For a brief impression of Julio Plaza

by Alexandre Dias Ramos

Text published along with the exhibition *Julio Plaza: Construções Poéticas (Poetic Constructions)*, conducted by Vera Chaves Barcellos Foundation and curated by Vera Chaves Barcellos and Alexandre Dias Ramos.

<http://fvcb.com.br/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Livro-Julio-Plaza-Po%C3%A9tica-Pol%C3%ADtica.pdf>

Julio Plaza always had something to say. But he usually preferred to stay silent. His biting criticism, silent manner and superior air used to create a certain distance from people... at the beginning. Later, he would show himself to be docile, intelligent and always aware of cutting edge research. His trajectory as an artist is mixed up with his work as a professor; his exhibits were always careful to have a brief explanatory text, usually printed in a brochure or catalog, one that could talk to students in just the right measure, without interfering in their apprehension of the work, since he detested long critical texts with fancy, a posteriori interpretations tacked onto the work. For this reason, I will be brief.

What is the purpose of an art show catalog? First off, to document a happening that will, after all, be lost in time and space. They also allow visitors to take home a few of the images and some complementary content on what they saw in person. For those who couldn’t visit the exhibit they are important records.

Much of what we know about the 1960s and 1970s, the main periods in this show, is in print: prints, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers and postcards. Printing continues to be an efficient mode of preserving knowledge. The exhibit *Julio Plaza: Construções Poéticas (Poetic Constructions)* demonstrates the importance the artist gave to paper over the course of his career, a fraction of his vast production of lithographs, catalogs and books, in both traditional and experimental forms and supports. Without a doubt a reflection of his time, his group of friends and audience; through intense partnerships, they were able to promote their ideals together. Nowadays, talking about “ideals” sounds a bit démodé, either out of disgust or disuse, but the fact is, at that time the creative process was filled with hope for better days, freedom of expression, by the ode to creativity, by a more esthetic life. Vestiges, certainly, of modernist ideology.

Julio Plaza’s work belongs to a vision of the world that was expressed in Europe, among many other languages, by Constructivism, which brought new dimensions to the plane, new perspectives and colors that could engage in a perfect dialogue with mass culture, with advertising and new means of reproduction. In Brazil, Julio found an environment appropriate to his investigations: with little academic tradition in sculpture, a large part of its three-dimensional teaching was done by printmaking, drawing and painting professors, thereby producing an enormous number of artists whose perception of form arose from their reflections on the plane. It was like this with Amilcar de Castro, a student of Guignard; with Lygia Clark, a student of Arpad Szènes, Fernand Léger and Burle Marx; with Waltercio Caldas, a student of Ivan Serpa; with José Resende and Carlos Fajardo, coming from architecture, students and later colleagues of Wesley Duke Lee; with Ana Maria Tavares, a student of Regina Silveira and Julio Plaza himself, to cite just a few of the innumerous artists from different generations who brought elements from their two-dimensional training to discuss three-dimensional space, and vice versa. Taking a closer look, many sculptures from the 1960s and 1970s were created with cutting and folding. In an imaginatory exercise, they can be reconfigured to flatness, as with works by Amilcar de Castro, Franz Weissmann, Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Waldemar Cordeiro and Luiz Sacilotto.

In Julio Plaza’s work, you can see these influences and it results in an elegant, perfectly resolved mixture of European Constructivism and Brazilian concrete and contemporary traditions, which Julio also helped to build. His two-dimensional poetic constructions propose visual games that instigate spectators to make a three-dimensional reading. We can see this movement, from plane to space and space to plane, in the work displayed in this exhibit: in the geometric background of the etching *Duchamp x Vassarely* (1975), which simulates what the sculpture/painting Planes materializes; in the visual games of the series *Anarquiteturas* (1969); in the “planes to assemble” of the *Black Box*, which can be transformed into objects, as an example of his artist books, which play with viewers, who can only enjoy the work when it is between plane and space.

His books, one-of-a-kind even when made in editions (unlike each other by design), carry within them the desire to be furniture, to be handled by many people, to be manipulated in a variety of ways. For example, in *Objects* (1969), aside from its formal and contemplative intention – which uses color, cutting and folding to propose a dynamic reading of the paintings –, there is a didactic intention, in so far as it considers the audience an activating component of the work.

The artist’s books *Poemóbiles* (1974), *Black Box* (1975) and *Reduchamp* (1976) were the result of a profitable intersemiotic partnership between Julio Plaza and Augusto de Campos, with experiments that played with the limits between text and image, art and literature. With the predicates that the book support contains, these works were able to circulate more widely, on museum shelves and in private collections.

The exhibit *Julio Plaza: Construções Poéticas* features a small selection of an enormous breadth of work that goes beyond the boundaries of paper. Behind his excellence in printmaking, mastery of space and color composition, there is a complex construction that shows us that everything that is on display won’t be lost in time and space, because it’s not just a fortuitous esthetic result, but an important part of the history of concrete art in our country.

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