the resources to collect, preserve and disseminate those documentary and bibliographic materials which relate to contemporary art practices in the broad sense: not only from the perspective of art history, but also encompassing other fields such as cultural studies, communication, philosophy, sociology, etc.

As the starting point of the Study Centre

collection, MACBA relied on its library holdings: mainly reference bibliography and, to a lesser extent, artist publications and other special materials.<sup>2</sup> Before the Study Centre was founded, the Museum had been acquiring through different means various sets of documents, which until then had been distributed – sometimes not systematically – between the art collection and the library. In addition, the bibliographic and documentary holdings from the Alexandre Cirici Documentation Centre of Contemporary Art, founded in 1984 in what was then called the Centre d'Art Santa Mònica, were incorporated and transferred in their entirety to MACBA in 2006 in order to concentrate all specialised documentary resources on contemporary art in the city in one single institution. This contribution resulted in the addition of a number of significant documents, notably the valuable personal papers of the painter Joan Josep Tharrats (1918-2001), a member of the group Dau al Set who served as editor of the magazine of the same name which the group released between 1948 and 1956.

## The collections

In order to extend and enrich these initial holdings, one of the main objectives of the Study Centre, we needed first to answer a question of major importance: what is the scope, and what are the limits, of the collections that the Study Centre aims to consolidate? Or, to put it another way: what are the parameters that define which materials should be incorporated into the holdings? The acquisition policy of the Study Centre – be it purchases, donations, deposits or exchanges, which are the most common acquisition methods – is defined by the same discursive lines that give content to all other MACBA activities, starting with the temporal and geographical parameters which limit both the exhibition programme and the acquisition of art works for the art collection. Thus, the period on which the Study Centre has focused begins in the 1950s and continues to the present. In terms of geography, although it certainly gives priority to matters related to its local context, the Study Centre has not imposed any geographical boundaries to its collecting. Stemming from this decentralised interest, close attention has been paid to contemporary art practices in Latin America, and the Centre has assumed a specific responsibility as a reference institution for adequately preserving and documenting contemporary artistic practice within that context.

Together with these temporal and geographical parameters, a series of key themes guided acquisition of new holdings in this first phase of the Study Centre's activities. It is worth noting some of the more relevant of these, although it should be emphasised that this list is by no means exhaustive, and that the work dynamic which shapes these collections involves the gradual incorporation of other key themes, as certain territories are covered and research unveils new areas of interest.



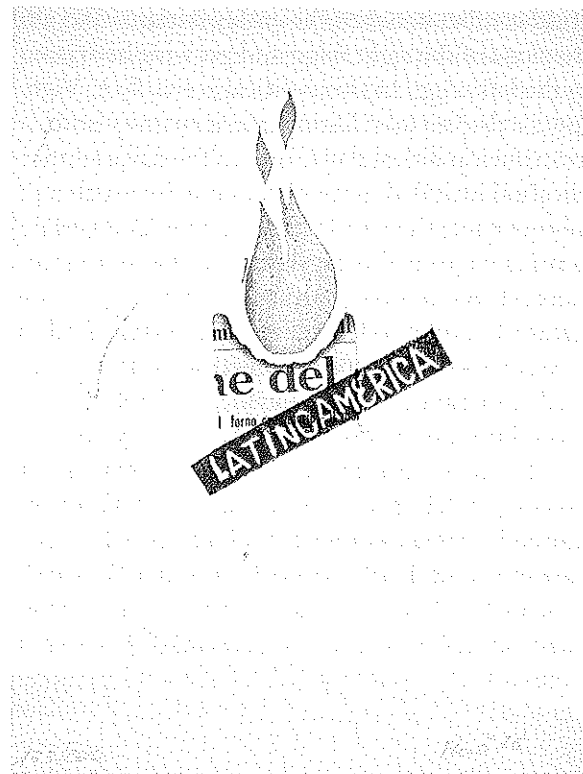
Joaquín Torres García, *Lo aparente y lo concreto en el arte* (Montevideo: Asociación de Arte Constructivo, 1947)

The change of artistic paradigms which took place in the fifties and sixties brought about an unstoppable process of de-materialisation of the art object. Besides other consequences, this consolidated artist publications as an artistic medium in their own right. Among other relevant pieces stemming from Latin American artists, the Study Centre preserves emblematic books from the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García, such as *Foi* (1931), *Lo aparente y lo concreto en el arte* (1947), *La tradición del hombre abstracto* (facsimile of the edition of 1938), as well as the last issue of the magazine *Removedor*, founded by the artist in 1944. The documentary collection of concrete poetry also stands out, with publications from the Brazilian artists Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari and Augusto de Campos and the first issue of the magazine *Noigandres* (1952). Highlights from the

following decade include *El corno emplumado* (1962-1969), *SLD. Suplemento/literatura/difusión* (1967-1970) and *Tótem* (1971-1977), as well as the book-suitcase from the Mexican artist Octavio Paz entitled *Octavio Paz/Marcel Duchamp* (1968).

MACBA is working intensively to consolidate its artist publication holdings of the sixties and seventies, due not only to their relevance for tracing this phenomenon's genealogy, but also because they often constitute significant pieces in the overall artistic production of their authors, many of which are well represented in the MACBA art collection. Artists' publications by Ed Ruscha, Marcel Broodthaers, Dieter Roth, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Christian Boltanski, Hanne Darboven, Richard Long, Lawrence Weiner, Peter Downsbrough and Hans-Peter Feldmann, to name but a few, fall into this category, which also includes pioneering Spanish artists, such as the collective Zaj, Joan Rabascall, Eulàlia Grau, Muntadas, Isidoro Valcárcel Medina, and magazines like *Dau al Set* and *Negre + Blau*. In the sixties and seventies, a number of alternative circuits and networks emerged in Latin America which focused on the publication, distribution and exchange of experimental publications. The Study Centre holds a significant collection from this period, with outstanding works such as those from Mirtha Dermisache and Antonio Dias, as well as those from the Mexican artist Felipe Ehrenberg, founder of the Beau Geste Press (1971-1974) in England, which evolved into a creative network due to the manual production of its publications, that required artists to spend two to four weeks in Ehrenberg's home to produce a print run of 20 to 200 copies. Beau Geste Press gave visibility to new developments in Latin American art in Europe. The Uruguayan Clemente Padín and the Brazilian Paulo Bruscky were the first artists to produce their work through this publishing house, together with the Mexican artist Ulises Carrión, who went on to found the bookshop-gallery-workshop Other Books and So in Amsterdam, a space that served, between 1975 and 1978, as a vital cultural centre for exhibitions, collaborations, performances and the making and publishing of artists' books. The Study Centre holds key publications from these artists, such as the magazine *Los buesos del plata* (1964-1969) and *Ovum 10* (1969-1972), both published by Clemente Padín.

Also directly linked to these new formats is mail art. Many of its representative artists, particularly in Latin America and Eastern Europe, gave a marked political character to their works. In this field, the figure of Edgardo Antonio Vigo (La Plata, 1928-1997) stands out as a precursor of mail art and a



*Sobre CVC*. 2641900. [La Plata : s.n.], 1976.

driving force behind the conceptual art trends in Argentina and Latin America. In addition to his own artistic production, Vigo wrote critical essays and chronicles, organised numerous events, and published a huge array of printed material. The Study Centre has an important and extended collection of documents illustrating his work, as well as the magazines that he published. In 1958 Vigo started to produce periodicals that he directed, designed, financed and distributed. The first magazine, entitled *WC*, which referred to the famous *Fontaine* (1917) by Marcel Duchamp, was a collective project that spanned five issues and adopted the format of an envelope which included wood engravings, collages, graphic compositions, foldable leaflets and texts-manifestoes authored by him, as well as texts from European artists which had not been published in Spanish. In 1960 he produced *DRK '60* with a similar editorial program, of which only three issues appeared. In 1962 *Diagonal cero* was launched, with 28 issues published until 1969. The title alluded to a non-space in the urban grid of La Plata, the number zero of a diagonal road. *Diagonal cero* thrived in a prolific decade for scientific, intellectual and artistic production under the predominantly Argentinian development model of the sixties. The magazine *Hexágono '71*, published between 1971 and 1975, was produced in 13 issues and was influenced by a distinct period in the country: the worsening of the

political conflict between the authoritarian expressions of the right wing and growing activism from the left wing. In this political scene, E.A. Vigo adopted a discourse of Latin American unity and more explicit political engagement; the cover of the publication included, notwithstanding its usual humorous tone, the words 'Revista Hexágono, eso sí, la más peligrosa' (Hexágono magazine, yes it is, the most dangerous one). Other relevant publications in the collection of the Centre include Our International stamps/cancelled seals: (to) towards a marginal creative parallel philately = Nuestro libro internacional de estampillas y matasellos: (para) hacia una filatelia marginal creativa y paralela, a series of artists' books that was produced in twenty editions and four special editions between 1979 and 1993. Between 1993 and

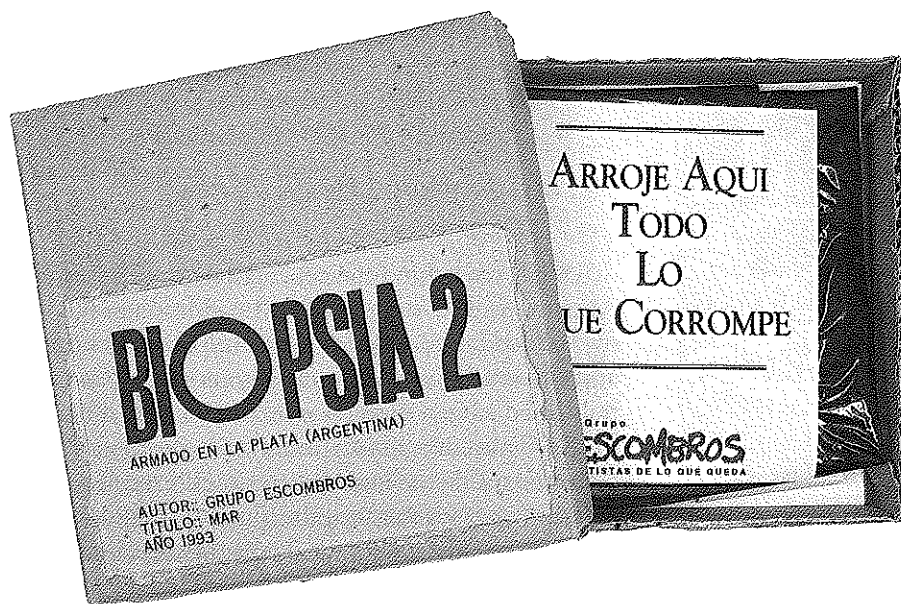
relation to what he called 'long-distance communication', among other subjects. In these letters he includes personal photographic material showing the inner circle of the artist.

Documentary materials that illustrate the activity of post-war avant-garde artists and movements – mainly in Spain, Latin America and Eastern Europe – are of particular interest to the Study Centre. This key theme covers practices which are often grouped under the rubric of 'conceptual art', because of their rejection of classical artistic genres, the art market and its distribution networks. It also includes documentation referring to what Simon Marchán Fiz called 'conceptualisms', a set of unconventional conceptual practices, away from the dominant discourses, qualified as ideological. Some of the highlights in this area are the materials from the

collective artistic practices of the Catalan Grup de Treball and the Argentinian experiments of Tucumán Arde, which are distributed between the art collection and the Study Centre according to their typology.

A distinct category among our holdings groups together documents generated by galleries, cultural spaces, centres and institutions that have been key in the contemporary scene. In the Latin American context, it is worth noting the documentary collection from the CAYC, Centro de Arte y Comunicación (Centre of Art and

Communication), a cultural space that began in 1968 as a multi-disciplinary workshop under the direction of Jorge Glusberg, and which acted as an international exchange network for artists and intellectuals. CAYC organised exhibitions, workshops, symposia, congresses and conferences around the world, as well as publishing newsletters, exhibition catalogues and artists' books. Also noteworthy is the collection of documents from Nervo Óptico/Espaço N.O., created in 2009 from a donation by the Fundação Vera Chaves Barcellos (Porto Alegre, Brasil). Outstanding examples are the manifesto of the group of 1976, the magazine *Nervo Óptico* (13 issues) and a set of documents from the cultural centre *Espaço N.O.*, including catalogues, programme brochures, leaflets, invitations and



Edgardo Antonio Vigo (editor), Grupo Escombros, *Biopsia 2* (La Plata: Biopsia, 1993).

1997, Vigo also published *Biopsia*, a series of 'publication-objects' in which a different artist was in charge of each edition, with a print run of 50 serial copies. Participating artists included Horacio Zabala, Grupo Escombros, Juan Carlos Romero, Hilda Paz and Jorge Pereira. The collection of Vigo material at the Study Centre has recently grown with the generous donation from Pere Sousa, another mail art artist living in Barcelona, of a significant number of manuscript letters from Vigo, in addition to numerous mail art and graphic documents. In the letters addressed to Sousa, dated from 1993 to 1997, Vigo recalls his background, points out his artistic references, elaborates on his contact with Europe (and particularly with the Spanish scene close to Sousa), and describes his

posters produced by this organisation.

Nervo Óptico and Espaço N.O. documents share many traits with those grouped under another relevant theme, that of movements, collectives, and other agents questioning and transforming the intellectual, artistic and political status quo. Most of these are documents with a hybrid character – not only artistic, but also political and social – and they are almost always markedly peripheral to the mainstream, and often less well represented in most institutional collections. A selection which illustrates this line of acquisition was presented at the exhibition *On the margins of art: creation and political commitment*,<sup>3</sup> which included situationist tracts, Black Panthers campaign posters, Guerrilla Girls feminist works, Alfredo Jaar's passport and maps from *Two or three things I imagine about them* (1992), the dollar notes with bullet holes of *Bang, bang, bang: 3 billetes* (Samaral, s.d.), the Brazilian cruzeiros notes manipulated by Cildo Meireles, and a long list of documents with significant political content.

No matter how important it is for our Study Centre to collect materials from older generations, we are aware that we must also pay attention to current practices in the field of artist publications, and therefore actively collect newly published material as well. Some of the more recent Latin American publications of note include those from the Mexican artists Mariana Castillo Deball, Eric Beltrán and Taller Gráfica Actual, as well as magazines such as *La patria ilustrada*, published by the Cultural Centre La Curtiduría, and *Cenizas*, published by the Costa Rican Rolando Castellón.

An example of this attention to the present is the presence in its collections of a class of publication of more recent onset: fiction books written by artists. This phenomenon, whose expansion dates from the last five or ten years, covers books designed, produced, and sometimes published by artists, which are, however, not 'artists' books', but rather an exercise in language and writing reinvention, designed to be related to artistic production. The exhibition *The malady of writing: a project on text and speculative imagination*<sup>4</sup> presented the acquisitions made by the Study Centre after the first year of tracking such publications, and this collection continues to expand as new titles with these specifications are published.

Photography, not only as an art genre, but especially due to its documentary nature, constitutes another key area. The regular acquisition of historically significant books of photography began during the preparatory research work for the exhibition *Universal archive: the condition of the document and the modern photographic utopia*,<sup>5</sup> One of

the relevant tasks here is the identification and preservation of personal papers and the legacies of photography critics and local photographers that were important during the second half of the 20th century. This is particularly relevant because, in the Spanish context, this period in the history of photography still lacks research and analysis, owing to a great extent precisely to the difficulties in accessing this primary documentation. In this area, one of the highlights is the acquisition – through donation – of the personal papers of Josep Maria Casademont (1928-1994), the most important critic of photography in Barcelona during the sixties and seventies, when he published some of the first theoretical contributions that appeared in our country on this subject. And the most important collection to date is the personal archive of the photographer Xavier Miserachs (1937-1998), a renowned member of the 'new avant-garde' that emerged in Barcelona in the 1950s. The Library also has a complete section dedicated to this field, where you can find, for example, the complete set of CMDF (Centro Municipal de Fotografía de Montevideo) publications on the historical and contemporary photography of Uruguay.

Most of the materials mentioned so far are held in the section of the Study Centre holdings named 'Archive'. The Archive is complemented by the Library, an extensive collection of reference publications currently including around 70,000 books, audiovisuals, periodicals and folders. In this very broad collection, the selection of critical and reference magazines and journals certainly stands out, being extremely diverse both in content and in format, and covering a wide range of topics including not just contemporary art but also photography, performance, gender studies, exhibition and curating history, expanding cinema, etc. Among the approximately 1900 periodicals available in the Library, 250 are subscriptions to magazines that are still current, which are published all over the world. Among the numerous Latin American magazines that belong to this collection, some are particularly relevant, such as (to name only a few) the complete set of Chilean *Revista de crítica cultural* (edited by Nelly Richard), the Argentinian *Ramona* (which recently disappeared) and the Peruvian *Juanacha*, published by the alterantive art space Espacio La Culpable.

MACBA focuses on establishing productive exchanges and co-production relationships with local institutions with which it shares similar interests. The network of partners from Latin America that are members of the Study Centre's publication exchange network is particularly

important, and includes 60 countries. Aside from numerous official institutions specialising in contemporary artistic practices, this exchange program includes a number of artist-run centres and other collectives working in the field of artistic research, whose publications usually circulate outside mainstream commercial channels.

An exhaustive list of the fields on which the Study Centre has focused to date is beyond the scope of this article. In the search for new artist publications and original documents, and in order to build its large collection of reference bibliography, other areas of interest have included the history of art exhibitions; the theoretical legacy of feminist studies; the connection between the audible and the visual as a result of the hybridisation between music, sound and visual arts; and film and its multiple and diverse relationships with art. As already noted, the exhibiting and collecting activities of the Museum shape the evolution of these interests, and there is a constant drive by the Study Centre to explore new areas. Our intention is to continue expanding our Latin American collections with materials from practices and geographic areas that are currently unrepresented.

## Notes

1. The MACBA Independent Study program (IEP) is a two-year program whose first graduates attended from 2006 to 2007. Its objective is to develop reflection about the field of artistic practice that links Art with Human Sciences, and with socio-critical intervention, investigating the fields of critical theory, pedagogy and museum studies.
2. It is complex to define these two terms accurately. To put it simply, and without noting exceptions, we understand by *artist publications* all documents, generally printed, but also photocopies, manuscripts, etc., on a two-dimensional support, usually published in series and whose authors are individual or collectives of visual artists. The term therefore includes not only artists' books, but also other ephemera formats, including posters, invitations, hand sheets, leaflets, magazines, etc, and also editions printed on fabric (T-shirts, for example), on wood or on other non-paper materials. We use the term *special materials*, a definition with vaguer limits than the previous one, to refer to all those materials which cannot be classified as a 'publication' – for example, a collection of letters from personal papers, a series of photographic negatives – or which are not works by an artist, but whose documentary value is due to other reasons, such as the fact that they relate to the creation of the Museum of Contemporary Art, forerunner of MACBA.
3. MACBA Study and Documentation Centre, *On the margins of art: creation and political commitment*, exhibition held July 10 to November 8, 2009, curated by Guy Schraenen.
4. MACBA Study and Documentation Centre, *The malady of writing: a project on text and speculative imagination*, exhibition held November 20, 2009 to April 25, 2010, curated by Chus Martinez.
5. Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, *Universal archive: the condition of the document and the modern photographic Utopia*, exhibition held October 23, 2008 to January 6, 2009, curated by Jorge Ribalta.

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