

## The ARCO catalogue is dead, long live the ARCO catalogue!

The ARCO catalogue has a complex, multifaceted identity. It could be said that it both is, and is not, a book. It is also a few other things besides a book.

It is certainly true that this catalogue has more than 600 pages in the latest Spanish edition (and more than 300 in the Portuguese one), a relatively manageable format despite its thickness, a simple-looking but durable binding, a table of contents, an almost-conventional ordering of page numbers, a precise, regular structure combining texts and images... And these undoubtedly bookish formal features meet commonly held expectations about what a book is.

Other characteristics, however, make the ARCO catalogue a rather peculiar publication. For one, its central purpose – its main *raison d'être* – is directed more at the future than at the present (while the past, in this book, is barely visible). Although the catalogue is published for each new edition of the ARCO fair – and may be useful to guide the interest of some visitors –, in general it does not take on its full meaning during the five or six days over which the fair takes place, but rather when the fair is dismantled. A new publication is released punctually each year on the fair's opening day; however, it does so in the full knowledge that it will attract more interest at some future date after the event than during the event itself. A new fair is inconceivable without a catalogue, and yet the catalogue is, above all, the *archive* of each fair: a tool made, like all archives, for a time yet to come.

At the same time, this is not a book meant to be read from cover to cover, or perhaps even to be *read* in the strictest sense. The overwhelming majority of the texts it contains are of a synthetic nature, like the index cards of a database: names and locations of galleries, lists of artists, patrons and collaborators, captions, and so on. In the large family of published works, perhaps its closest relatives are dictionaries, which are used to search for specific pieces of information for whose interpretation it makes no difference what place these occupy in the volume, or what comes just before or just after them. Concatenation and order, so important in the appreciation

of any other book, are here as arbitrary as the alphabetical order. They play a purely functional role; the catalogue's contents can be navigated in leaps and bounds – forwards, backwards or in a zig-zag – and many or just a few pages can be consulted: none of this will affect much the 'reading'.

Thus, the ARCO catalogue functions, to a certain extent, as a paper replication of the fair's *space*. Although the correspondence between the large three-dimensional *volume* that the fair occupies and the much smaller two-dimensional surface that unfolds in the printed *volume* is far from direct, the fact is that one moves through the catalogue's pages in a similar way to how one would wander through the aisles of the fair halls: sometimes with a plan and a destination, sometimes by intuition or impulse, without following a strict order, flipping through the pages of some galleries just once (or never) and returning to others repeatedly, perhaps without consciously intending to do so.

This resemblance is mutual, as it works in both directions: the fair could also be understood as a large, open book. And if, for a moment, we imagine that the event itself is like a book, we could then hold that the works exhibited at each of the booths make up the book's semantic content, or 'main text', and, just as in a printed volume, this main text is surrounded by its corresponding 'paratexts': elements that are situated in an 'undefined zone between the inside and the outside'<sup>1</sup> of the fair, whose dual nature is related both to its form and to its content, and whose mission is to make its main text intelligible, or 'legible', to its visitors/readers. We're referring, of course, to aspects such as signage and the organisational grid according to which the booths are arranged, making the fair physically comprehensible, but also, by extension, to the corridors, the entrances, the dining areas... and even to the ARCO catalogue itself, which, from this perspective, also fulfils a mission which is half functional and half semantic in the unfolding of the 'text' that constitutes each new edition of the fair.

But it so happens that in the walls of this 'book-archive-space', whose relevance and usefulness have been beyond doubt for decades, a crack seems

1. According to Gérard Genette, in a textbook, paratexts are – among other elements – the titles and subtitles, the table of contents, the acknowledgements, etc. See Gérard Genette, 'Introduction', in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, trans. Jane E. Lewin (originally published in French in 1987).

to have recently opened up, through which the winds of change are now blowing in. In the 2023 edition, a new, self-reflective section appeared in the catalogue, under the title 'A book within a book' and made up of various essays dedicated to pondering the identity and potential of the ARCO catalogue itself. A new section whose emergence was so unexpected that, despite being inserted in the middle of the catalogue and duly referred to in the table of contents, it was oddly left out of the continuous sequence of the page numbering.

Among the suggestive reflections that the essays in this new section raised in relation to the future developments of the ARCO catalogue, two proposals – to which several of the texts pointed in different ways – were particularly interesting. The first was the suggestion that it may be appropriate to publish a significant part of the content related to each new fair online, since the immediacy and elasticity of the digital format could be better suited to the type of browsing that this content requires, as well as being more in line with necessary modern efforts to reduce paper consumption. The second was a proposal to consolidate the catalogue's identity as a place for experimentation, actively seeking ways to move away from tradition in order to expand its potential. One way of doing so could consist, for example, of reinforcing the catalogue's identity as a *space*, that is, transforming it into a two-dimensional and paginated extension of the physical areas of the fair which are devoted to the presentation of creative proposals. Turning the catalogue, in other words, into a working surface for creation.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this idea, which is not actually a new one. Exhibition catalogues already underwent their own 'historical revolution' in the 20th century, which took place in several phases, gradually opening up an increasingly broad territory of possibilities in the process. The publications of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm under Pontus Hultén, the Seth Siegelaub Contemporary Art in New York, the Centro de Arte y Comunicación in Buenos Aires or, closer to home, the Galería Buades in Madrid and the Galería G or Metrònom in Barcelona are just some of the landmarks that, due to their brilliant originality and innovative character, set out this evolution.

In some of these instances, and in many others, this impulse would entail making the catalogue's 'space' available to the artists so that they could define, in whole or in part, its form and content. But, in fact, already since the dawn of modernity, exhibition catalogues and books in general – as well as all other kinds of printed publications, such as posters, postcards,

pamphlets, invitations, and so on – have served as a surface for artistic practice, a trend in which games, alterations and a distorted spatial perception of the pages have played a significant role.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the range of possibilities is immense. Two examples can best illustrate the ends of this spectrum – in particular when it comes to serial publications, from which one would expect a certain congruence, either in their formal conditions or in their conceptual premises.

Since 1997, the annual reports of Ringier AG, Switzerland's largest printing and publishing company, have been designed by leading contemporary artists. They decide on the number of pages, the format, the physical features and the content of each report, with only one condition: data on the economic and business activity of the Swiss publishing giant – figures, statistics, and lists –, which are, in principle, the *raison d'être* of this publication, must be part of each report. To date, artists such as John Baldessari, Maurizio Cattelan, Fischli & Weiss, Helen Marten, Katja Novitskova, Yoko Ono, Laura Owens, Walid Raad and Rirkrit Tiravanija, among others, have been commissioned to design one of these reports. Their proposals, highly varied in nature, often require a considerable budget and exquisite production techniques.

When Ringier AG makes its financial and technical resources available to artists and commissions them to design its annual reports, it turns these reports, *de facto*, into a 'space' for art. But, as has already been pointed out, the transformation of the two-dimensional page into such a space is not an original idea. So, what is so special about Ringier's approach? Undoubtedly, it is the emphasis with which, in this editorial project, 'art meets commerce [and] intellect meets money', as Bernhard Weissberg, production coordinator of the 2013 report, puts it. 'It is where extremes meet that there is friction,' Weissberg continues, 'and friction generates

2. The ambivalences and overlaps between exhibition space and editorial space constitute a subject on which much has already been written and which I have explored at some length in 'Un espacio habitado quizás por fantasmas' ('A space perhaps inhabited by ghosts'), in the online essay collection *Cordada*, no. 1. Leon: Fundación Cerezales, 2022 [<https://fundacioncerezalesantoninoycinia.org/cordada/>]

energy. That is precisely what Michael Ringier's artistic concept for the Ringier annual reports aims to achieve<sup>3</sup>.

As underlined in this and other corporate texts that appear in the various annual reports, Ringier AG – which merged in 2004 with JRP and created the art publishing house JRP Ringier, and which also owns a contemporary art collection – prides itself on giving artists *carte blanche* because the values to which the company wishes to be associated are precisely the freedom that creators flaunt, their ingenuity and even their desire to provoke.<sup>4</sup> Even as this multinational company – which owns numerous newspapers and magazines in Switzerland and elsewhere in the world – wishes to be linked to attributes that are considered characteristic of art explicitly highlights the current 'reciprocal blurring between art as mass media and mass media as art'.<sup>5</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, in the summer of 2023, a Madrid gallery started the *O8* series, described as 'an annual cycle of exhibitions organised by Alejandro Cesarco that take place when the gallery is closed for the summer break. Each one, regardless of its format, *is conceived as [the gallery's] summer exhibition*'.<sup>6</sup> The cycle began with the publication of *Ir al motivo*, by the poet and curator Mariano Mayer: a beautiful volume of poetry with just over a hundred pages, delicately designed and elegantly produced, which was launched in July 2023.<sup>7</sup> In this case, the exercise of transforming

3. Bernhard Weissberg, 'The 1940s Are Back-Just for a Moment', in *Ringier Annual Report 2013* (designed by Laura Owens). Zurich: Ringier AG, 2014, p. 4.

4. Maurizio Cattelan, for example, turned the 2011 Annual Report into a new issue of his magazine *Toiletpaper* and Richard Phillips asked for the 2006 issue to be typeset entirely in Fraktur, a typeface associated with National Socialism (although, in fact, Hitler banned its use).

5. Travis Diehl, 'Ringier AG and Their Artists: The Synergy of Subversion', in *X-Tra Online*, vol. 21, no. 2, Winter 2019 [<https://www.x-traonline.org/article/ringier-ag-and-their-artists-the-synergy-of-subversion>, accessed January 2024.]

6. Flyleaf accompanying the first book in the series. Emphasis in italics are mine.

7. Mariano Mayer, *Ir al motivo*. Madrid: Elba Benítez Gallery, 2023. The book was designed by Iván Mezcuca and printed by a small publishing house in Malasaña. Out of a print run of 250 copies, 100 were sent to the gallery's mailing list in order to present the 'exhibition', and the remaining 150 were distributed or offered for sale by the author himself.

the book into a space for creation acquired a different degree of radicality; it no longer seeks to find a meeting point between the exhibition room and the editorial space, but rather *defines* the editorial product – a publication whose author, moreover, defines himself as a poet and not as a visual artist – to be an *exhibition*, completely detaching it from the physical space of the gallery and also from the conventions that are usually accepted as features of a visual work of art. This paradoxical proposal, if you will, is based on a real material fact: during the month of August, the gallery is closed, making it impossible to display artworks in its exhibition spaces. Consequently, any form of art that intends to be ‘exhibited’ during that month will necessarily have to invent other ways to be visible and circulate.

Beyond the obvious differences in scale and ambition, what connects Ringier AG’s series of annual reports and Alejandro Cesarco’s first iteration of the *08* series, and what makes them different? Both projects are based on the desire to turn a publication into ‘something else’ or something ‘other’ by transforming it into a feasible medium for the presentation of art. In the case of the Swiss company, it is essential that their corporate content is not left out (on the basis of which these reports could be considered distantly related to a catalogue such as that of ARCO). However, perhaps because of their hybrid condition, or because the exuberance with which they are produced ends up blurring the strength of the creative ideas behind them, this series of annual reports has failed to acquire a truly memorable profile. The ‘summer exhibition’ curated by Cesarco, on the other hand, has no obligation to take on any informational mission or content, and can therefore be designed with much greater freedom. While the identity of *Ir al motivo* as an exhibition derives, in essence, from the curator’s act of enunciation, it is up to the readers/visitors to enter into the semantic game and take it as a book and an exhibition simultaneously, or not.

The two opposed perspectives materialized by these two projects frame a spectrum of possibilities which is almost limitless. The future of the ARCO catalogue may lay in exploring some of these possibilities, accepting that we have long since entered an era in which the coexistence of electronic publishing media and traditional print does not constitute a threat to books, but rather frees them from some of their current obligations as information carriers, opening up a much greater potential for experimentation.

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