

Beyond Bookworks: Ulises Carrión's Cultural Strategies

by

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## **Beyond Bookworks: Ulises Carrión's Cultural Strategies**

### **Introduction**

Mexican-born, Amsterdam-based conceptual artist Ulises Carrión (1941, San Andrés Tuxtla, Mexico – 1989, Amsterdam) is perhaps best known for his 1974 text “The New Art of Making Books.” In this text, Carrión defines this new art as one that rejects literary aspects of the book in favor of a rigorous exploration of the book’s material, sequential, and graphic elements. While Carrión achieved success as a Mexican literary writer early in his career, by way of concrete poetry, he developed an intermedia arts practice marked by a thorough, yet broadminded analysis of systems and structures of communication. Carrión’s departure from traditional linguistic forms hinged on his participation in the international communities of artists’ publishing and mail art, as well as in the artist-run spaces of Amsterdam, where a predominantly immigrant group of artists experimented with new artistic media. Ultimately, Carrión integrated these communities’ emphasis on a collaborative, networked, and anti-hierarchical system of artistic production into the very structure of his projects.

Working in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s, Carrion was active in many of the “new media” of the day, from artists’ books and mail art to video and performance. Beyond these activities, he founded *Other Books and So* (1975-78), a pioneering bookstore-gallery focused on experimental artworks in book form. Through *Other Books and So* and his related activities as a publisher, organizer, and curator within alternative spaces, Carrión became a key figure within an international network of artists working at the margins of the main threads of

conceptual and minimal art. Through this trajectory, Carrión rejected the traditional focus on individual artworks in favor of a broader concept of “cultural strategies,” asking, “Where does the border lie between an artist’s work and the actual organization and distribution of the work?”<sup>1</sup> Challenges – like Carrión’s – to the conditions of social and economic exchange within established art galleries and museums were widespread in the 1970s. However, whereas artists like Hans Haacke pursued an “institutional critique” from within, Carrión and others forged a parallel, less market-oriented framework where artists themselves took on the roles of curator, critic, and distributor.

After he settled in Amsterdam in 1972, Carrión began producing artists’ bookworks whose economy of language and attention to the space of the page were strongly influenced by concrete poetry. According to Mary Ellen Solt, “The most important single aspect of the concrete poetry movement is that poets in many countries, speaking different languages, unknown to each other, began making similar innovations in structure almost immediately following World War II.”<sup>2</sup> More precisely, concrete poetry emerged in the 1950s as a product of interchange between Latin-American and European avant-gardes: Swiss-Bolivian poet Eugen Gomringer and the Brazilian Noigandres group are considered founding figures of the genre. As Solt writes, the Noigandres group’s poems, drawing upon French symbolist Mallarmé, envisioned the poem “as a ‘space-time’ structure, the word and consequently the poem being conceived three-dimensionally as verbivocovisual.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ulises Carrión, *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: VOID Distributors, 1980, p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Ellen Solt, “Concrete Poetry,” *Books Abroad* 44, no. 3 (1970): 422, doi:10.2307/40124559.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

In his 1974 text *The New Art of Making Books*, Carrión extended this line of thinking to encompass not just the page, but the entire structure of the book, advancing a decidedly anti-literary approach to language. He writes, “The words of the new book are not there to transmit certain mental images with a certain intention. They are there to form, together with other signs, a space-time sequence that we identify with the name ‘book.’”<sup>4</sup> The bookworks that Carrión produced in the early 1970s put into practice the approaches to structure, signification, and the rhythm of reading that Carrión outlined in *The New Art of Making Books*. *Arguments*, published by Beau Geste Press in 1974, is a slim, perfect-bound volume consisting of 25 sections, or “arguments,” each exploring social relationships through the visual arrangement of names across the pages. While the visual and temporal arrangement of names gives little narrative information in comparison to a literary, descriptive text, the reader can interpret a complex range of social relationships from Carrión’s minimal composition. While *The New Art of Making Books* discusses reading primarily in terms of rhythm, *Arguments* and other bookworks also shift the emphasis from the author’s subjectivity to the interpretive function of the reader. Carrión studied literature at universities in Paris, Germany and England in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and *The New Art of Making Books* bears the imprint of the rise of semiotics within the intellectual culture. His thinking thus reflects Roland Barthes’ proclamation of “the death of the author”; as Barthes writes, “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed... a text’s

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<sup>4</sup> Ulises Carrión, “The New Art of Making Books,” in Carrión, Ulises, Thierry Dubois, and Juan J. Agius. *Quant Aux Livres = On Books*. Genève: Héros-Limite, 2008, 140.

unity lies not in its origin but its destination.”<sup>5</sup> For Carrión, this shift from writing to “making books” not only frees the conditions of the producer, but also the reader: “The new art appeals to the ability every man possesses for creating signs and systems of signs.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether working with books, mail art, video, performance, or participatory public projects, Carrión ultimately used each of these media to explore the structures of everyday communication in a broad social context. His key essay on mail art, *Mail Art and the Big Monster* (1977), shows the same rigorous approach to communication systems as *The New Art of Making Books*. Carrión analyzes the mail as consisting of two interlocking sub-systems: that of written language and that of the postal services. As he writes, “...only by incorporating the mail system as an essential part of the piece are we able to make a real Mail art piece... the best Mail Art pieces use the post as an integral, functional element of the work.”<sup>7</sup> Carrión’s key mail art projects, including the magazine *Ephemera* (1977-78) and *The Stampa Newspaper* (1980) likewise incorporate the function of sending and receiving in the international mail art network as constitutive elements, emphasizing multiple authorship in form and content. In *Gossip, Scandal and Good Manners* (1981), a public project, lecture-performance, and video, Carrión analyzed systems of informal social communication including gossip, scandal, and rumor. In the project, he enlisted friends to spread gossip about himself throughout the city of

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<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath, *Image, music, text* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2009), 148.

<sup>6</sup> Carrión, “The New Art of Making Books,” 149.

<sup>7</sup> Ulises Carrión, “Mail Art and the Big Monster,” in Carrión, Ulises, *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: VOID Distributors. 1980, p. 42.



Amsterdam, ultimately presenting a lecture in which he offered academic-style analysis and documentation of his “findings” about gossip. According to Carrión, “...gossip is a language communication chain, created by anonymous and collective effort, that evolves erratically within the frame of daily life in a particular social context.”<sup>8</sup>

Carrión’s approach to information and communication reflects a broader intellectual turn toward semiotics and systems-based thinking within diverse global art practices grouped under the rubric of “conceptual art.” Writing on the 1970 *Information* exhibition at MoMA, Eve Meltzer notes that conceptual artists, working within a structuralist idiom, embraced the rhetoric of information “...because they were deeply immersed in the ideological fantasies that accompanied informational processes...”<sup>9</sup> While Carrión engaged these issues from a somewhat different perspective, his work likewise embraces the aesthetic of information systems while remaining critical of the bureaucratic and political implications of existing and emerging communications technologies.

Carrión’s interest in language, structures, and networks of communication was not merely formal and theoretical, but a reflection of emerging forms of discourse and artistic praxis in the artists’ communities in which he worked. Carrión’s activities as a publisher and within artist-run initiatives such as the Beau

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<sup>8</sup> Carrión, Ulises, and Juan J. Agius. *Art? Skill? Technique?: Ulises Carrión's Cultural Strategies and Communication Tactics: Five Reports*. Heras, Cantabria, Spain: Ediciones La Bahia, N.d., 48.

<sup>9</sup> Meltzer, Eve, “The Dream of the Information World,” *Oxford Art Journal* 29, no. 1 (2006). doi:10.1093/oxartj/kci046, 125.

Geste Press, Amsterdam's In-Out Center (1972-74) and *Other Books and So* not only responded to gaps within the local ecology of art institutions; they also created new, intercontinental networks of artistic exchange. Through artists' publishing, mail art, and the creation of exhibition and distribution spaces, Carrión's practice served as a point of interchange between Latin American, Eastern European and Western European alternative art circles.

He thus helped forge a model of what Zanna Gilbert calls "translocal collaboration." Gilbert, writing about mail art and the Beau Geste Press, with whom Carrión published two bookworks, writes:

The translocal is an open distinction that tries to rethink the way we define and interpret how artistic production originates, doing away with absolute geographical imperatives such as 'Latin American art.' Through its emphasis on a locality, the translocal also allows for the emergence of the particularities of a place to be accommodated while simultaneously denying deterministic readings of that context or position.<sup>10</sup>

Carrión's transition from Mexican literary writer to Amsterdam-based conceptual artist, writer and organizer doesn't fit neatly into the silo of "Latin American art" and is contextually illuminated by Gilbert's method. Translocal thinking about how artistic production cut across cultural and geopolitical boundaries is particularly relevant considering the centrality of networked collaboration to the goals and practices of mail art and artists' publishing. Concrete poetry, as Solt notes, was already a site of fervent cross-pollination between Latin American and European experimental artists in the 1950s and 1960s. Likewise, the Fluxus movement in the

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<sup>10</sup> Zanna Gilbert, "'Something Unnameable in Common': Translocal Collaboration at the Beau Geste Press," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2-3 (2012): 48, doi:10.1162/artm\_a\_00019.

1960s promoted a spirit of internationalism and figured directly in the genealogy of Carrión's artistic networks. By the 1970s, however, this translocal collaboration was not just a question of mutual influence or specific events, but a core element of the artistic process within artist-organized exhibition spaces, publications, and mail art projects. Active from 1975 to 1978, Carrión's bookstore/gallery *Other Books and So* exemplified this translocal model by distributing books and ephemera by artists from far-flung geographic regions, while serving as a point of interchange for Amsterdam's artistic scene.

While Carrión's activities took place at the margins of major artistic institutions, and even at the periphery of what is now considered the conceptual art canon, it would be a misstep to claim that they existed in total autonomy from institutions. Rather, the forms of making and reception adopted by Carrión and his circle were new modes of address that manifested a new artistic public. These practices were not aimed at direct confrontation with artistic convention, as in the modern avant-gardes, but rather at realizing a participatory mode of art production that existed in parallel to museums and the art market. During the 1960s and 1970s, artists' publishing, mail art, and artist-run spaces were somewhat naively discussed as inherently "democratic" practices, freer from the strictures of market and museum hierarchies. Carrión was cynical of this rhetoric of democratization, questioning the idea "that books would allow artists to liberate themselves from galleries and art critics. I would like to ask, what for? To fall into the hands of

publishers and book critics!"<sup>11</sup> Carrión's distance from the notion of artists' books as "democratic multiples" was likely due to the fact that he approached the medium by way of literature, rather than the New York-centric visual arts scene where that discourse emerged. The notion of "democratization" suggests that media such as publishing will bring art out of the "art world" and into the purview of the general public. Instead, drawing on the groundwork of Fluxus and concrete poetry as well as the situational marginality incurred in his migration from Latin America, Carrión's aim was more likely to construct a creative public that was not geographically confined to art capitals.

On the other hand, recent discussions of artists' publishing in the context of theories of the public sphere more appropriately express the impact of Carrión's "cultural strategies," particularly at *Other Books and So*. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner makes a crucial distinction between *a public* and the more all-encompassing notion of *the public*. *The public* is invoked as a social totality organized around such macro-communities as the nation-state. On the other hand, *a public* must be organized outside the state, principally by means of writing and discourse. As Warner writes, "A public is a space of discourse organized by discourse itself... it exists by virtue of being addressed... it is self-creating and self-organized."<sup>12</sup> "Making a public" was a crucial aspect of Carrión's impact at *Other Books and So*, his publication of artists' books, and his mail art activities.

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<sup>11</sup> Ulises Carrión, "Bookworks Revisited," in Carrión, Ulises, Thierry Dubois, and Juan J. Agius. *Quant Aux Livres = On Books*. Genève: Héros-Limite, 2008, p. 164.

<sup>12</sup> Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2002, 67-69.

At *Other Books and So*, experimental writers, artists, concrete poets, and Fluxus co-travellers from across the globe found fertile territories of intersection precisely because of the new practices of artists' publishing and mail art, of which discursiveness was a core value. In the 1970s as much as today, Annette Gilbert writes, "the idea of making a public through publishing is connected with the concept of a scene or community that is conceived of as a limited, yet in principle accessible, open public sphere."<sup>13</sup> Although Carrión's impact during his time was confined to a discrete yet translocal community of artists, the modes of production and reception at play in this network offer a model for undoing perceptions of margin and center, both geographically and art historically. Though not "democratic" in the conventional sense of political participation, these activities still offered clear alternatives to a market-oriented logic of artistic exchange.

Carrión's involvement in the international mail art community deepened in the later 1970s, as he increasingly began coordinating mail art projects and exhibitions at *Other Books and So*. Even more so than artists' publishing, mail art emphasized a kind of "being in common" that rhetorically and aesthetically distanced itself from individual artistic genius. As Carrión writes, "Mail Art shifts the focus from what is traditionally called 'art' to the wider concept of 'culture'... a Mail Art project is never closed. Every human being, even those who will never hear the question, can provide an infinite number of answers."<sup>14</sup> Prime examples of Carrión's concept of cultural strategies, mail art projects were not closed works to be judged

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<sup>13</sup> Gilbert, Annette, and Hannes Bajohr. *Publishing as Artistic Practice*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Carrión, "Personal Worlds or Cultural Strategies," in *Second Thoughts*, 53-54.

on their visual qualities alone. Rather, each project prompted an open latticework of responses that emphasized a multiplicity of geographic and cultural positions. The magazine *Ephemera* (1977-78), which Carrión co-edited with Aart van Barneveld and Salvador Flores, showcased the ephemeral works that Carrión received daily through the mail, with each issue reproducing many pieces on a folded broadside in a collage-like fashion. *Ephemera* also notes the artist and city of origin of each piece, making visible that mail art's geography was far-reaching and relatively untethered from artistic centers such as New York City. According to Carrión, "An artist doesn't need to live in an 'art-capital' to have his voice heard and as a matter of fact there are centres [sic] of Mail Art activity in places where there are no art galleries but only a modest post office."<sup>15</sup> Carrión's mail art projects and writings on the subject demonstrate the political tensions at play within the medium. While mail art is dependent on the bureaucratic infrastructure of the postal system for its functioning, artists also used the mail to evade state censorship and engage in coded political critique.

Perhaps Carrión's most radical cultural strategies were his "public projects," which go the furthest in decoupling his practice from the institutional frames of art and literature. Though the intent of the projects varies, each of their strategies place these institutional frames in contradistinction with a more diffuse field of social action. While these projects share some superficial features with more recent art movements such as Relational Aesthetics and Social Practice, these projects essentially act on the social by means of the social, rather than producing a defined

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<sup>15</sup> Carrión, "From Bookworks to Mailworks," in *Second Thoughts*, 30.

aesthetic product. Popular culture, everyday speech acts, and networks of acquaintances were the basis of these projects, broadening the focus from social communities of artists (as in Mail Art) to social communities as such. As Guy Schraenen writes: “In his public projects [Carrión] worked with participants who became like objects within different experimental settings. One can therefore regard these projects as a sort of gambling in which people, behavior and ideas are thought of as game pieces.”<sup>16</sup> A quasi-scientific approach converges beautifully with the logic of the game in Carrión’s 1981 project *Gossip, Scandal and Good Manners*. In the first phase of the project, he constructed twelve pieces of gossip about himself, which he instructed his friends to spread through the city of Amsterdam, documenting their experiences in specialized notebooks, much as a scientist uses a lab notebook to record their findings. Carrión thus “tested” his theses about gossip in a real social setting, presenting his “results” in a formal lecture at De Appel, a prominent Amsterdam exhibition space for performance and installation art. The “experimental lecture” format of the project was not totally alien to contemporary art, bearing resemblance to John Cage’s *Lecture on Nothing* and Henry Flynt’s *From Culture to Veramusement*. However, Carrión chose the lecture format precisely because its rigidity placed the erratic and informal nature of gossip in stark relief.<sup>17</sup> Though the format of *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners* is unique, like much of Carrión’s work, it applies a precise structuralist analysis to “minor” genres of everyday social communication. A game-like experimental framework is similarly at

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<sup>16</sup> Schraenen, Guy. *Ulises Carrión: Dear Reader. Don't Read*. Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2016, 23.

<sup>17</sup> <sup>17</sup> Carrión, Ulises, and Juan J. Agius. *Art? Skill? Technique?: Ulises Carrión's Cultural Strategies and Communication Tactics: Five Reports*, 47.

play in the 1982 work *The Robbery of the Year*, an installation in which viewers are able to look at, touch, or even steal a diamond on display in the gallery space.

Carrión's *The Robbery of the Year* draws on the lineage of institutional critique by devising a participatory scenario which reveals the entrenched conditions of spectatorship.

Carrión's strategies of shifting focus from individual artworks to the means through which art is organized and distributed within a collective field are eminently a product of the cultural environment of the 1970s. This shift reflects the "dematerialization" of the art object in the wake of conceptual art, as well as a rise of information- and systems-based thinking in social spheres from literary theory and economics to computer science. The following three chapters will explore Carrión's cultural strategies through analyzing distinct aspects of his work, framing these activities in terms of the translocal artistic networks in which he worked and the theoretical influence of structuralism upon his practice. The first chapter will focus on Carrión's founding of *Other Books and So* and his participation in the artist-run space *In Out Center* and the publishing project *Beau Geste Press*, within the context of alternative art spaces in the 1970s. During the period, artists' publishing and alternative spaces emerged as intertwined practices through which artists sought to distribute their works outside of institutional contexts. The second chapter will examine Carrión's prolific involvement in the mail art community, highlighting three projects in particular: the mail art periodical *Ephemera* (1977-78), *Box, Boxing Boxers* (1978), and *The Stampa Newspaper* (1980). All three projects are examples of the "assembling" genre of mail art: multiply authored works whose aesthetics



emphasized a networked production process. That Carrión's network of collaborators in these Mail Art projects cross-cut geographic and political boundaries becomes even more interesting in light of his critique of the state and postal bureaucracies that undergird the practice of mail art. The third chapter will focus on how Carrión's public projects in the 1980s decoupled his analysis of communication systems from the frames of art and literature. Through projects like *Gossip, Scandal and Good Manners* (1981) and *The Robbery of the Year* (1982), Carrión delved into the complexities of "minor genres" of social communication in public space and real time. While ideas of the network have changed drastically in our current technological and geopolitical climate, Carrión's practice provides critical approaches to the relationship between art, bureaucracies and communication that are still relevant today.

## **Other Books & Other Spaces: Ulises Carrión and Alternative Artists' Networks**

The arc of Ulises Carrión's career in the 1970s is often discussed in terms of a transition from writing as a literary author to deploying language as an intermedia visual artist. However, Carrión sought less to shift from the literary field to the visual field than to adopt strategies that acted upon the broader cultural context, moving beyond the limits of the discrete artistic work. Publishing artists' bookworks and organizing activities in collaborative artist-run spaces were two key means through which Carrión helped forge an intercontinental and interdisciplinary public for experimental art in this period. During the early 1970s, Carrión worked with the UK-based artist publishers Beau Geste Press and was a founding member of the In-Out Center, Amsterdam's first "alternative" art center; both initiatives were grounded in fervent collaboration between artists from Latin America and Europe. Drawing on the translocal networks of artists and writers forged through these projects, Carrión founded *Other Books and So* (1975-78), the first artist-run bookstore and gallery dedicated exclusively to the medium of artists' books. Emerging from artists' growing criticism of gallery and museum institutions in the 1970s, independent publishing and artist-run spaces were two deeply intertwined means by which artists created a parallel, peer-based and international model of artistic exchange. Carrión was uniquely positioned to draw the activities and viewpoints of Latin American artists and writers into this paradigm of translocal collaboration.

Carrión's shift away from traditional literary forms to engaging with the structure of language in an experimental form and a broad social context was

undergirded by the discourses of structuralism and semiotics. His early publications, such as *Arguments; Looking for Poetry/Tras la Poesía*; and *Tell Me What Sort of Wallpaper You Have and I Will Tell You Who You Are*, reflect Saussure's interrogation into the nature of the sign. According to Saussure, "The linguistic sign unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The latter is not the material sound, a purely physical thing, but the psychological imprint of the sound, the impression it makes on our senses."<sup>18</sup> In these bookworks, Carrión places the signifying function of language and the materiality of the page in dialogue, pointing to Saussure's classic observation that "the bond between the signifier and signified is arbitrary."<sup>19</sup> However, to argue that Carrión's engagement with linguistic structures was confined to the genre of either experimental literature or artists' books is to overlook the social context in which he worked and intended these publications to act. While there are elements of formalism to his essay *The New Art of Making Books*, Carrión's trajectory ultimately brought him beyond consideration of medium as such. Thus, following Rosalind Krauss, one might understand his use of the bookwork as a "technical support" in his examination of how language circulates and acts within a wide social field.<sup>20</sup>

Ulises Carrión was one of many artists who came to Amsterdam from abroad in the 1960s and 1970s, attracted by its progressive political atmosphere and spirit of cross-pollination between radical art and social movements. Amsterdam's

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<sup>18</sup> Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in general linguistics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 66.

<sup>19</sup> Saussure, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition," *October* 116 (2006): 56, doi:10.1162/octo.2006.116.1.55.

tolerance toward homosexuality also allowed Carrión to live as an openly gay man; his long-term partner, Aart van Barneveld, was a key collaborator in many of his creative endeavors. During the 1960s and 1970s, Dutch artists and activists used embodied and performative actions as a form of social and political protest.

Likewise, Amsterdam became a hub for promoting and exhibiting the “dematerialized” and information-based strategies of Conceptual art. The confluence of performative and circulatory practices in Amsterdam’s cultural scene exerted a strong influence on the new strategies that Carrión would pursue in the 1970s.

In the 1960s Netherlands, happenings emerged as a form of political protest through the activities of Robert Jasper Grootveld and the anarchist Provo movement. An outgrowth of the beatnik counter culture, “Their happenings were primarily a means of publicity, which the media avidly latched onto, whereby Provo’s political ideas were rapidly disseminated nationally and internationally.”<sup>21</sup> The Provos also won a seat on the Amsterdam city council, where they proposed a series of “White Plans” advocating for a free bike-sharing program, contraception and sex education, squatting, and other initiatives. This movement died out several years before Carrión’s arrival, but its fusion between art, life and politics attracted artists from abroad who would later be part of Carrión’s circle. The squatter movement in 1970s Amsterdam also played a role in shaping artists’ initiatives during the period. According to Marga van Mechelen: “The housing shortage gave rise in the 1970s to the squatting movement which increasingly became a political

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<sup>21</sup> Marga Van. Mechelen and Michael Gibbs, *De Appel: performances, installations, video, projects, 1975-1983* (Amsterdam: De Appel, 2006), 21.

subculture that made its mark on metropolitan life as a whole.”<sup>22</sup> Artists also played a part in the self-directed transformation of urban space. As Tineke Reijnders writes, “On the sidelines of such confrontations, young artists... opened art centres in the newly occupied buildings, renovated them as they thought fit, and put on their own programmes.”<sup>23</sup>

In Amsterdam, artist-run spaces cropped up not as a critique of regressive institutions, but as parallel spaces in a diverse cultural setting. In 1969, the Stedelijk Museum held the influential exhibition *Op Losse Schroeven*, showcasing the newest developments in Conceptual Art, Land Art, and Arte Povera. The museum’s 1971 exhibition *Sound Texts? Concrete Poetry, Visual Texts* would prove influential in Carrión’s shift from literary writing to text-based structural experiments.<sup>24</sup>

Forward-thinking galleries like Art & Project, Rieke Swart, and Helen van der Meij infused the Dutch cultural scene with conceptual art and its rigorous approach to language. Art & Project showed conceptual artists like Sol Lewitt, John Baldessari, Gilbert & George and Hanne Darboven, and announced its exhibitions in a series of bulletins that served as circulating artworks in themselves.<sup>25</sup> The bulletins drew on the “dematerialized” practices of New York-based dealer and curator Seth Siegelaub, who adopted the frame of advertising and mass media to promote the information-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>23</sup> Tineke Reijnders, “Ephemeral and Consistent,” in Adrichem, Jan Van., Noor Mertens, and Astrid Vorstermans. *Positioning the Art Gallery: Het Amsterdamse Galeriewezen in Een Internationale Context = the Amsterdam Gallery World in an International Context*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012, p. 155.

<sup>24</sup> Heriberto Yepez, “Cinco Estrategías Posnacionales de Ulises Carrión,” in Yepez, Heriberto, Tineke Reijnders, Sofia Carillo, Javier Maderuelo, Fernando Castro Florez, and Jose Maria Lafuente. *Arte Y Parte: Ulises Carrión*, no. 122 (April 2016), p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Rini Dippel, “Art & Project: The Early Years,” in Cherix, Christophe. *In & out of Amsterdam: travels in conceptual art, 1960-1976*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009, 26-27.

based works of conceptual artists like Carl Andre and Lawrence Weiner. The passage of this group of artists through Amsterdam in the 1960s and 1970s is chronicled in Christophe Chérix's 2009 MoMA exhibition *In & Out of Amsterdam*, which emphasizes the internationalism and theme of travel in this artistic context.<sup>26</sup> However, Chérix's concept of "internationalism" hardly manages to extend beyond the borders of the United States and Western Europe.

Both the conceptual artists Chérix highlighted and Carrión used "dematerialized" aesthetic strategies, but they worked within different systems to different ends. Whereas Conceptualists retooled the function of galleries and dealers to suit their systems-based investigations, Carrión utilized non-commercial art spaces and co-opted non-art bureaucratic infrastructures (such as the postal service) to expand the art public to those without immediate geographic or cultural access to galleries. Carrión's first forays into alternative art would happen through his contributions to the UK-based independent publisher, Beau Geste Press, and the Amsterdam artist-run space, In-Out Center, between the years of 1972 and 1974. In this three-year period, Carrión published twelve bookworks with Beau Geste Press and his own In-Out Productions, marking his decisive shift from literary writing to an interdisciplinary, language-based practice.

Despite the title of the exhibition *In and Out of Amsterdam*, Chérix makes only cursory mention of the In-Out Center. There, a group of artists not shown in spaces like Art & Project worked with all of the "new media" of the time, from performance

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<sup>26</sup> Chérix, Christophe. *In & out of Amsterdam: travels in conceptual art, 1960-1976*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009, 17.

and sound art to video and artists' books. Founded in 1972, the In-Out Center was run by nine artists from Latin America, Iceland, and the Netherlands: Michel Cardena, Raul Marroquin, Ulises Carrión, Hreinn Fridfinnsson, Sigurdur Gudmundsson, Kristján Gudmundsson, Hetty Huisman, Pieter Laurens Mol, and Gerrit Jan de Rook [Fig. 1]. According to Tineke Reijnders, each artist was responsible for programming the space for one month a year, typically showing their own work for two weeks and inviting another artist to show for the remaining two weeks.<sup>27</sup> In the context of the center, Carrión founded a small press, In-Out Productions, bringing his experiments with language out of the sphere of literature and poetry and into a multifaceted artistic environment [Fig. 2].

Carrión purchased a mimeograph machine, and through In-Out Productions he published five of his own artists' books, or "bookworks," as he would later call them: *Sonnet(s)*; *Dancing with You*; *Tell me What Sort of Wall Paper Your Room Has and I Will Tell You Who You Are*; *Amor*; and *Speeds*.<sup>28</sup> These publications exemplify the ideas Carrión would advance in "The New Art of Making Books," emphasizing language's structure over its content, making use of appropriation, and drawing attention to the spatial and sequential aspects of the book. As Felipe Ehrenberg of Beau Geste Press writes, Carrión's "intense interest in 'rolling up his sleeves' and tackling the actual construction of the book" marked a decisive shift away from

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<sup>27</sup> Tineke Reijnders, "Ulises Carrión," in Yepez, Heriberto, Tineke Reijnders, Sofia Carillo, Javier Maderuelo, Fernando Castro Florez, and Jose Maria Lafuente. *Arte Y Parte: Ulises Carrión*, no. 122 (April 2016), p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> Maderuelo, 55.

literature toward the “new art” that he championed.<sup>29</sup> “Making books” signified a self-directed approach to the artistic production process that was a key feature of spaces like In-Out Center.

Beyond the bookworks’ formal and conceptual innovations, Carrión’s In-Out Productions should be considered within the context of alternative spaces as means of creating new channels for art to be produced and distributed. Independent publications by the likes of Carrión, Michael Gibbs, Marroquin, and Huisman were not only *a*, but *the* key forum for artists working at the intersection of visual poetry and conceptual art. As Gabrielle Detterer notes:

“Correspondence art and collective publishing were ... not only instrumentally exploited means of communication between the communities, but formed key features of a number of artistic campaigns and local initiatives that led to the foundation of community centers.”<sup>30</sup>

Publishing thus served as a key means of connecting artists working in collectively-run spaces in different national and local contexts. It was an activity by which individual artists could distribute their works outside traditional galleries as well as a way that spaces with shared ethics and aesthetic programs could share information.

In addition to self-publishing bookworks through In-Out Productions, Carrión participated in performances organized by other In-Out Center artists, such as Raul Marroquín’s *Building and Crushing a Body Sculpture* in 1973. In the piece, Dutch painter Anton Verhoeven posed as an academic figure model and Carrión

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<sup>29</sup> Felipe Ehrenberg, “Carrión: Beyond Literature,” in Schraenen, Guy. *Ulises Carrión: Dear Reader. Don’t Read*. Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2016, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup> Gabriele Detterer and Maurizio Nannucci, *Artist-run spaces: nonprofit collective organizations in the 1960s and 1970s* (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2012), 14-15.



proceeded to undress him, culminating with both artists leaving the room.<sup>31</sup> The piece reflected the mounting significance of bodily performance during this period in Amsterdam, a shift that would be reflected in Carrión's own, primarily sound-based experiments in performance. Carrión also exhibited his bookworks and text-based artworks in the In-Out Center's gallery; he held his first solo exhibition at the space, *Texts and Other Texts*, from May 28 – June 9, 1973. While the In-Out Center closed in 1974 due to financial difficulties, the artistic networks that gathered there would funnel their activities into new initiatives, such as Carrión's *Other Books and So* and Wies Smals' De Appel Art Centre, both founded in 1975.

During the period that In-Out Center was active, Carrión was also active in publishing bookworks with the UK-based Beau Geste Press, who took a collaborative approach to publishing practice within a broadly international group of artists. Beau Geste Press was founded in a farmhouse Devon, England in 1970 by Mexican artists Felipe Ehrenberg and Martha Hellion and English artist David Mayor. Beau Geste played a crucial role in bringing works by Latin American and Eastern European artists to audiences in Britain and continental Europe. The collectively run press was rooted in Fluxus' legacy of openness and internationalism, as evidenced by its first publication, a catalogue for the traveling *FLUXSHOE* exhibition [Fig. 3]. Zanna Gilbert underlines the influence of Fluxus artists on Beau Geste's praxis:

“Filliou's commitment to developing connections between like-minded individuals and Maciunas's internationalist ambitions coalesced in Fluxshoe

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<sup>31</sup> Maderuelo, Javier. *Ulises Carrión, Escritor*. Heras, Cantabria, Spain: Ediciones La Bahia, 2016, 55.

and set the parameters for the activities of the Beau Geste Press.<sup>32</sup>

Beau Geste's magazine *Schmuck*, which drew contributions from artists around the world and was distributed through the mail, solidified the press' role in creating a translocal network of artists.<sup>33</sup>

While Carrión was acquainted with Ehrenberg from Mexico, the relationship was rekindled when Carrión found a copy of the Beau Geste publication *DT* on a visit to London in 1972.<sup>34</sup> The two began a vibrant correspondence, which led to Carrión publishing two key bookworks with Beau Geste in 1973: *Arguments* and *Looking for poetry/Tras la poesia*. Both publications show the influence of structuralism on Carrión's work, interrogating the relationship between signifier and signified and how it is impacted by the visual arrangement of signs across the structure of book and page. *Arguments* is a slim, perfect-bound volume consisting of 25 sections, or "arguments," each exploring social relationships through the visual arrangement of names across the pages [Fig. 4]. By using first names, which could possibly refer to any number of people, Carrión opens space for readers' subjective associations with the visual signifiers he presents. *Arguments* was also strongly influenced by concrete poetry, which Carrión argued had a decisive influence on the development of artists' books. As he wrote, while traditional poetry occurs in an "abstract, ideal, impalpable space," concrete poetry "occurs in a concrete, real, physical space – the page."<sup>35</sup> As

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<sup>32</sup> Zanna Gilbert, "Something Unnameable in Common," 53.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>34</sup> Felipe Ehrenberg, "Carrión: Beyond Literature," in Schraenen, Guy. *Ulises Carrión: Dear Reader. Don't Read*. Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2016, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Ulises Carrion, "The New Art of Making Books," in Carrion, Ulises, *Second Thoughts*, 6-23. Amsterdam: VOID Distributors. 1980, 12.

with the earlier concrete poems of Eugen Gomringer and the Noigandres group, space becomes a primary means through which *Arguments* communicates. Mary Ellen Solt underlines: "Space having become the syntactic agent, the meaning of the poem is to be perceived from the structural relationship of its spatial-linguistic elements."<sup>36</sup> The division of *Arguments* into chapters perhaps places this experiment more in dialogue with the page space than the structure of the book as a totality.

*Looking for Poetry/Tras la Poesía* is similarly influenced by concrete poetry and structuralism. A series of seven lines visually links the pages of this mimeographed book; on the right-hand page of each spread appears a pair of words, in Spanish and English: *lines/lineas, threads/hilos, wires/alambres, strings/cuerdas, etc.*<sup>37</sup> Through referring to the abstract lines with these word pairs, Carrión assigns them a metaphorical or representational quality, thus "looking for poetry" through this associative process and pointing to the arbitrary nature of the sign. The gesture also recalls Joseph Kosuth's investigation of linguistic representation in *One and Three Chairs* (1965). Finally, the continuation of the lines across all the pages reflects Carrión's emphasis upon the whole book as a "space time sequence": "To make a book is to actualize its ideal space-time sequence by means of the creation of a parallel sequence of signs, be it linguistic or other."<sup>38</sup> In making these books with Beau Geste Press, Carrión also met the artist Michael Gibbs, whose magazine of visual poetry, *Kontexts*, would publish Carrión's influential essay "The New Art of

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<sup>36</sup> Solt, 423.

<sup>37</sup> Maderuelo, Javier. *Ulises Carrión, Escritor*. Heras, Cantabria, Spain: Ediciones La Bahia, 2016, 48-49.

<sup>38</sup> Carrión, "The New Art of Making Books," 9.

Making Books” in 1975.

The participants in Beau Geste Press viewed “networking” as a core element of their practice and publishing as a means of traversing geographic and ideological boundaries. Viewed in this context, Carrión’s explorations of language are not bounded by the book; they incorporate a social understanding of language and communication that would traverse his entire artistic output. The translocal network of artists engaged by Beau Geste Press included Latin Americans such as Clemente Padín and Regina Silveira and Hungarian artists Endre Tot and Milan Knizak, who would later distribute publications and participate in projects at Carrión’s *Other Books and So*. Both the ethics of networking at Beau Geste Press and the network participants themselves would thus carry forth into other periods of Carrión’s practice. As Gilbert writes, “networked art challenges common assumptions about what constitutes art—the categories of object, author, and materiality—but also because it questions how we try to understand, record, archive, and organize knowledge.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, these practices dismantle exclusionary narratives about Latin American and Eastern European art; Gilbert’s thesis of the translocal demonstrates “the dialectical rather than oppositional nature of Latin American and Eastern European contacts with the rest of the world.”<sup>40</sup>

After the closing of In-Out Centre, Carrión’s passion for the unconventional publications being produced by artists and writers led him to open his own

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<sup>39</sup> Zanna Gilbert, “Something Unnameable in Common,” 71.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

bookshop-gallery, *Other Books and So*. Founded by Carrión in 1975 with the help of his partner, Aart van Barneveld, *Other Books and So* was the first bookshop dedicated exclusively to artists' publications. Visitors to the shop could browse a selection of artists' books, magazines, postcards, sound works, and multiples produced by experimental artists and writers from around the globe [Fig. 5]. Over the course of its four-year run, *Other Books and So* hosted over fifty exhibitions on mail art, artists' books, sound poetry, and conceptual art, including solo shows by Dick Higgins, Allan Kaprow, and Dorothy Iannone. Through the international scope of its offerings and the shop's role as a meeting place for artists from various alternative networks, *Other Books and So* earned a legacy within artists' publishing that outlasted its short lifespan.<sup>41</sup>

*Other Books and So* opened in a small, basement-level storefront at 227 Herengracht in Amsterdam, a space that was shared with a young graphic designer, Thomas Gravemaker.<sup>42</sup> While Carrión had been living in Amsterdam illegally until 1974, he had obtained legal residence by the time *Other Books and So* opened, making it easier for him to meet his basic financial needs and secure funding for his projects.<sup>43</sup> Still, Carrión relied upon friends to finance the shop's opening; 18 people gave 100 guilders each to finance the first six months' rent.

*Other Books and So* neither fit neatly into the model of a bookstore, nor that

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<sup>41</sup> Some content in this section is adapted from [https://monoskop.org/Other Books and So](https://monoskop.org/Other_Books_and_So), a preliminary version of this essay which I posted in January, 2010. Monoskop is a collaborative wiki for arts, humanities and media.

<sup>42</sup> Reijnders, "Ulises Carrión," 53.

<sup>43</sup> Maderuelo, 101.

of a traditional gallery. While there is necessarily a commercial aspect to an artist-run bookstore, *Other Books and So* was less a self-consciously entrepreneurial endeavor than a mechanism for circulating discourse. In line with Carrión's notion of "cultural strategies," his distribution, editorial and curatorial activities at *Other Books and So* should be viewed as key elements of an expanded artistic practice, rather than ancillary to the production of books and objects. Carrión understood these initiatives within a broader shift in artists' practices, acting autonomously from critics and the academy. As he writes:

"Artists have started publishing books and magazines, distributing them, managing galleries and other art centers, organizing cultural events that involve various media and specialized professions. In other words, they have abandoned the sacred realm of art and entered the wider, less well-contoured field of culture."<sup>44</sup>

Other artist-run spaces dedicated to artists' publishing emerged shortly after the founding of *Other Books and So*, such as Franklin Furnace and Printed Matter, both founded in New York in 1976. For multidisciplinary artists' spaces such as Art Metropole (founded 1974, Toronto), Zona (1974, Florence), and Artpool (1979, Budapest), publishing was a key means of networking and spreading information about their activities.<sup>45</sup> The notion of distribution-as-artwork was apparent in the contents of the *Other Books and So* shop, which developed not through market demand, but through Carrión's own particular process of curation, communication and community building – he solicited publications from over 1,000 artists through

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<sup>44</sup> Ulises Carrión, "Critical Autonomy of the Artist," in Carrión, Ulises, Thierry Dubois, and Juan J. Agius. *Quant Aux Livres = On Books*. Genève: Héros-Limite, 2008, p. 164.

<sup>45</sup> Detterer, 12.

the mail preceding the shop's opening. *Other Books and So* both reflected a public that was coming into being through the act of publication and created a public by offering a space to gather, exhibit, and exchange ideas. As Gerrit Jan de Rook, Carrión's friend and collaborator, writes:

As yet unknown artists were welcome to present their books, magazines or audio tapes, while well-known artists exhibiting at De Appel or the Stedelijk Museum, such as David Salle, always came in to browse... the gallery developed into the ultimate hangout for lovers of experiments with books.<sup>46</sup>

While some more established artists visited the space, *Other Books and So* had a casual and unassuming style of presenting books and objects that differed markedly from the "white cube" gallery approach and emphasized the interactivity of artists' publications. As Guy Schraenen recalls, "Through its presentation, the bookstore immediately involved the visitor in looking at and in making contact with the books, most of which were laid out flat on tables or shelves, their covers immediately engaging one in their subsequent discovery."<sup>47</sup>

Carrión sourced materials for the shop through the connections he developed within the publishing and mail art networks in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the United States. Artists also self-submitted their own bookworks, audio recordings, and postcards. A postcard announcing the opening of the shop described it as "a space for the exhibition and distribution of other books, non books, anti books, pseudo books, quasi books, concrete books, conceptual books, structural books, project books, plain books."<sup>48</sup> [Fig. 6] Carrión's

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<sup>46</sup> Jan de Rook, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Schraenen, Guy, *Ulises Carrión: "We have won! Haven't we?"* Amsterdam: Museum Fodor, 1992, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Maderuelo, 25.

playful list of the shop's contents emphasizes that his interest was not necessarily in art or in books by artists, but rather in unconventional experiments with the book form originating from a variety of disciplines. Unlike the organizers of spaces such as Printed Matter, Carrión placed a strong emphasis on the role of concrete and visual poetry in the development of the bookwork. As Carrión wrote:

“The fact is Fluxus and conceptual artists helped make the public accustomed to artists’ publications and take them seriously, but their contribution to the development of the book as form is less impressive, less rich and less varied than the contributions by concrete and visual poets.”<sup>49</sup>

*Other Books and So's* exhibition and performance program heavily featured artists originating from experimental poetry, distinguishing its position somewhat from conceptual and performance art-oriented spaces in the United States.

In 1977, the shop moved to a somewhat larger space at 259 Herengracht, down the street from its first location. Programming at *Other Books and So's* new location emphasized Carrión's deepening interest in mail art, with exhibitions such as *What Is Mail Art?*, *Poste Restante*, and a solo exhibition by Canadian mail artist Anna Banana.<sup>50</sup> During this period, Carrión simultaneously curated mail art related exhibitions at other venues, including *From Bookworks to Mailworks* at the Stedelijk museum Alkmaar, 1978. In 1977 and 1978, *Other Books and So* published the 12-issue magazine *Ephemera*, edited by Carrión, Barneveld, and Salvador Flores, which showcased the daily communications the editors received through the mail art network. Closely associated with *Other Books and So* was the Stempelplaats gallery,

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<sup>49</sup> Carrión, Ulises, “Bookworks Revisited,” in *Quant Aux Livres*, 167.

<sup>50</sup> Schraenen, *Dear Reader, Don't Read*, 184.



which Barneveld operated between 1977 and 1980. Situated in the Posthumus rubber stamp factory in Amsterdam, the Stempelplaats focused on artists' stamps by mail artists, and collaborated on exhibitions and publications with the same tight-knit community active at *Other Books and So*.

Other Books and So shut its doors in the winter of 1978-79, due to the failure of the shop to obtain subsidies that were promised to it, as well as Carrión's desire to move on to other projects.<sup>51</sup> From this point onward, Carrión maintained his collection of artists' books, mail art and ephemera as the Other Books and So Archive, which was opened to the public at 121 Bloemgracht, Amsterdam, beginning in 1980.<sup>52</sup> Like the bookstore that preceded it, Carrión considered his archive to be an artwork, writing:

"...I believe art as a practice has been superseded by a more complex, more rigorous, and richer practice: culture. We've reached a privileged historical moment when keeping an archive can be an artwork."<sup>53</sup>

Carrión was among many artists of his generation who viewed the creation of a personal archive as not merely an act of preservation and documentation, but as a "living archive" with a social dimension. This is apparent through the many Polaroids of visitors to OBASA that he took in 1980-81, labeled with the names of pictured artist friends including Michael Gibbs, Guy Schraenen, Claudio Goulart, and Pawel Petasz, among many others.<sup>54</sup> The archive remained open until Carrión's death in 1989, at which point it was placed in the custody of his friend, Juan Aguis.

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<sup>51</sup> Jan de Rook, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Reijnders, "Ulises Carrión," 59.

<sup>53</sup> Carrión, "Other Books," in *Quant aux livres*, 195.

<sup>54</sup> Maderuelo, 246-247.

OBASA's long history as an archive that was rich and specific, yet permeable and social, makes evident the essential role of international artists' networks throughout Carrión's entire practice. It was a public archive and a document of a public.

Carrión's activities as a publisher, distributor, curator, and maker of artists' publications within the context of alternative artists' networks reflected a conception of art that was not limited by traditional notions of authorship or the artistic work. It was through taking on these so-called "para-artistic" activities that Carrión had such a decisive role in forging a new, experimental artistic public that existed in parallel to established galleries and art institutions. While they did not position themselves in direct confrontation with established art institutions and practice, *Other Books and So*, In-Out Center, and Beau Geste Press established circuits of artistic exchange that largely did away with "mediating" figures such as critics, curators and dealers. Carrión's engagement with artists' publishing and artist-run spaces both asserted the value of self-determination and promoted a decentralized approach to cultural production that crisscrossed geographic and political boundaries. *Other Books and So* also served as a key point of contact for artists for whom distributing informal publications and ephemera through the mail were a means of getting around censorship. Thus, publishing was inextricably linked to translocal collaboration between Latin America, Eastern and Western Europe in the 1970s, as was the mail art network. Through Carrión's deepening involvement in Mail Art in the late 1970s, he conceived of networked collaboration as not just a means to an end, but a structural feature of his works.

**“A Guerrilla War Against the Big Monster”:  
Ulises Carrión and the International Mail Art Network**

During the second half of the 1970s, Ulises Carrión became increasingly involved in the international network of mail art as a means of putting into practice his conception of broad-based cultural strategies. Through both mail art editorial projects and exhibitions, Carrión mobilized a broadly translocal milieu of collaborators. These projects instrumentally engaged the networked structure of mail art as both formal and conceptual elements. His mail art projects, such as the magazines *Ephemera* (1977-78), *Box Boxing Boxers* (1978) and the rubber-stamp piece *The Stampa Newspaper* (1981), emphasized multiplicity and openness in their execution, supplementing Carrión’s written critiques of the conventions of authorship and originality. Carrión’s writings and projects move beyond an aesthetic conception of mail art, calling into question the means by which these practices rely on state bureaucracies – the postal system – and official symbols of power – the stamp. These questions took on a political dimension, as Carrión forged strong ties with mail artists in Latin America such as Paulo Bruscky and Clemente Padin, for whom sending ephemeral works through the mail became a key means of evading state censorship. While Carrión’s curious description of mail art as “a guerrilla war against the Big Monster” posits a variety of possible meanings, it certainly suggests that mail art was a small form of liberation in a geopolitically uneven world.<sup>55</sup>

While mail art experienced an intense period of productivity and a wide

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<sup>55</sup> Carrión, Ulises, “Mail Art and the Big Monster,” in Carrion, Ulises, *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: VOID Distributors. 1980, 44.

range of approaches in the 1970s, the practice is widely acknowledged to have originated with Ray Johnson and his New York Correspondence School. Ken Friedman argues that the “second phase” of mail art began with Fluxus, both through the “Mail Order Fluxshops” initiated by George Maciunas and through Robert Filiou’s conception of an “Eternal Network” of communication.<sup>56</sup> According to Friedman, “It was at this time that mail art first created, and began to make real, its potential for social change and for contributing new forms of communication to the world.”<sup>57</sup> Friedman designates a third era of mail art activity that coincides with the mounting of large exhibitions that brought mail art visibility among a wider public. Friedman himself curated the significant exhibition *Omaha Flow Systems* in 1973, in which over 5,000 artists were invited to send mail works to Omaha, to be displayed either at the Joslyn Art Museum or at a number of satellite spaces. Visitors were allowed to take pieces home, so long as they themselves left something for the exhibition and wrote a response to the artist, creating an additional “feedback loop” within the show’s design.<sup>58</sup> *Omaha Flow Systems* proved largely influential in the “fourth era” of mail art, in which Carrión and his correspondents participated. This period, writes Friedman, was “characterized by moral intensity I hadn’t seen since the 1960s, by passion, by commitment and by a real interest in the network, a

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<sup>56</sup> Friedman, Ken, “The Early Days of Mail Art,” in Welch, Chuck. *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995, 7-8.

<sup>57</sup> Friedman, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Van Der Meijden, Peter. “BOX BOXING BOXERS-Mail Art Projects, Exhibitions and Archives.” Lomholt Mail Art Archive. 2014. <http://lomholtmailartarchive.dk/texts/peter-van-der-meijden-box-boxing-boxers-mail-art-projects-exhibitions-archives>.

network seen as a human phenomenon more important than art.”<sup>59</sup>

Carrión thus entered into mail art at a time when mail artists working in various contexts, such as John Held, Judith Hoffberg, and Carlo Pittore, were actively archiving and producing critical writings about the medium. Moreover, Carrión’s engagement with mail art was in many ways a fluid transition from his activities as a publisher and distributor of artists’ books at *Other Books and So*. As he acknowledges, “...one of the decisive factors for the world-wide proliferation of artists’ books (and of artists’ books shows) was their ability to be distributed by means of the mail.”<sup>60</sup> Carrión’s shift toward mail art, particularly during the second half of *Other Books and So’s* existence, was a question of more intensively activating the translocal social networks in which he was already engaged. Carrión was one of many artists in Northern Europe who produced mail art in the early 1970s, the circulation of his mail art projects also reflected his strong ties in Latin America. While Friedman’s timeline is in many ways correct, Carrión’s Mexican heritage and engagement with concrete poetry and Latin American artists brought out different tendencies within his approach to mail art. According to Zanna Gilbert:

...throughout the 1960s, artists and poets in Argentina, Mexico, Uruguay and Brazil developed concerns with the notion of systems of all kinds — postal, linguistic, epistemological, bureaucratic, political — and that this concern stemmed more from an engagement with experimental poetry and theories of language than with any knowledge of Ray Johnson’s or the Fluxus

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<sup>59</sup> Friedman, 15.

<sup>60</sup> Carrión, Ulises, “From Bookworks to Mailworks,” in Carrion, Ulises, *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: VOID Distributors. 1980, 27.

movement's love of the mail.<sup>61</sup>

Carrión, working in Europe, would have been familiar with Fluxus, primarily through his work with the Beau Geste Press. However, his interest in linguistic and bureaucratic systems and his background in experimental poetry bear similar influences and goals to the works of his collaborators who remained in Latin America during this time period.

The breadth and depth of Carrión's involvement in mail art is perhaps most clearly exemplified through the 12-issue mail art magazine *Ephemer*a, which he co-edited with Salvador Flores and Aart van Barneveld. By recirculating the mail art works the editors received from around the globe on a daily basis, the magazine functioned as a document of mail art activities that was simultaneously a kind of positive feedback loop that reinvigorated the network. *Ephemer*a both re-deployed material from the editors' personal archives, displayed in a collage-like fashion, and showcased new ephemeral works, artists' stamps and interventions on the page. In total, the 12 issues featured pieces from some 245 collaborators, presenting a wide variety of aesthetic approaches and a multiplicity of geographic and disciplinary origins [Fig. 7]. According to Javier Maderuelo, *Ephemer*a was not a reflection of Carrión's tastes or those of his coeditors, but a reliable testimony to the types of works that were realized during this period through the correspondents'

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<sup>61</sup> Zanna Gilbert, "Genealogical Diversions: Experimental Poetry Networks, Mail Art and Conceptualisms," *Caiana: Revista de Historia del Arte y Cultura Visual del Centro Argentino de Investigadores de Arte*. 4 (2014): 1, [http://caiana.caia.org.ar/template/caiana.php?pag=articles/article\\_2.php&obj=136&vol=4](http://caiana.caia.org.ar/template/caiana.php?pag=articles/article_2.php&obj=136&vol=4).

collaboration.<sup>62</sup> Printed on newsprint, often with small works affixed or loose pages inserted, the magazine was, according to Maderuelo, a collage of collages, whose aesthetic of precarity and improvisation stood in contrast to the glamour of glossy illustrated magazines.<sup>63</sup>

While the magazine's value is documentary, as Maderuelo implies, it also highlighted mail art activity in certain regions and works by particular artists through several themed issues. Though Eastern European and Latin American artists were broadly integrated into each issue of *Ephemera*, the two final issues focused solely on mail art activity in Hungary and Brazil, respectively. On the one hand, the Hungary and Brazil issues serve to showcase the aesthetic specificity and disciplinary origins of mail art practices within these regions. On the other, by showcasing mail art practices in local contexts outside western democracies, *Ephemera* deepened artistic exchange across geographic and ideological borders, making a small but significant political intervention. As Gilbert writes, "...translocal communication might be thought of as one locality temporarily traveling into another in the form of the mailed artifact. This breach, however tiny, enables the establishment of an alternative artistic economy based on gift exchange..."<sup>64</sup>

Beyond connecting localities through the logic of the gift, the mail art exemplified in *Ephemera* functioned, especially in the Latin American context, as a

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<sup>62</sup> Maderuelo, Javier. *Ulises Carrión, Escritor*. Heras, Cantabria, Spain: Ediciones La Bahía, 2016, 174. Text appears in Spanish.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Zanna Gilbert, "'Something Unnameable in Common': Translocal Collaboration at the Beau Geste Press," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2-3 (2012): 48, doi:10.1162/artm\_a\_00019, 70.

means of evading censorship. According to Fabiane Pianowski:

In order to defeat censorship, many postal artists ... ciphered their messages, using visual poetry as an efficient means to transmit subversive messages. Therefore, in the Latin American context, mail art became a valuable means of communication with the outside world.<sup>65</sup>

In 1976, Paulo Bruscky – whose work features in the Brazil issue of *Ephemera* – and Daniel Santiago organized the Second International Mail Art Exhibition in Recife, Brazil, which was shut down by authorities, resulting in the jailing of Bruscky and Santiago for three days. Uruguayan mail artist Clemente Padin was imprisoned from 1977 to 1979 for his artists' stamps that denounced human rights abuses by Uruguay's dictatorial government.<sup>66</sup> The cover of *Ephemera* no. 5 features a piece by Carrión that reads "Padin and Caraballo are in jail!" with the subtitle "Ask for information. Transmit it."<sup>67</sup> [Fig. 8] Because these artists were barred from sending and receiving mail art works themselves while living as political prisoners, Carrión's piece suggests that the mail art network was a means of increasing awareness of and support for these artists in a time of duress. The piece stands out as a moment of outright activism and political critique in *Ephemera*, where artists' political stances are often veiled through aesthetic choices and humor.

*Ephemera* no. 7 is a special issue by Carrión, consisting entirely of a handwritten text relaying a long series of mundane social interactions from the

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<sup>65</sup> Pianowski, Fabiane. "The Net Out of Control: Mail Art in Latin America." Lomholt Mail Art Archive. 2015. Accessed March 26, 2017. <http://www.lomholtmailartarchive.dk/texts/fabiane-pianowski-the-net-out-of-control-mail-art-in-latin-america>.

<sup>66</sup> Padin, Clemente, "The Options of Mail Art," in Welch, Chuck. *Eternal Network: A Mail Art Anthology*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995, 205.

<sup>67</sup> Uruguayan artist Jorge Caballo was also imprisoned for his mail art activities in 1977.



artist's life. While other issues formally suggested the "Eternal Network" through multiple contributors and a decentralized collage layout, *Ephemera no. 7* exhaustively lists Carrión's personal interactions within a condensed period of time. It thus functions as an information-saturated document of his friendships and acquaintances. It embraces intimacy over formality through the consistent use of first names, and while many of the people mentioned are themselves mail artists, *Ephemera no. 7* does not document specific mail art activities or works. However, by tracing his own network of colloquial and everyday communications, Carrión's text elicits the way the mail art network functions through those same communication chains, transmitting information erratically through interpersonal links. Its content elaborates upon Carrión's longstanding interest in gossip, prefiguring the 1981 project *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners*. The use of handwriting also signifies a personal intimacy and takes on an epistolary connotation in conjunction with the use of the mail.

However, Carrión's text is less a letter than a list, standing in stark opposition to the narrative function of the epistolary novels or personal letters its format calls to mind. *Ephemera no. 7* is in essence an exercise in conceptual writing, not intended to be read from end to end. Each bit of gossip that Carrión relays interrupts the previous one, barring the text from cohering to transmit meaning in the conventional sense. As Gilbert notes, "Through the failure of the linguistic system, other codes are revealed: a 'meta-message' of another order is transmitted,

which enables a message about censorship to be communicated.”<sup>68</sup> While it is unclear whether Carrión intended to comment on censorship with the piece, as Gilbert argues, he surely intends to invert the hierarchy of values which are attributed to certain linguistic codes. While informal, erratic and mundane social communications might play into the content of a traditional literary work, they are subsumed under the discursive structure of the novel. Carrión’s text posits that with mail art, informal and erratic communication is not extraneous or inessential, but embedded within the structural dynamics of the work. Indeed, these ephemeral crossings and meetings are at the very heart of mail art practice: they are the intangible content transmitted through the mail art network, the material through which it perpetuates.

Carrión’s claim that “the best mail art pieces use the mail as an integral, functional element of the work” is even more fully exemplified by *Box, Boxing, Boxers*, an issue of Pawel Petasz’s assembling magazine *Commonpress* that Carrión edited in 1978.<sup>69</sup> [Fig. 10] According to Peter van der Meijden, “Petasz’s idea [for *Commonpress*] was that one of the contributors to any particular issue would agree to publish the next, thus turning publishing into a kind of relay race.”<sup>70</sup> In assembling magazines like *Commonpress*, the editor’s role was not to impose a prevailing order upon submissions, but to compile them. Petasz’s concept of a rotating editorship went a step further than like-minded mail art magazines in

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<sup>68</sup> Gilbert, “Something Unnameable in Common,” 68.

<sup>69</sup> Carrión, “Mail Art and the Big Monster,” 42.

<sup>70</sup> Van Der Meijden, Peter. “BOX BOXING BOXERS-Mail Art Projects, Exhibitions and Archives.” Lomholt Mail Art Archive. 2014. Accessed May 3, 2015. <http://lomholtmailartarchive.dk/texts/peter-van-der-meijden-box-boxing-boxers-mail-art-projects-exhibitions-archives>.

dismantling the hierarchy between editor and contributor, establishing a fluid mechanism of collaboration. Each editor of the nearly 50 issues of *Commonpress* chose a format for their issue as well as a theme, resulting in a wide stylistic variation and displaying the diversity of approaches within the mail art community.

Carrión selected the theme “Box, Boxing, Boxers” for his issue of *Commonpress*, allowing contributors to interpret the multiple meanings suggested by the three words. Some artists chose to comment upon the boxer as athlete and the sport of boxing, potentially evoking the Dada boxer and provocateur Arthur Cravan in the process. Carrión’s piece features a penciled outline of a hand, with the handwritten caption, “This is the hand’s outline of a real boxer. He wishes to remain anonymous.”<sup>71</sup> The simplicity of the piece calls into question its own truth proposition – is it really the hand of a boxer? – and thus our faith in the declarative function of language. It also calls to mind associations between the boxer’s hand and the artist’s hand as representative implements of their respective crafts. Other artists, such as Ko de Jonge and Michael Crane, evoked the ‘box’ as a container of object and information and ‘boxing’ as an act of classification [Fig. 11]. Horst Hahn’s contribution specifically referred to archival boxes, calling to mind the ordering function of the archive as well as the large personal archives that mail artists often amassed.

Carrión summed up the responses with an editorial note on the inside back cover of the magazine:

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<sup>71</sup> *Box, Boxing, Boxers* was one of several projects by Carrión in the late 1970s that circulated around the theme of boxing, including the artists’ book *Mirror Box* (1979), the sound performance *Box Clinch* (1978) and a boxing-themed rubber stamp that appears in *Rubber* no. 6 (1978), among other places.

The question now arises: has this anthology primarily to do with art? Or, has it to do with box? And this question is valid, regardless of the plurality of meanings of the word 'box,' which lead some participants to take it as meaning 'sport' and some others as 'receptacle.'<sup>72</sup>

Even in suggesting that the implications of *Box, Boxing, Boxers* extend beyond the subject of art, he cleverly leaves the signifier 'box' in flux, refusing to pin it down to any of the possible interpretations opened up by the contributing artists. Van der Meijden points out that *Box, Boxing, Boxers* brought together the three actions of "creation (art), communication (mail), and reflection (the theme). When Carrión asks what it is about, the art or the theme, he implicitly points to the interrelatedness of all three components."<sup>73</sup> The participants' actions, as well as the coinciding interpretations of Carrión's prompt, intersect precisely through the use of the postal service, and a networked practice of art production more generally.

Carrión explored similar ideas through his engagement with artists' stamps, a subgenre of mail art, partially in connection to the Stempelplaats gallery, which Aart van Barneveld founded in 1977 to showcase the medium. Artists' rubber stamps both playfully subverted the stamps that ubiquitously appear on mailed items, and interrogated questions of authorship and originality. Beyond creating many of his own stamps, Carrión penned two theoretical tracts on the medium for *Rubber*, the bulletin of the Stempelplaats. Carrión's essay "Rubber Stamps Theory and Praxis," presented in the sixth issue of *Rubber*, outlines the relationship between artists' rubber stamps and power. Carrión writes that while "official" rubber stamps serve to validate or invalidate, "Artists' rubber-stamps... are

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<sup>72</sup> Carrión, Ulises, *Box, Boxing, Boxers*. Amsterdam: Commonpress, 1978.

<sup>73</sup> Van der Meijden.

incapable of transmitting power, but this lack is compensated for by an increase in glamour and sophistication.”<sup>74</sup> Artists’ stamps comment symbolically on the mail system through their playful uses of language, imagery, and references to the art world and the mail.

Typically, it is the collaborative structure of a stamp art project, rather than the visual content of the stamps, that intervenes more directly in the functioning of the mail system. Carrión fully exploited the networked structure of mail art for his project *The Stampa Newspaper*, which was conceived for an exhibition at Stempelplaats in 1980, but was never completed. [Fig. 12] Carrión’s call for submissions asks participants either to send a design for the stamp or the stamp itself, together with the enclosed eight-page newsprint leaflet indicating where they would like their stamp placed [Fig. 13]. *The Stampa Newspaper* thus extended the assembling concept to the rubber-stamp subgenre. Carrión himself questioned whether assemblings “must be seen as a compilation of individual works from the participants, or alternatively, that the only and real author of the work is the individual who conceives, coordinates and realizes the project.”<sup>75</sup> Alternatively, we might understand Carrión as asking here whether the concept should be viewed as the work, in a Duchampian mode. While Carrión devised the concept for *The Stampa Newspaper*, neither he nor the participants could exercise control over the final results; rather, diverse artists’ choices would collide through the network, visually informing one another in unexpected ways. Thus, while the final document results

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<sup>74</sup> Carrión, Ulises, “Rubber Stamps Theory and Praxis,” in Carrion, Ulises, *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: VOID Distributors. 1980, 33.

<sup>75</sup> Carrión, “From Bookworks to Mailworks,” 29.

from the execution of a concept, *The Stampa Newspaper's* intensive reliance on a network of collaborators lessens the absolute authority of the artist's choice. The project was not the only stamp art assembling, calling to mind Japanese artist Ryosuke Cohen's *Brain Cell*, launched in 1985.

Carrión offers a rigorous analysis of the communication systems through which mail art functions in his essay *Mail Art and the Big Monster*. As he writes:

When I send by post a letter that is only a letter, I am using the mail as a system that allows the transmission of my message. This system includes two sub-systems: on the one hand a sub-system of written or visual language, and on the other hand the sub-system of the postal services.<sup>76</sup>

In Carrión's analysis, the artists have primary control over the visual and linguistic media – the first subsystem – whereas the second subsystem – the postal services – functions as a support. In conceiving and executing a networked and multi-vocal practice, mail artists are dependent, even parasitic, on the bureaucratic infrastructure of the international postal services. Through his 1977 project *Erratic Art Mail International System*, largely a conceptual piece, Carrión attempted to imagine a means of circulating mail art “by any way other than the official post offices.”<sup>77</sup> [Fig. 14] Carrión's proposal for the project identifies himself as the Post Master and is comprised of a list of eight regulations indicating how the *E.A.M.I.S.* will function, mimicking bureaucratic systems. For instance, “If for any reason a piece remains 3 years undelivered, it will be sent back to the author by any means other than the official post offices.”<sup>78</sup> The extended time-frame stands in

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<sup>76</sup> Carrión, “Mail Art and the Big Monster,” 40.

<sup>77</sup> *Erratic Art Mail Information System (E.A.M.I.S.)*, 1977, as reproduced in Maderuelo, p. 169.

<sup>78</sup> Maderuelo, 169.

counterpoint to the swiftness of governmental delivery systems, critiquing them while acknowledging the difficulty of founding a workable alternative. The *E.A.M.I.S.* proposal's final bullet point is a statement of position: "By using the *E.A.M.I.S.* you support the only alternative to the national bureaucracies and you strengthen the international artists' community."<sup>79</sup> Carrión devised the *E.A.M.I.S.* at a time when his collaborators in Latin America were subject to censorship and arrested for mail art activities. His alternative post was thus also an alternative to the state's power to control and suppress the flow of information.

In *Mail Art and the Big Monster*, he poetically interrogates the effectiveness of mail art as a form of resistance. Carrión writes, "Every mail art piece is a weapon thrown against the monster who is the owner of the Castle, who separates us one from the others, all of us." [Fig. 15] Whereas Carrión's essay begins with detailed definitions of the structural makeup of the mail art system, his final call to arms remains playfully imprecise about what "Monster" stands in the way of the flourishing of this communication network. He follows with a series of rhetorical questions, pointing at aspects of the Monster, but leaving it unnamed:

What or who is the monster I am talking about? Do I mean the Post Master? Post office clerks? Do I mean the Minister of Communications? Or, do I mean the technology they use and control? Do I mean those little, colorful pieces of glued paper that we must buy every time we post something? To tell you the truth, I do not know exactly what or whom I am talking about. All I know is, there is a monster. And that by posting all sorts of mail pieces I am knocking at his door.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Carrión, "Mail Art and the Big Monster," 44-45.

The issue of censorship goes unnamed in Carrión's essay, and while state repression is likely at the heart of his critique, he leaves the reader free to imagine other systems – perhaps artistic, social or psychological – that might also be part of this Monster. Ultimately, Carrión calls for both increased participation in the network of mail art, but also new ways of engaging with communications systems that might wrest them from the mundane and forge new friendships and solidarities.

Through his intensive participation in the mail art community, Carrión forged deep ties with a geographically far-flung network of collaborators. Carrión's mail art projects were executed by and for participants in the network themselves, and allowed him to forge a creative practice that was largely independent of conventional art institutions. Projects like *Ephemera no. 7* and the *Erratic Art Mail Information System* foregrounded gossip and everyday speech acts as potential means of liberation from bureaucratic infrastructures, artistic and governmental alike. Into the 1980s, Carrión would develop a series of experimental public projects that deepened these lines of investigation, while moving further from established artistic genres. Carrión's *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners*, for instance, developed a framework for examining the spread of gossip that placed formal artistic discourses in relief with informal, everyday communication. These projects intensified the search for new cultural strategies that Carrión elaborated through his engagement with the mail art network, devising an expanded framework for the circulation and reception of the artistic work.



### **“Not Gossip as Art, But Art as Gossip”: Ulises Carrión’s Public Projects**

Throughout his career, Ulises Carrión pursued a variety of “cultural strategies” through which he sought to move beyond the institutional frames of art and literature to act upon the wider realm of culture. While the drive to move beyond these frameworks is evident in his approaches to artists’ publishing and mail art, Carrión’s public projects acted upon the social by means of the social, marking his most radical shift away from conventional artistic practice. Carrión’s public projects, though often quite dissimilar in conception, all functioned by juxtaposing analytical framing devices with a mode of informal and everyday communication, from B-movies to the spread of gossip. Intervening in the social field in an open-ended and non-programmatic fashion, Carrión’s public projects extended his long-standing investigation of language as an artistic material.

This essay will focus on two public projects in particular, each exemplifying distinct approaches and concerns within this rich and varied body of work. Drawing on systems and network-based theories in anthropology and sociology, *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners* (1981) employed a quasi-scientific framework to document the transmission of gossip through Carrión’s network of friends and acquaintances. Carrión’s *The Robbery of the Year* (1982) extended the lineage of institutional critique, creating an experimental social situation in which viewers could view, touch, or even steal a real diamond on display in his installation. These projects remain in dialogue with artistic institutions while calling for a creative practice that extends far beyond its borders and conventions.

Carrión's interest in gossip and networks of interpersonal communication is evident throughout his career, from his exploration of names and relationships in the early bookwork *Arguments* (1973) to his painstaking documentation of his social circles in *Ephemera no. 7* (1978). According to Carrión:

Gossip is language and language has always been the raw material for my work. Let me remind you that here I use "language" in the very sense of "communication tool" and not necessarily language in its relationship to literary forms and literary traditions.<sup>81</sup>

Though these earlier projects' uses of language are non-narrative and unconventional, *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners* (1981) more radically distanced itself from recognizable artistic and literary forms. As detailed in his extensive preparatory writings, Carrión's project attempted to spread gossip about himself through the city of Amsterdam, juxtaposing the approach of anthropological field work with the logic of the game.

Carrión recruited a group of ten friends as "active collaborators" who were instructed to disseminate eight "model gossips" through their network of friends and acquaintances over a period of three months in 1981 [Fig. 16]. Each active collaborator was given a small field notebook in which they were asked to document each instance in which they attempted to pass on a piece of gossip. Additionally, another group of friends who knew about the project were called upon as "passive collaborators": they were instructed never to deny any bit of gossip they heard. The project culminated with a lecture at the University of Amsterdam in June 1981, in

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<sup>81</sup> Carrión, Ulises, and Juan J. Agius. *Art? Skill? Technique?: Ulises Carrión's Cultural Strategies and Communication Tactics: Five Reports*. Heras, Cantabria, Spain: Ediciones La Bahía, N.d., 47.

which he presented the results of the gossip experiment along with his analysis of gossip, scandal, rumor and slander as related forms. The lecture, as Carrión stated, had a “formal character in order to counter-balance the informality with which gossiping is usually associated,” and it incorporated anthropological theories side-by-side with examples from film and popular culture.<sup>82</sup>

The model gossips that Carrión concocted spanned a variety of topics, from his private life – family, romance, and health – to his public life – artistic and professional status. For instance, one model gossip read:

“Ulises Carrión has inherited, from a rich uncle in Mexico, large land properties including some oil fields. He has decided to go back to Mexico for good. His friend Aart van Barneveld would also move to Mexico. As for the Other Books and So Archive, it will be taken over by the Stedelijk Museum.”<sup>83</sup>

Another gossip simply stated that Ulises Carrión has a malignant cancer. Most of the gossips, while all patently untrue, were not necessarily cruel in tone. As Carríon writes, “Now, slander has an openly wicked intention, whereas gossip *may* have it, but not necessarily. Gossip can imply *pleasure*, slander cannot.”<sup>84</sup> In spite of Carrión’s claim that gossip can imply pleasure and affirm social bonds in the everyday world, most of Carrión’s collaborators expressed some reservation or difficulty in spreading the gossip. One gossipper, Michael Gibbs, reported that “the more I studied the stories, the less believable they became,” and had difficulty spreading them with confidence. Multiple participants were reticent to spread the story of Carrión having cancer, for fear of the pain it might cause others.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Carrión and Aguis, *Art? Skill? Technique?*, 47.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

Although it could be argued that Carrión failed to spread the gossip to a very wide audience, his intent was less to get the stories to be accepted as truth than to develop a process of testing the transmission of social information. As he concluded his lecture:

My intention was to test myself as individual and as public image, to test the boundaries of my territory and my endurance. I have consciously chosen to do this by means of marginal, erratic, uncontrollable channels.<sup>86</sup>

Strikingly, Carrión illustrates the distinction between the communication channels of gossip, scandal, rumor, and slander through a series of hand-drawn diagrams, playfully adopting a means of representing abstract concepts from the social sciences. According to his illustrations, whereas gossip moves in an information chain, rumor shows multiple movement, scandal shows growing intensity, and slander has a definite target [Fig. 17]. Another series of diagrams describes how information evolves according to each of these models: gossip shows free evolution, rumor shows chaotic progress, scandal shows intensity radiation, and slander shows concentrated effort [Fig. 18]. Just as Carrión's essay "The New Art of Making Books" describes artists' books as "space-time sequences," his analysis of gossip focuses on the evolution of informal communication across space and time.

On the one hand, Carrión's selection of the academic lecture format was a means of juxtaposing two seemingly opposing discursive frames. On the other, the theories that he elaborated about gossip were deeply interrelated with sociological studies of social networks and anthropological studies of gossip in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. According to J. Clyde Mitchell, anthropologists turned to the model of the

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<sup>86</sup> Carrión and Aguis, *Art? Skill? Technique?*, 72.

social network to analyze societies beginning in the 1950s. As he writes, “the idea became popular partially as a reaction by anthropologists who were working in complex societies against the overformalization of the structural-functional approach originally developed in small-scale societies.”<sup>87</sup> At the time of writing, Mitchell argued that the theoretical basis of network-based anthropological studies was incompletely developed; he argued that these approaches “may well have their rationale in common-sense knowledge rather than sophisticated theoretical formulations.”<sup>88</sup> However, these network studies in anthropology resonate with more rigorous systems-based approaches being elaborated in other disciplines, from Norbert Wiener’s cybernetics to Claude Shannon’s theories of information. Mitchell notes that social network theories have proved particularly useful in anthropological studies of gossip, citing A.L. Epstein’s study of gossip within an African township. Epstein’s purpose, not dissimilar to Carrión’s, was “not merely to trace the origin and flow of rumor but to examine the set of norms of which those involved transmitted the gossip.”<sup>89</sup> Carrión refers to two anthropological approaches to gossip in his essay. Max Gluckman represents the functionalists, who “concentrate on explaining latent functions of gossip in various units,” and Robert Paine represents the transactionalists, who “stress how particular persons tactically utilize gossip for purposes of impression-management or information-management to further their relatively explicit aims.”<sup>90</sup> Carrión’s project should not be

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<sup>87</sup> J. Clyde Mitchell, “Social Networks,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (1974): 281, doi:10.1146/annurev.an.03.100174.001431.

<sup>88</sup> Mitchell, 284.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>90</sup> Carrión and Aguis, *Art? Skill? Technique?*, 64.

understood as an attempt to contribute to these academic debates, but rather a means of experientially testing the flows of information within his own social network.

On a broader level, *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners* shows the influence of thinking about information systems on conceptual art practices in the late 1960s and beyond. Kynaston McShine's influential *Information* exhibition at MoMA in 1970 presented works by over 100 American and European artists which structurally and aesthetically engaged with information systems. According to Eve Meltzer:

The 'information' at this exhibition brought together on the one hand the Conceptualist notion of art as 'infrastructural analysis,' and on the other, forms and fantasies derived from communications technologies... The word also represented, third and finally, matters of global and political urgency.<sup>91</sup>

For Meltzer, the conceptual artists in McShine's *Information* show often turned to an aesthetic based in communications technologies and technical documents in order to devise new modes of signification that grappled with the political exigencies of the day. Though Carrión was working in a somewhat different aesthetic, interpersonal and geographical context than these artists, his intersecting interests in both erratic communication forms and in structuralism manifest themselves as critiques of bureaucratic power. Read in the context of his earlier *Erratic Art Mail Information System* – which he describes as “the only alternative to the national bureaucracies” – Carrión's *Gossip* project perhaps posits gossip not as a destructive force, but as a potentially liberating alternative to more formalized modes of social

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<sup>91</sup> E. Meltzer, "The Dream of the Information World," *Oxford Art Journal* 29, no. 1 (2006): 126, doi:10.1093/oxartj/kci046.

interchange. Carrión definition of gossip as a chain of information moving from person to person also allows gossip to be viewed in opposition to mass-media broadcasting or government propaganda, where information emanates from a central source.<sup>92</sup>

Though Carrión likely would not have been aware of it, Lee Lozano's *Dialogue Piece* (1969) also posited informal social communication as an alternative to the institutional art world. Lozano began *Dialogue Piece*, which consisted of inviting people she "might not otherwise see" to her loft for a conversation, shortly after she announced her refusal to participate in official "art world" activities with *General Strike Piece* during that same year. As Lozano wrote, "The purpose of this piece is to have dialogues, not to make a piece. No recordings or notes are made during the dialogues, which exist solely for their own sake as joyous social occasions."<sup>93</sup> Lozano's refusal of art is coupled with a refusal of documentation; aside from the initial proposal of *Dialogue Piece*, she has made the conversations virtually irrecupable for artistic display.

On the other hand, Carrión's *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners* is marked by an excess of documentation, from the collaborators' field notebooks to the lecture to the documentary Carrión produced on the project. This multivalent process makes visible the transformations that gossip, as raw material, undergoes when placed

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<sup>92</sup> Carrión in fact commented on mass communications in a 1987 text and documentary-style video work called *TV Tonight Video*, in which he wrote: "It depends on the perspective, the lighting, the code, the frame. Television is a frame that makes everything equally real." Carrión goes on to analyze the relationship between television and video art, applying a similar analytical lens as he had with other communications media.

<sup>93</sup> "Lee Lozano, *Dialogue Piece* (Started April 21, 1969)," Museum of Modern Art, accessed April 9, 2017, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/96570>.

within various analytical frames. Rather than positioning the gossip as the “work” and the lecture and documentary as the “documentation,” *Gossip, Scandal and Good Manners* has a tripartite structure, where the different communication media both inform and work against each other, offering clues as to how information is transmitted across various discursive regimes. In his notebooks, Carrión notes that his goal is to create “not gossip as art, but art as gossip.”<sup>94</sup> Carrión’s statement inverts the presupposed intent of his project: art as gossip suggests that art is not about the production of a distinct art object, but rather a communication practice that engages with the way information is transmitted and received. Whereas the circulation of information was, for instance, a key concern of video artists working in Carrión’s milieu, gossip, like mail art, is a model for the transmission of information from individual to individual. Gossip certainly has implicit protocols, but it is an open-ended practice that acts at the level of intimate personal relationships, representing a possible alternative to formal, institutional, and mass-mediated modes of communication.

Guy Schraenen describes Carrión’s public projects as “a sort of gambling in which people, behavior and ideas are thought of as game pieces.”<sup>95</sup> Though the two projects differ dramatically in aims and execution, Schraenen’s statement equally applies to *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners* as it does to the 1982 project and installation *The Robbery of the Year*. As in *Gossip*, Carrión’s *The Robbery of the Year* situation created an experimental setting in which the participants’ reactions

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<sup>94</sup> Carrión and Aguis, *Art? Skill? Technique?*, 33.

<sup>95</sup> Schraenen, Guy. *Ulises Carrión: Dear Reader. Don't Read*. Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2016, 23.



functioned as variables that determined the final outcome of the piece. Carrión presented the installation *The Robbery of the Year* in February 1982 at the Drents Museum in Assen, the Netherlands, a small provincial museum devoted to arts and history [Fig. 19]. Behind a thick, floor-length curtain, Carrión presented a single real diamond, which rested on a velvet curtain upon a table. Entering one at a time through the curtain, next to which stood a sign reading ‘*de diefstal van het jaar*,’ or “the robbery of the year” in Dutch, visitors could pick up, touch, or as the signs indicated, even steal the diamond. Additionally, Carrión recruited Brazilian artist Claudio Goulart to photograph the visitors and the exhibition space during all five days of the exhibition. Goulart’s photographs, most of them taken from the same angle to show the visitors entering the area behind the curtain, have the air of crime scene photographs, envisioning the visitors as potential “suspects.”

Carrión’s description of the project focuses less on the implied or intended “robbery” than the diamond’s spatial and symbolic function within the gallery:

The diamond with all its power of attraction is a way to organize the space in a certain manner. Exactly in the same manner that painters did by means of lines, colors, and forms... For me it is about the use of space. My intention was to make a clear delimited space, without lines, without windows, in which the attention of people is directed to a certain point. My solution for creating this focused/directed attention was to place something at this point. That was the diamond.<sup>96</sup>

The attention placed upon the ways that interactions between viewer and object are regulated by the spatial and ideological function of the gallery draws *The Robbery of*

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<sup>96</sup> Goulart, Claudio, Paulo Silveira, Damián Ortega, and Martha Hawley. *El Robo Del Año: Ulises Carrión*. La Ciudad De México: Alias, 2013.

*the Year* into the lineage of institutional critique. Since the 1960s, artists practicing institutional critique, such as Hans Haacke, Adrian Piper and Michael Asher, sought to make visible the socioeconomic relations that undergirded the museum and the gallery as normative spaces for artistic display. According to Alexander Alberro, institutional critique “...sought at once to foreground the tension between the theoretical self-understanding of the institution of art and its actual practice of operation, and to summon the need for a resolution of that tension or contradiction.”<sup>97</sup> Carrión’s piece positions active theft as the antithesis to passive spectatorship. In the case that the diamond is stolen, it ceases to function as an art object, collapsing the entire logic through which the gallery space is organized. If Carrión posits the theft of the diamond as the successful outcome of the work, then the work’s success is at the same time its end, both temporally and functionally as a work of art. Carrión’s construction of an experimental setting in which viewers’ engagement reveals the codes of the institution is a frequent tactic in institutional critique. Brian O’Doherty notes that works of this genre often do not directly confront the institution, but point to its functioning; as he writes, “The [art] structure is questioned not by classic resentment but by project and gesture, by modest didacticism and phasing of alternatives.”<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, the selection of the diamond and the overt emphasis on, even encouragement, of theft highlight art’s function both as a luxury commodity, and as a commodity whose value is subject to unique codes of exchange. Carrión’s piece

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<sup>97</sup> Alberro, Alexander. *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003, 3.

<sup>98</sup> Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the white cube* (Larkspur, Ca.: Lapis Press, 1976), 77.

points to what Bourdieu describes as the distinction between economic capital and symbolic capital within the artistic sphere. In this sphere, Bourdieu argues, “disinterested” appreciation of art is historically predicated on a disavowal of the purely economic exchanges at play. As Bourdieu writes:

“...alongside the pursuit of ‘economic’ profit, which treats the cultural goods business as a business like any other, and not the most profitable, ‘economically’ speaking... and merely adapts itself to the demand of an already converted clientele, there is also room for the *accumulation of symbolic capital*.”<sup>99</sup>

For Bourdieu, symbolic capital is associated with factors such as authority and prestige; it is “a capital of consecration implying a power to consecrate objects... or persons... and therefore to give value, and to appropriate the profits from this operation.”<sup>100</sup> While symbolic capital within the art world is not acknowledged by participants as purely economic, this regulated code of interchange ultimately has economic results. Carrión’s use of the diamond suggests that, at its heart, the system of art within galleries and museum is rooted in commodity exchange. The diamond, itself a fetishized object, also metaphorically emphasizes the air of rarity built into artistic display. The piece nearly literalizes O’Doherty’s description of gallery exhibition practices: “Isolated in plots of space, whatever is on display looks a bit like valuable scarce goods, jewelry, or silver: esthetics are turned into commerce – the gallery space is expensive.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. Cambridge: Columbia University Press, 1993, 75.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> O’Doherty, 76.

The ultimate ‘failure’ of the diamond to be stolen during the installation of *The Robbery of the Year* demonstrates the fixity of the codes of symbolic exchange within art exhibition spaces. At the same time, the project on the whole cannot be said to be a success or failure, as Carrión did not attempt to demonstrate anything, but rather to create an experimental situation in which the outcome was determined by audience engagement. According to Paulo Silveira, “as Carrion himself would affirm, the main aim of the exhibition was its criminal potential and not the crime itself.”<sup>102</sup> However, Carrión’s project should not be treated as a somewhat academic investigation of the social and economic constraints of the gallery system. The staging of *The Robbery of the Year*, its theatricality and the playful poster design, point to the popular genre of the mystery novel; Carrión sets up a situation where a genre-fiction caper could potentially transpire in a space reserved for “serious” culture.

While the caper did not play out during the weeklong installation of *The Robbery of the Year*, the diamond, ironically, was stolen from Carrión’s apartment during a dinner party later that year.<sup>103</sup> The robbery thus happened in the sphere of ‘life’ rather than in the sphere of ‘art,’ bringing it full circle to relate to Carrión’s interest in pursuing broad cultural strategies through his projects. Additionally, the robbery caused Carrión and his friends to conjecture about who the perpetrator was, but the thief was never found. As Martha Hellion points out, “The fact is that the artwork inadvertently turned into part of the language, the gossip, the rumor and

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<sup>102</sup> Goulart, Claudio, Paulo Silveira, Damián Ortega, and Martha Hawley. *El Robo Del Año: Ulises Carrión*. La Ciudad De México: Alias, 2013.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

slander that form part of the themes explored by Carrión in other artworks.”<sup>104</sup>

Gossip might have formed part of the initial design of the piece in the sense that the heist or mystery genre is full of these kinds of social games of guesswork; however, the museum setting seemed to pose only the two opposing outcomes of theft and spectatorship. The project’s afterlife in the everyday social world seemed to open it up to a wider possibility of actions, interpretations, and discourses; erratic and informal communication enters the work through the unintended theft that transpired after the “work” was over.

*Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners* and *The Robbery of the Year* exemplify only some of the broadly-conceived cultural strategies that Carrión pursued through his public projects in the early 1980s. Art historically, we might retroactively associate these projects with distinct lineages: *Gossip, Scandal and Good Manners* recalls the later development of social practice, while *The Robbery of the Year* draws on aspects of institutional critique. Still, within the larger context of Carrión’s practice, these public projects expand upon his exploration of language and communication through a broad-based social network. Earlier projects, from publishing to mail art, questioned the focus on individual authorship in favor of artistic interchange within a broad social field. Expanding upon these previous projects, Carrión’s public projects are ‘open works’ that call for interpretive methodologies that don’t make hard distinctions between what is internal and exterior to the work. Further, these projects and others like *The Lilia Prado Film Festival*, *Love Story*, and *Trios & Boleros* question the hierarchies and relationships

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

between various discursive regimes, be they elite and popular culture or European and Latin American culture. The projects thus provide unique and game-like models for thinking through questions of semiotics and social systems, for creatively traversing boundaries between different areas of cultural practice.

## Conclusion

Ulises Carrión's multifaceted trajectory deployed many aspects of the experimental art practices of the 1970s to explore structures of communication and the transmission of language within a social field. Much previous work on Ulises Carrión has focused either on his theoretical contributions to the medium of artists' books, or his transition from Mexican literary writer to European intermedia artist. While that research has proved foundational to this study, this thesis aims to move beyond considerations of medium as such in order to situate Carrión's practice within a broader ecology of artistic networks and practices. Carrión's question, "Where does the border lie between an artist's work and the actual organization and distribution of the work?" is not only key to understanding his own work, but also to defining new art-historical methodologies for investigating the alternative artists' networks in which he participated.<sup>105</sup> This study aims to draw upon Carrión's question in order to propose new directions not only for the study of his own work, but also the wider range of artists' publishing, mail art and experimental art activities developed within artist-run initiatives of the 1970s.

My theoretical framework focuses on artistic ecologies, and artists' publications and mail art are indeed distributed practices that can circulate across a variety of geographic, discursive, and social spaces. However, the monographic nature of this study is also an attempt to counter the under-representation of Carrión's contributions to the practices of artists' publishing, mail art, and

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<sup>105</sup> Carrion, Ulises, "Personal Worlds or Cultural Strategies?" in *Second Thoughts*. Amsterdam: VOID Distributors. 1980, 51.

intermedia artwork, particularly his interest in language and signification within the social field. Carrión's unique position at the interstices of Latin American and European artistic communities and sensibilities allows us to move beyond a conception of 1970s "alternative" art that is overly oriented towards the United States and Western Europe. Carrión's activities as an art worker, publisher, distributor, curator, and organizer stitched together translocal networks of experimental writers and artists. Carrión and the artists with whom he worked forged collaborative models and exchange that traversed geographic, cultural, and ideological borders across Latin America, Western Europe, Eastern Europe and North America. The notion of the "translocal" should not be seen merely as an appealing political frame for Carrión's work, as it is also embedded within the aesthetic and formal aspects of his projects.

For instance, while concrete poetry, Fluxus, and conceptual art are diverse in origin, Carrión's work bears the imprint of each of these tendencies in terms of his approach to language and signification. Liz Kotz's *Words to Be Looked At*, drawing heavily on John Cage's influence on Fluxus, provides an indispensable analysis of how language operates within 1960s art practices. As Kotz writes, "it is important to understand that it is not just the *visual* presentation of words but their use as an underlying structure and temporal model that undergirds artists' uses of language in the 1960s."<sup>106</sup> On the one hand, Kotz's focus on American artists does not encompass the ways in which Latin American experimental artists and writers

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<sup>106</sup> Kotz, Liz. *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007, 4.



engaged with language and influenced the alternative conceptualisms with which Carrión was engaged. On the other, while the concerns Kotz outlines are indeed fundamental to Carrión's work, his emphasis on communication *networks* moves a step beyond the ways in which language and structuralism were engaged through the artistic strategies of the 1960s. For Gilbert, "networked art challenges common assumptions about what constitutes art—the categories of object, author, and materiality—but also ... it questions how we try to understand, record, archive, and organize knowledge."<sup>107</sup> Carrión's public projects not only question our understanding of "the work" through their emphasis on informal and ephemeral communication; they also often consist of multiple outputs across different media, from social processes to texts, lectures and video documentaries. A project such as *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners*, for instance, calls upon us to move beyond standard conceptions of "process" and "documentation."

Gilbert notes that the paradigm of the translocal necessitates an art historical approach that draws from a variety of disciplines, including communications and systems theory, cybernetics, anthropology and philosophy.<sup>108</sup> Such systems-based approaches provide a unique insight into artistic strategies such as Carrión's, which focus on transmissions, relationships, and interchanges. Although some of these ideas have been touched upon here, a more rigorous application of systems and media theory to Carrión's work, particularly to his mail art practices and his *Gossip*

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<sup>107</sup> Gilbert, Zanna, "Something Unnameable in Common": Translocal Collaboration at the Beau Geste Press," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2–3 (2012): 48, doi:10.1162/artm\_a\_00019, 71.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

project, is a ripe area for further study. Network and information-based artistic practices in the 1970s demand to be read in the context of the rise of global telecommunications infrastructures during the period, as Meltzer expertly discusses in her article on the *Information* exhibition. Though Carrión engaged with state and mass-media telecommunications systems to some degree, for the most part his understanding of “networking” skews toward the analogue. For this reason, I have elected to situate Carrión’s work within the social and information systems of his own era: despite the ubiquity of television and advertising, the mailed, written, and spoken are at the heart of Carrión’s investigation of language and networks. It may be tempting to draw connections between Carrión’s work and the pervasive context of digital social networks today, and such thinking has perhaps encouraged contemporary interest in his ideas. However, such extrapolations from the 1970s to today gloss over vast geopolitical and technological differences, ultimately doing a disservice to a deeper understanding of Carrión’s work.

Ultimately, Carrión’s emphasis on cultural strategies that operate within collectively and autonomously organized frameworks offers an important model for both artistic practice and art-historical study today. His decentralized approach, located at the interstices of artistic and literary experimentation, offers the possibility for undoing hegemonic narratives of the canon of 1960s and 1970s art and of its geographies. Taking on a shifting and interrelated series of roles within artist-run initiatives, Carrión stands as an alternative to professionalized and market-oriented figures of the artist or the institutional agent. Though Carrión’s approach could potentially be seen as a ‘flexible’ one that prefigures the demands of

post-Fordism upon the art worker, such an analysis of his 'cultural strategies' moves beyond the scope of this paper. Principally, these cultural strategies were instrumental in forging new ways of 'making public' and 'making a public' that did not depend on geographic proximity.

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## Appendix B: Images

Fig. 1: Exhibition Opening, In-Out Center, November 1972. Photograph by Paul Hartland.  
Via <http://www.amsterdamart.com/event/in-out-center>

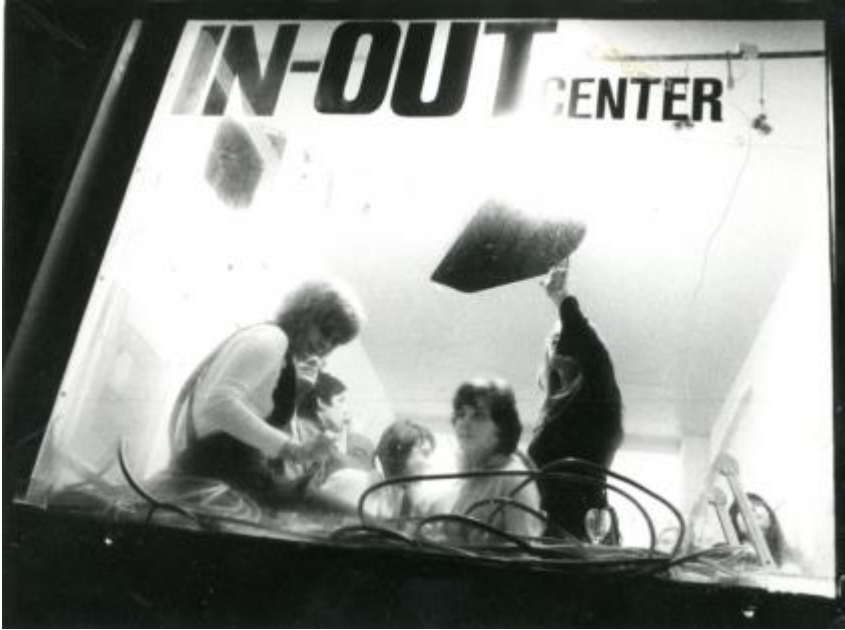


Fig. 2 : Flyer, In-Out Productions, In-Out Center Amsterdam.  
Via Archivo Lafuente, <http://archivolafuente.com/en/exposiciones/ulises-carrion-querido-lector-no-lea>





Fig. 3: Fluxshoe Catalogue Cover, David Mayor and Felipe Ehrenberg, 1972.  
Via [http://www.artcornwall.org/interview\\_fluxshoe\\_stuart%20reid\\_felipe\\_ehrenberg2.htm](http://www.artcornwall.org/interview_fluxshoe_stuart%20reid_felipe_ehrenberg2.htm)



Fig. 4 : Ulises Carrión, *Arguments*, Beau Geste Press, 1973.  
Author's scan from MoMA Library copy of book.

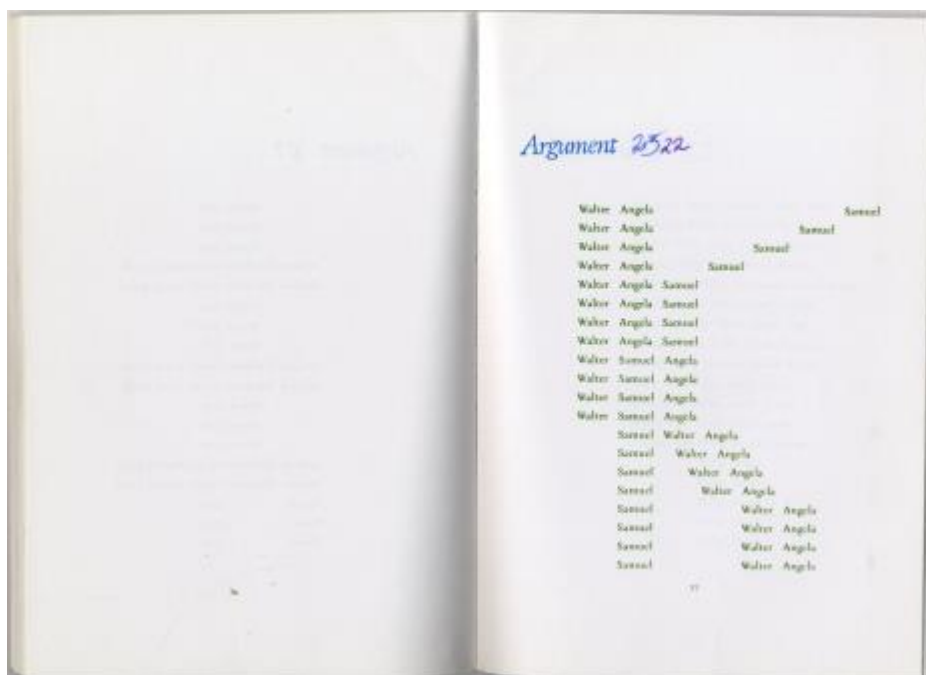


Fig. 5: Ulises Carrión in Other Books and So Bookshop, circa 1977.  
Via Spike Art Magazine, <http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/artists-favourites-mariana-castillo-deball>



Fig. 6: Postcard, Other Books and So, 227 Herengracht, c. 1975-76.  
Via Museo Reina Sofia, <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/activities/new-art-making-books>

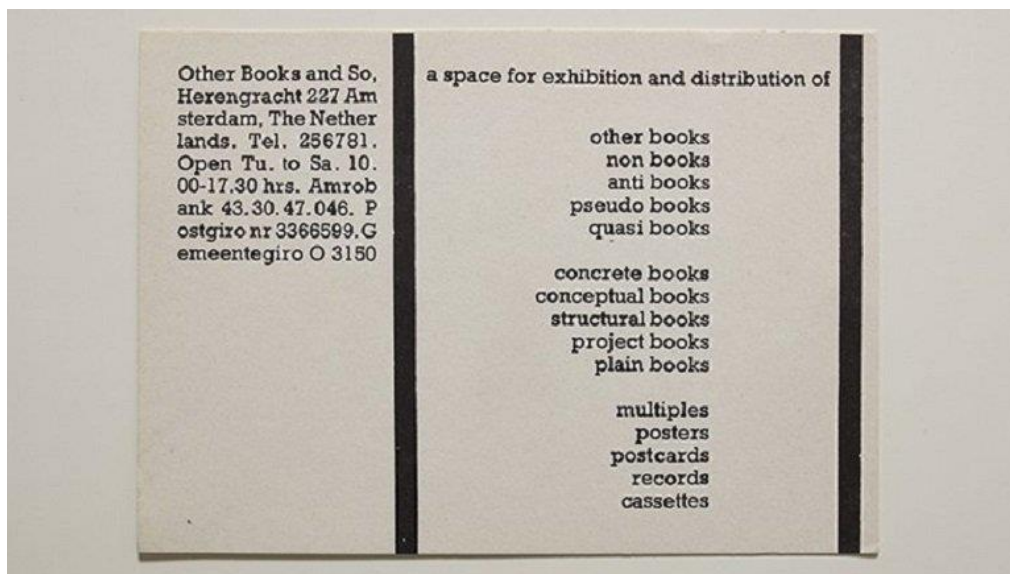


Fig. 7: Cover of *Ephemera* no. 6, ed. Ulises Carrión, Aart van Barneveld, and Salvador Flores, 1978.

Via <https://monoskop.org/Ephemera>



Fig. 8: "Padin and Caraballo are in Jail!" *Ephemera* no. 5, ed. Ulises Carrión, Aart van Barneveld, and Salvador Flores, 1978. Via <https://monoskop.org/Ephemera>

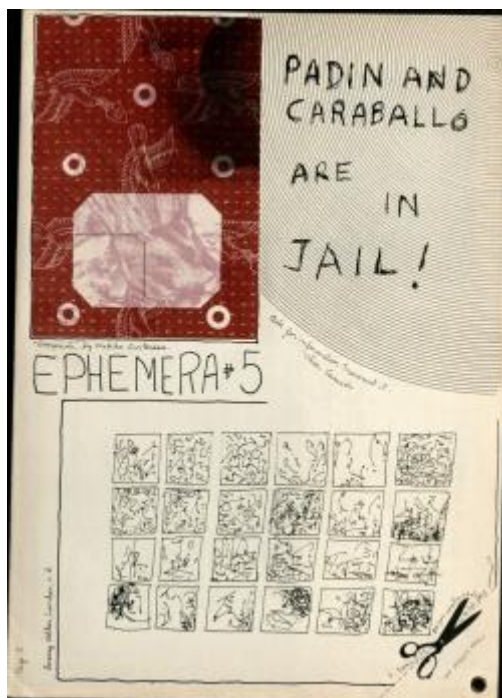




Fig. 9: Ulises Carrión, *Ephemera* no. 7, ed. Ulises Carrión, Aart van Barneveld, 1978. Via <https://monoskop.org/Ephemera>

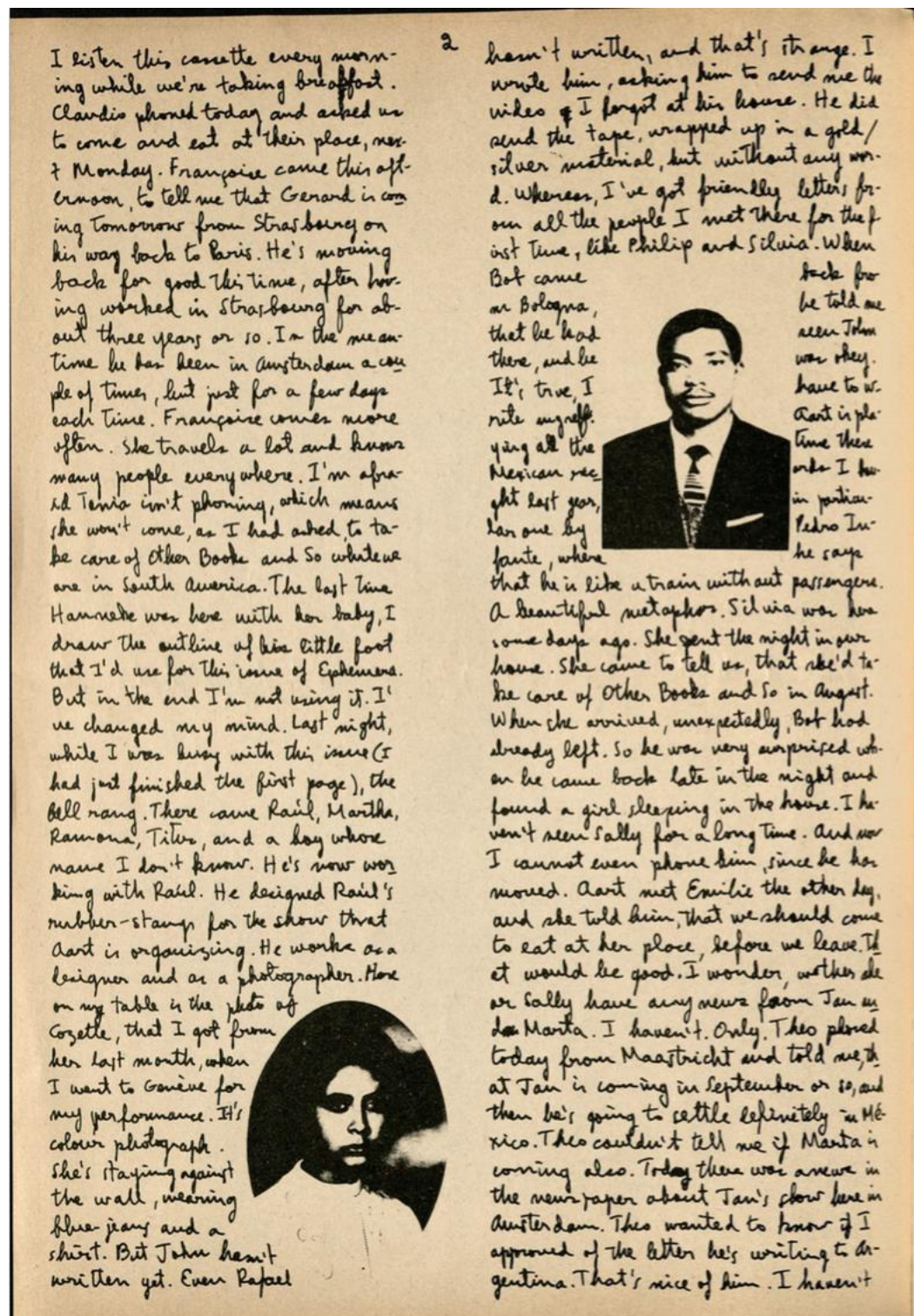


Fig. 10: Ulises Carrión, *Commonpress* no. 5: Box Boxing Boxers, 1978. Cover.  
Via Lomholt Mail Art Archive,  
<http://www.lomholtmailartarchive.dk/location/holland/1978-09-21-carrion-no-2>

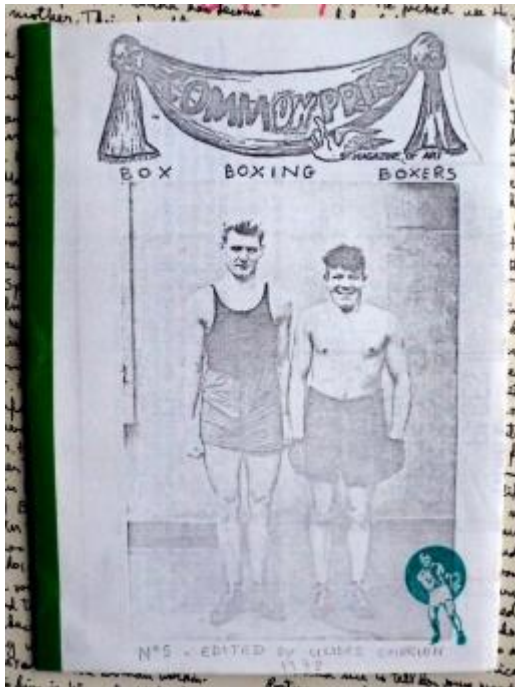


Fig. 11: Ulises Carrión, *Commonpress* no. 5: Box, Boxing, Boxers, 1978. Featuring contribution by Ko de Jonge. Via  
<http://www.lomholtmailartarchive.dk/location/holland/1978-09-21-carrion-no-2>

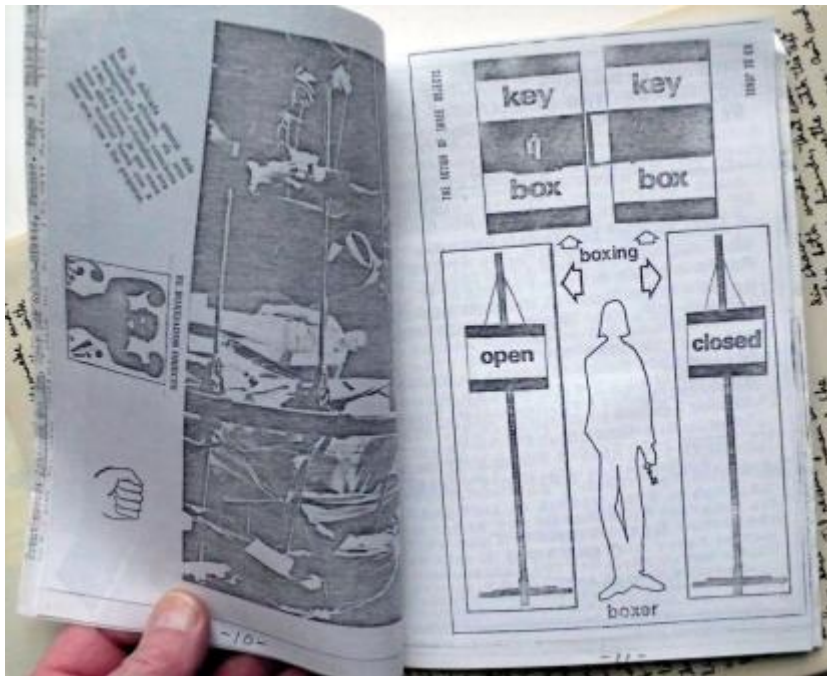


Fig. 12: Ulises Carrión, Letter to Niels Lomholt regarding *The Stampa Newspaper*, 1981. Via [http://lomholtmailartarchive.dk/files/c/5/5088/m\\_1981-01-30\\_Carrion\\_002.jpg](http://lomholtmailartarchive.dk/files/c/5/5088/m_1981-01-30_Carrion_002.jpg)

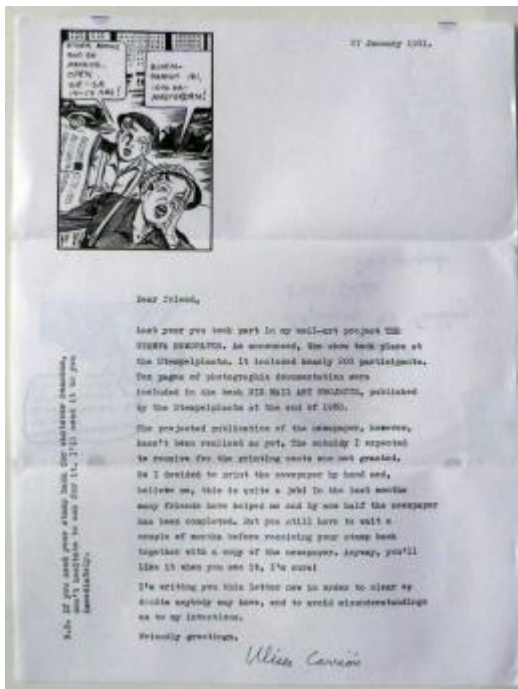


Fig. 13: Ulises Carrión, *The Stampa Newspaper*, 1981. Via *Dear Reader, Don't Read*, ed. Guy Schraenen, 2016.





Fig. 14: Ulises Carrión, *Erratic Art Mail International System*, 1977. Via *Dear Reader, Don't Read*, ed. Guy Schraenen, 2016.



Fig. 15: Ulises Carrión, *Mail Art and the Big Monster*, poster for two lectures/performances, 1979.

Via [http://www.museoreinasofia.es/sites/default/files/exposiciones/ulises2\\_0.jpg](http://www.museoreinasofia.es/sites/default/files/exposiciones/ulises2_0.jpg)



Fig. 16: Ulises Carrión, *Active collaborators, Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners*, 1981. Via *Dear Reader, Don't Read*, ed. Guy Schraenen, 2016.





Fig. 17: Ulises Carrión, Diagram, *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners*, 1981. Via *Dear Reader, Don't Read*, ed. Guy Schraenen, 2016.

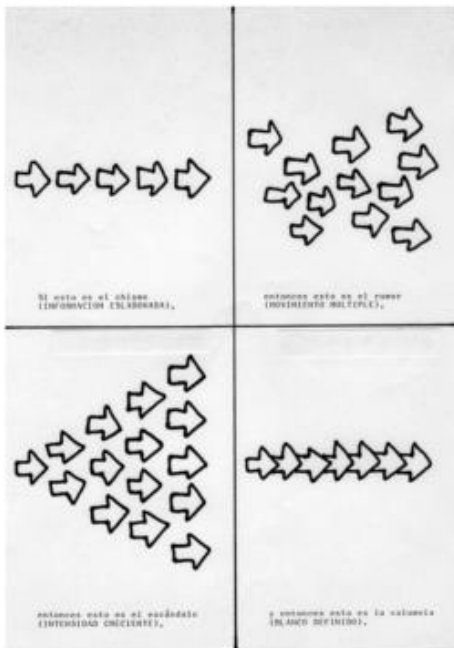


Fig. 18: Ulises Carrión, Diagram, *Gossip, Scandal, and Good Manners*, 1981. Via *Dear Reader, Don't Read*, ed. Guy Schraenen, 2016.

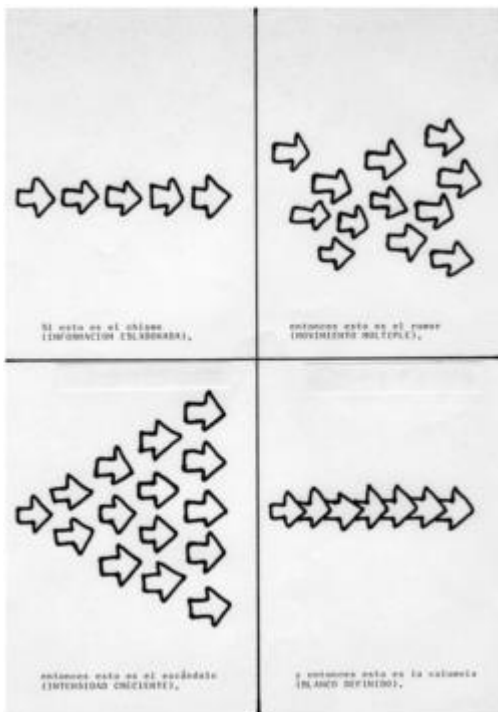


Fig. 19: Ulises Carrión, Poster, *The Robbery of the Year*, Drents Museum, Assen, 1982. Via *Dear Reader, Don't Read*, ed. Guy Schraenen, 2016.

