

Art?

Skill?

Technique?

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Ulises Carrión's
Cultural Strategies and
Communication Tactics

Five Reports

Edited by Juan J. Agius



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GOSSIP

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Gossip, Scandal
and Good Manners

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Clues

aan Lily van Ginneken

A black silhouette of a man playing a guitar, set against a solid red background. The man is shown from the waist up, in profile, facing right. He is holding a guitar with both hands, and the neck of the guitar extends towards the bottom right corner of the frame. The text 'ULISES, CARRIÓN & TRIOS BOLEROS' is written in a stylized, bold, black font across the upper right portion of the image, partially overlapping the man's head and the guitar neck.

ULISES,
CARRIÓN

&
TRIOS
BOLEROS

3

Trios & Boleros





5

Lilia Prado Superstar
Film Festival

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From March to June 1981

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Beyond Literature

Ulises Carrión was one of those unordinary, disruptive, unclassifiable artists who, nevertheless, retrospectively showed himself as emanating from his time. Even though from the beginning he was singled out as a writer, a philosopher and a lover of words and its meanings, the arrival of structuralism faced him with the need to call into question not only his literary education, but also literature itself, as an institution, a material practice, and a way of distribution and communication of ideas.

The *Theatre of the Absurd* of Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett had already anticipated such distrust for language, which had been a characteristic feature in several theories of the sixties. However, it was the notion of structure which left an indelible mark on the young Carrión when he was still studying in England. In his thesis on the dramaturgy of William Shakespeare, presented in the University of Leeds, he claimed: "The characters are not what they say they are. The characters are what their function within the structure of the play tells us they are."¹ Later on, he translated this remark into his own work when he stated: "In my texts, words do not count because they mean this or that to me or to somebody else, but because, taken as a whole, words form a structure"²

The meaning of words was gradually losing importance each day; instead, the relations that made words part of the systems known as literature, writing, and poetry were emerging in the spotlight. This implied setting aside not only language, but also its usual derivations as crystal clear entities, and embarking on the exploration of the opacity deeply rooted in their support material, the rules of grammar, the methods for the construction of meaning, and the ideological determination. Among the usual support material, the book was presented as a problematic space. In a short period of time it developed from being the disciplined structure of certain linguistic constructions, which were surreptitiously hidden behind the shadow of an argument or a narration, to become an area where words and its relations became apparent.

Just like in John Cage's sound work, in which silence is essential and music is translated into an environment formerly considered as noise, the *Artist's Books* of Ulises Carrión regards the blank page as a backbone and literature shows itself as a sort of semantic spec-

trum projected from the letters, phrases, design structures, graphical interventions, images, and other visual elements towards an enlarged concept of poetic sense. Verbal composition lost its autonomy. Together with it—and, sometimes, even replacing it—there appeared the rhythm and counterpoints of music, surfaces and stains of plastic arts, drawing lines and diagrams, photography related documents, and spatial constructions of architecture (experiments with the body of books, for example).

Some analysts held that, with the incorporation and the remarkable development of these resources, Carrión had definitely abandoned the literary field. Nonetheless, this argument cannot be true and his projects and notes fully support this. It should be pointed out that, by means of those resources, the Mexican artist accessed to extremely sophisticated literary forms, which—to use an expression characteristic of such time—we could call *conceptual*, though with a very different meaning from conceptual orthodoxy. Unlike the authors supporting this tendency, who proposed a self-reflexive production, based on linguistic propositions which only have value within the artistic circuit, Carrión created works which depart from the literature disciplinary field to interact with social and community universes. In this sense, he approached the other line of Conceptualism which is identified with the *institutional critique*.³

It could be rightly affirmed that Ulises Carrión's works from the early seventies did not place importance on literature. The experimentation with its forms of appearance in handmade books, laboriously produced, with scarce resources and small print runs, deviated the attention of the artist towards the distribution and circulation problems of this kind of publications. His contact with the independent publishing house *Beau Geste Press* (1970–74) and the subsequent foundation of *Other Books and So* (1975–78) led him to militate in favour of this marginal, alternative and furtive production, which developed behind the shadow of the highly standardized book publishing market not only in their means of approaching readers but also in the writings formats offered.

According to Carrión, such distribution and circulation problems were not exclusively related to the run and marketing of artist's books. In fact, they were part and parcel of other more urgent concerns: the movement and communication of ideas. In this sense, Carrión did not consider them to be moments alien or subsequent to the creation, but an integral part of an authorship position. In his writing called *Personal Worlds or Cultural Strategies?* (1979), Carrión stated: "Where does the border lie between artist's work and the actual organization and distribution of the work? When an artist is concerned about

choosing a starting point, while defining the scope, he has the right to include the organization and distribution of the work as elements of his own work and, in doing so, the artist is creating a strategy which will be turned into a formal element constituent of the finished work."⁴

Therefore, in Ulises Carrión's aesthetic program, the distribution of his work was not a minor issue, but one of its *formal components*. The years following the foundation of the publishing house, bookshop and archive *Other Books and So*, and even after its closure, the artist's performances were developed by two means which evidenced this close relation between production and circulation: *mail art* and the use of *mass media*, which in the artistic field was called *new media*.

In both cases, the work could not be independent from its way of distribution by means of a specific circulation system or from the alternatives and modifications introduced by such circulation system. Not only did this system take part in the way the work was presented to the audience, but also, and especially, in the way the latter received the work. The rubber stamps, accidentally folded or torn up envelopes, postage stamps, delivery delays, and other contingencies were part of this mail art: under no circumstances could they be considered undesirable or fortuitous elements. Likewise, a television showing a video, an advertisement framing a radio emission, urban life developed within a walking tour transformed into an artistic event, or the repercussion in press of a yesteryear film festival were an imperceptible part of the projects carried out by Carrión within the surrounding of "new media" (below).

Deframed projects

When Ulises Carrión performed his artist's books or carried out mail art, such practices were not clearly established; however, nowadays, they are part of virtually identifiable categories and, at some point such as mail art—almost precisely situated in a fixed moment. The former is still being produced, albeit the artist's book is a rather high-priced product given the interest printed on them by certain collectors who are fond of accumulating such kind of books. Mail art has become strange due to the loss of the social function of its way of distribution: the postal transport. In both cases, there are many specialized studies, catalogue raisonné, archives and specific treasures which allow us to track back the history, evolution and material production of mail art.

However, in the 1980s, Carrión pressed ahead with projects beyond the bounds of possibility due to their materiality, production methods, meaning effects and social extension. Each one of them investigated specific community, cultural and political contexts with