The Library of Babel

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The Library of Babel

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The production of artist’s books in the twentieth century is directly related to the political and avant-garde movements. Latin American writers who were part of these movements returned to the exotic beauty of the indigenous codices, the simple forms of medieval literatura de cordel--chapbooks and explore the non-conformist typography of concrete poetry, giving a new vision to book design. Like their counterparts in Europe and the United States, artists and graphic designers experimented with typography, page design and binding. They immersed themselves in mastering techniques such as engraving, woodcut, photography, collage, frottage, photomontage and digital design.

Such collaborations between artists, writers and presses are reflected in Jorge Luis Borges's “The Library of Babel.” Aside from his fame as a writer, Borges viewed himself as a librarian. In his story, Borges contemplates a new definition of the library:

“The universe (which others called The Library), is composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries. In the center of each gallery is a ventilation shaft, bounded by a low railing. From any hexagon one can see the floors above and below--one after another, endlessly. The arrangement of the galleries is always the same: Twenty bookshelves, five to each side, line four of the hexagon's six sides; the height of the bookshelves, floor to ceiling, is hardly greater than the height of a normal librarian."

In Borges library there is a mirror, one single mirror, "which faithfully duplicates appearances." One could view this universe with a certain light--"certain spherical fruits" called bulbs, which bathes the books. The universe of the independent presses is composed of indefinite hexagonal galleries that one could walk, such as the history of the publishing and printing, the history of the book, and the history of calligraphy and paper. The history of poetry, art, music, theater, performance and happening are ventilation shafts giving oxygen to these galleries, keeping a perpetual balance between symbol and image. The mirror and light are the many forms that these books assume in the mind and eye of the reader. Breaking free of a restrictive definition, the book become surprise boxes or in the language of Borges "enigmatic books" in the form of a stack of loose-leaf pages, printed, bound,
stitched, with mobile artifacts inserted. They can be a portfolio, a codice, or a cylinder, an envelope tied with ribbons or cord, collected perhaps in a box of wood or metal.

Collaborations between artists and writers require great amount of time, effort and money. But, the pleasure of producing a good book goes hand in hand with the power to employ technical and artistic knowledge. Though talent knows no boundaries, artists and writers in the Southern hemisphere have always worked with greater financial constraints. Their work depends on the political climate and economic infrastructure of the country. Despite these barriers, in Latin America there are numerous examples of independent projects and presses. Examining each form historically allows for a broader understanding of their influence on present day Latin American bookmaking.

**Codices**

Before the Spanish colonizers arrived to America, the indigenous population of what constitute today Mexico, had a system of writing in place, whereby they used characters and drawings arranged in lines. These organized characters in painted scenes of animals, plants, birds, islands, mountains, rivers, trees, beeches, pyramids, buildings, cemeteries, gods, goddesses, priests and peoples told different stories. Codices archived all the information about the laws, ceremonies, historical annals, sacrifices, rituals, calendars, accounts, maps, magic and spells, poems, songs and astronomical annotations. These codices are long pieces of thin leather from jaguar or tree bark folded in the form of cylinders with wood covers in each extreme that serve as the bindery system. Codices were Latin America first books and were one of the sacred objects of the indigenous people. The places were they were kept were called the painting houses, the first libraries of the continent. In the painting houses the scribes and other functionaries memorized, painted, organized, and protect everything that was codified. A poem cited by Alcina Franch as part of the book *Cantares mexicanos* describes the writing process:

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I sing the paintings in the book
I spread it out
I am a flamboyant bird.
I make the codices talk
In the interior of the paintings house.
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The narrator is the one who paints the characters in the codices, referring to himself as the one that makes the codices talk (the codices talk through him), comparing himself with a bird—a talking bird, a parrot perhaps. The person who painted the codices was its guardian; it is not surprising to discover that the scribe--guardian was also the poet of the kingdom. The poet--scriber--guardian needed to keep in his memory the history of his people in order to recite it in front of the Court and later repeat in paintings in the codices.
The Spanish monarchy fell under the spell from the beauty and complexity of these books. Despite their beauty and intrinsic value, Spanish conquerors destroyed the painting houses, declaring their contents as "sinner" books. The few codices that survived were sent to the court in Spain together with the gold and silver. Today, some of these codices are kept in the most important libraries of Europe. This savage destruction did not stop the indigenous population from producing more codices, which, for safety reasons, were buried in caves and earthen vaults.

**Literatura de cordel**

During the 16th century, books were extremely expensive and rare resulting from the Spanish Inquisition, which kept the ports and ships under strict vigilance. The censors were particularly interested in eliminating the *literatura de cordel* or chapbooks—"books of profane and fabulous themes." The monarchy was fearful these books would get into the hands of the Indians and distract them from evangelization, and prohibited specifically the poetry chapbooks together with books of magic, songs, romances—fiction and plays—those books of *historias mentirosas*—untrue history.

The term *literatura de cordel* is derived from a particular kind of chapbook that blind vendors in the streets of Madrid and Seville hung from straight line in cords. The *literatura de cordel* is also known as *pliegos sueltos*, *pliegos poéticos*, *pajaritas de papel* and *plaquettes*. As the French *littérature de colportage* and the English pamphlets the Spanish *literatura de cordel* was made from a piece of paper folded in four, but they also tended to consist of four sheets of paper in signatures of two, six, or 12 leaves. It was very common to illustrate *literatura de cordel* with woodcuts, but they were also produced without illustrations, as well. The type used was Spanish Gothic and they were printed without a colophon. Series or numbered chapbooks, as well as the colophon were introduced in Valencia at the end of the 16th century. Bibliographers conclude that poetry books in Spain originated with the *literatura de cordel* publication of the poetry of Gómez Manrique in 1482. After this date, *literatura de cordel* could contain news and chronicles, plays and romances mixing moral and religious themes.

As a consequence of the Inquisition, the first books that officially entered the new territories were devotional books, and books of hours. Nevertheless, much of the reading material of the conquerors and later of the privileged classes came from the clandestine book movement. The people of these viceroyalties smuggled many sorts of books, including *literatura de cordel* about history, philosophy, poetry, medicine, architecture, art, music, law, as well as children’s books. Living proof was the unique library of Sor Juan Inés de la Cruz, the great poet of colonial Mexico. Parallel to the prohibition of certain books, the Queen of Spain gave permission to the German printer living in Seville, John Cronberger, to bring the book trade and printing art to the New World. Cronberger arrived in Mexico in 1525, and began
publishing religious and Castillian grammar books for the sole purpose of "educating" the Indians. But, his most lucrative business items were the _literatura de cordel_, which he sold back in Seville. During the 18th century two very important institutions were also established in Mexico. According to Aquino Casas, the Real Academia of San Carlos—the first art school of Mexico was founded in 1785 and in 1778, under the direction of Jerónimo Gil, an engraving school was opened in the Casa de Moneda. Mexico, followed by Peru, became one of the centers of book arts for the new world. The quality of books in these territories could compete with the best books printed in Europe.

One extraordinary example is the handmade chronicle written and illustrated in Lima, with calligraphy, text and drawings by Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, _La Nueva corónica de buen gobierno_ (1585). Guaman Poma took the art of the book and brought it to its full glory with his calligraphy variations and extraordinary drawings. _La nueva corónica_ is a letter that the author sent to the Crown, commenting on the abuses of Indians by the colonizers, together with a description of Indian customs. The text consists of 1,200 folios and pliegos with approximately 400 drawings. Guamán Poma, an Indian from the Andes, wrote and designed a manuscript to the same high standards met by the most beautiful manuscripts in Europe.

**Contemporary Book Arts**

“I affirmed that the library is infinite . . . it is a sphere whose center could be any hexagon, and its circumference inaccessible…” continues Borges's description of the library. In the twentieth century the influence of the codices and _literatura de cordel_ together with the influence Futurist, Dadaist, Surrealists movements and the European and United States fine presses schools, have continued influencing the production of books in Latin America. Let’s explore some examples.

In 1916 Vicente Huidobro from Chile, wrote his _Creacionismo_—Creationism manifesto pushing toward a new esthetic of the poem. Huidobro, a poet that was part of the avant-garde movements of Europe it is also called the father of the avant-garde in Latin America. Huidobro wrote in his manifesto:

“Lo realizado en la mecánica también se ha hecho en la poesía. Os diré qué entiendo por poema creado. Es un poema en el que cada parte constitutiva, y todo el conjunto, muestra un hecho nuevo, independiente del mundo externo, desligado de cualquier otra realidad que no sea la propia, pues toma su puesto en el mundo como un fenómeno singular, aparte y distinto de los demás fenómenos”.

What was build by mechanics was build in poetry. The *poema* is one and separate in its part and as a piece of engineering, each part is independent from any other reality positioning in the world as a singular phenomena. Huidobro, a very wealthy person,
controlled the design and publishing of all his books producing a magnificent inventory of artist's and fine press books. A good example is the poster-poem Moulin—Moulin De La Mort Moulin De La Vie, the poem moves around and within a windmill designed by Delauney. Molin is part of thirteen poster-poems of Huidobro exhibited in the Edouard VII Theather in Paris in 1922. The title of the exposition was Salle XI.

The extraordinary contribution of Mexico to the twentieth century book arts is still to be written. To provide some insights in this concise inventory let’s describe some examples of writers, avant-garde movements and institutions. Being the first one Manuel Maples Arce. Headed by the poet Manuel Maples Arce in 1921, the estridentistas in Mexico, a group highly influenced by the Futurists, read their poetry in cafes and bookstores distributing broadsides with illustrated poems, books, flyers and manifestos. The Estridentistas found a new way of incorporating typography and visual art in the page, giving preference to dynamic images. Maples Arce manifesto Actual no. 1: Hoja de Vanguardia comprimida estridentista de Manuel Maples Arce, is a reaction against modernism and traditional art and literature of Mexico. His book Urbe a poetry book illustrated with six woodcuts by Jean Charlot is one the first books published in Mexico that I have found using the modern techniques of books arts. “¡Cosmopoliticémonos!”--Let’s get cosmopolitans!—urged Maples Arce to his fellows writers and artists.

Salvador Novo the poet and short story writer from the Mexican Contemporáneos writers group published in 1928 his book Return Ticket—a diary of his trip to Hawaii. A bibliographer and book artist he wrote in his diary:

“Confieso que tengo más libros que tiempo que dedicar a su lectura, por rápidamente que lea. Pero acaso algún día…y además ¿Qué otra cosa podría hacer? Los ejemplares numerados, las ediciones agotadas, las encuadernaciones costosas, son para mí un augustioso placer, más duradero que los juegos de azar, a los que no sé por qué les comparo”.

A collector of rare and limited editions, Novo produced most of his books and personally supervised their printing. Return Ticket was published in a Warrens Olde-Style paper in a 500 copies production, 10 of which were inserted in a leather box, and the rest of the production in a cartoné box. The printing and binding took place under the supervision of Novo in Editorial CVLTVRA printing facilities.

The Taller de Gráfica Popular—Popular Graphics Workshop in Mexico, was founded in 1937, publishing in 1942 El libro Negro del terror nazi en Europa with 32 drawings from members of the workshop. The impact of the Taller goes beyond Mexico. During the same year the Escuela de Artes del Libro—School of Book Arts was founded, which becomes the center for the teaching of engraving. In 1947, the Sociedad Mexicana de Grabadores—Mexican Engravers Society-- was founded as well. All these institutions had influenced in one way or another the graphic design, book art and fine presses development agglutinating the best artists and
producing an immense legacy of portfolios, pliegos, codices and limited editions. An example of such production is the 1950’s work *Fisonomías de animales* by Erasto Cortés Juárez produced with 40 engravings and text of the author in a limited edition of 275 copies. A contribution made by the Spanish civil war refugees in Mexico was Imprenta Madero. Considered by many to be the first press of 20th century Mexico to take into account the value of design in the book, Imprenta Madero was established in 1951. Not only has Imprenta Madero influenced the fine presses but also the big publishing houses of the country, serving as a book arts training school under the supervision of Vicente Rojo. The contribution of the Spanish civil war refugees artists and writers to graphic design is being explored in many countries among them Argentina and Puerto Rico.

In Peru and highly influenced by film, the Dadaists and Surrealists, the extraordinary book *5 metros de poemas* published in 1927 by Carlos Oquendo de Amat, at the age of 21 is a pioneering construction. Oquendo designed *5 metros de poemas* as an accordion book, with pages that open horizontally and extend like the footage of film. This codice includes instructions for opening it “como si estuvieses pelando una fruta”--as the peeling of a fruit. Oquendo also issued literary bonds in order to finance his project. Oquendo died in 1936 in Spain, after spending his last years in a tuberculosis hospital.

In 1938 in Puerto Rico the young women poet Julia de Burgos gather together a few pesos and headed toward Imprenta Venezuela –Venezuela Print Shop in Old San Juan, in order to published *Poema en 20 surcos* –a book of poems in a limited edition. Including gothic and roman italics typography in a machine-woven paper, this unique book was printed in a 19th century press and include one woodcut of an unknown artist30. Once printed Julia travel in public transportation a great portion of the island selling his book door to door. An artistic performance, having as setting an island landscape.

Joaquín Torres García from Uruguay painter and sculptor and founder of the school of aesthetics Nueva Escuela de Arte Constructiva rooted in Latin America, but with the influence of all the modern aesthetics, wrote a series of essays and manifestos between 1913 and 1954. During the same period Torres García wrote his book-manifesto-essay, *Nueva escuela de arte del lenguaje: pintura y arte constructivo*. The publication of *Nueva escuela* included art exhibitions, public speeches, a series of artists meetings and other manifestos.

The magnificent contribution of Brazil to book arts has been researched by innumerable people. From the *literatura de cordel* that is still produced in the northeast region to the Concretism movement. I will talk about two Concretist poets and book arts designers: Harold and Augusto de Campos. Haroldo de Campos is today one of the leaders of experimental poetry together with his brother Augusto de Campos. Both brothers and Déci Gagnantari launched the journal *Noigandres*, originators of the Noigandres Concrete Poetry Group in the fifties. In 1956 Haroldo participated of the launching of the official statement of Concrete Poetry in the First
Exposition of Concrete Art of Brazil. In 1958 he published the manifesto entitled *Plano-Piloto Para Poesia Concreta*, with Augusto de Campos e Décio Pignatari. The manifesto immediately defines the issue “poesia concreta: produto de uma evolução crítica de formas dando por encerrado o ciclo histórico do verso (unidade rítmico-formal)”.

Concrete poetry is a product of a critical evolution of forms that closes the historical cycle of the verse or the formal unity.

Although the European tradition is very strong in Latin America, in the last forty years the United States fine presses and art movements have had a tremendous impact. The travel revolution and ever-changing technology, the digital revolution, as well as the evolution of graphic design have impacted the continent. Let's see some examples. The poet Javier Sologuren from Peru and his fine press, Rama Florida, has published one hundred and twenty poetry books in limited editions over the past fifteen years. Today his publications are intensely search by collectors and researchers. The Painter Omar Rayo in Colombia established in 1981 the Museo Rayo de Dibujo y Grabado Latinoamericano—an engraving and drawing Latin American Museum. In 1983 initiated Arte Vital, a visual art project. Together with his wife, poet Agueda Pizarro, they established in 1985 the press Embalaje. Since 1985 this couple not only have been producing poetry plaquettes in limited numbered editions, but they also established the Encuentro—a diverse annual meeting of Colombian women poets—including indigenous and black women writers. A similar example is El Vigía in Cuba. Established also in 1985 El Vigía produces literatura de cordel, codices and plaquettes in editions of 200 numbered and signed by the author. In their Catálogo general of 1999-2000 they express their main objective, to create "un libro más humano, más alejado de las máquinas, más cercano al hombre"—a more human book, less confronted with machines, more closely related to the human being. Today El Vigía publications had become collector’s items. In the United States the Codices by the Chicanos Guillermo Gómez Peña and Enrique Chagoya have opened a third eye, defining the crossing of the borders and the many conquerors. Taken with the codices of Consuelo Gotay from Puerto Rico, these books make up the hexagonal galleries with its bulbs of Borges's Library.

It is surprising to note in current research there are so few women book artists. The bibliography has shown a large list of male writers, artists, graphic designers and book artists, but little mention women book artists. One example is Belkis Ramírez the Dominican Republic designer and illustrator of Chiqui Vicioso. *Julia de Burgos: la nuestra* (1987). Women book artists offer a different perspective, a different aesthetic than their male counterparts. One well-known engraver and book artist is Consuelo Gotay.
Consuelo, a well-known engraver with a background in art history, woodcut, serigraphy, typography and printing, is one of the few women book artists in the Caribbean. Diligently and almost anonymously, have created a particular book arts esthetics. As a woman artist her work have been exhibited in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, Brazil and the United States. An alumnae of Columbia University, Pratt Graphic Center and the Center for Book Arts in New York, she is also a teacher at the Escuela de Artes Plásticas of San Juan. Gotay produced her first portfolio in 1976, and in 1993 her first book. Highly influenced by the Mexican Taller de Gráfica Popular, as well as William Morris aesthetic, she is the founder of The Polvorín Workshop in the Escuela de Artes Plásticas of San Juan and also the founder of her own fine press, Plumas. Among her awards and distinctions we could mention the 1998 Bronze Medal in the Second Art Biennial of Colombia. In 2001 Consuelo curated La palabra dibujada, the first book arts exhibit in Puerto Rico, in the Museo Las Américas with the participation of ten book artists.

Consuelo printed her first codice Los animales interiores: tres poemas by Luis Palés Matos (1976), illustrated with fourteen woodcuts. For fifteen years Consuelo dedicated herself to raise a family, to teaching, engraving and to the mastering of fine press typography. In 1991 she produced Valle de Collores by Luis Lloréns Torres, the Puerto Rican poet. A bound accordion with seven illustrations in Menhart typography of 100 copies numbered and signed. In 1993 she produced Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, of Aimée Césaire, the Martinique poet. Cahier d’un retour au pays natal is a codice consisting of nineteen leaves illustrated with woodcuts. In the same year Consuelo was then invited to Martinique to exhibit her work at Le Colisee in Fort de France, Martinique.and to celebrate the birthday of Aimée Césaire in which she presented the codice to the poet.

In 1996 Consuelo printed Hay un país en el mundo: poema gris en varias ocasiones, by the Dominican poet, Pedro Mir, a codice of twenty-three leaves also illustrated with woodcuts. She was also invited to Dominican Republic to present the book to the poet. In 1999, she printed Puerta al tiempo en tres voces, by Luis Palés Matos, and Rapto continuo, by Pedro López Adorno, both Puerto Rican poets. She designed Puerta al tiempo en tres voces following William Morris’s principle—the unity of the book is created by the double-spread sheet. The book includes eight woodcuts. In this particular production Consuelo and Edna Acosta, a graphic designer, created the font, Fronda. In Rapto continuo, the pages-cards of the Tarot book by the Puerto Rican poet Pedro López Adorno, are inserted in a wood box. In 2000 Consuelo in collaboration with a group of artists produced Oda a la tipografía of Pablo Neruda, the Nobel Prize from Chile. The same year Oda a la tipografía won a Mention of Honour from the Association of Arts Critics of Puerto Rico. Her last book produced with the title ¿Puedes? (2001) is a poem by the Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén A codice limited to 15 copies and illustrated with woodcuts. The book ¿Puedes? won another Mention of Honor in the 2001 Art Biennial of San Juan.

By having chosen highly political 1930's well-known poets from the Caribbean this artist has established a clear position. Her unique books with
exuberant images in woodcuts in intense blacks, blues, greens, and oranges colors are a reflection of the political complexity of the Caribbean islands seeing through the eyes of a woman. By interlacing poetry with visually sophisticated typography, handmade paper, and editioned pieces, she confronts the reader with the nature of the book— an artifact as malleable as culture.

Going through this inventory as a whole, one can conclude that Book Arts in Latin America is not a simple topic. Little can be found in journals and traditional source materials on the development of book arts. Little to no research exists on graphic design, digital design, fine presses and the evolution of typography in the 20th century. The terms fine presses, book arts, small presses, private presses, alternative presses, or artists books are not even part of thesaurus, bibliographies, inventories or library subject headings, yet library shelves are full of these productions. Latin American book vendors announce in their catalogs these publications under categories such as livre de artistre, ediciones limitadas or pliegos or plaquettes. You may find them in the literature section under the name of the writer. One way to research book arts in the Latin American region is to identify the writers, the avant-garde movements and then explore their particular work in order to define the writer's production. Borges vast library--our universe--does not contain two similar books, and the registry of its components, includes infinite combinations. One will need to look more carefully at this rich and diverse inventory of hexagons, bulbs, ventilation shafts, librarians, tunnels and shelves that are part of our Library of Babel.

3 Druckner, 377.
4 Idem., 381.
5 José Luis Martínez. Origen y desarrollo del libro en Hispanomérica. (Madrid: Fundación Germán Sanchez Ruipérez, 1984.) 12
6 José Luis Martínez, 12.
7 Idem, 69.
8 Translation mine.
10 Martínez, 24
11 Idem., 25.
12 Leonard, 26
13 Carlos Romero de Lecea. La imprenta y los pliegos poéticos (Madrid: Joyas Bibliográficas, 1974.) 27.
14 From the French language meaning a small poetry book.
15 Candance Slater. Stories on a String; The Brazilian Literatura de cordel. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.) 56.
17 Romero de Leceo, 30
18 Leonard, 186.
Martínez, 25.


21 For a detailed description see: Rolena Adorno, Guamán Poma and his Illustrated Chronicle from Colonial Perú: from a Century of Scholarship to a new era of Reading= Guaman Poma y su crónica ilustrada del Perú colonial: un siglo de investigaciones hacia una nueva era de lectura. (Denmark: Mus Jusculanum Pr, 2001.)

22 Translation mine.

23 See: “Creacionismo”. In: <http://www.uchile.cl/cultura/huidobro/manifiesto1.htm>


26 The Contemporâneos group were actively engaged in the renewal of Mexican literature in the first half of the century.

27 Puerto Rican artists such as Carlos Raquel Rivera and Rafael Tufiño has been influenced by the Taller aesthetics, as well as Chicano artists and some African American artists of the period.

28 Arnulfo Aquino, Casas, In: <http://library.northernlight.com>

29 I have a special debt to Jorge Marcone who first open the door to the work of this poet.

30 Special thanks to Michael Joseph for the physical description of this book.


33 Translation mine.

34 For more information see: Lourdes Vázquez. “Construyendo libros con Consuelo Gotay”, SALALM Newsletter. 38(2) (October 2000).

35 The other artists are Haydeé Landing, Edna Acosta, Miriam Vázquez, Marta Rivera, Haydeé Quijano and Budoff.