

BOOKS WITHOUT LITERATURE

Horacio Zabala

"I could tell you my adventures, beginning from this morning," said Alice, a little timidly, "but it's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then."
"Explain all that," said the Mock Turtle.
"No, no! The adventures first," said the Gryphon in an impatient tone, "explanations take such a dreadful time."

Lewis Carroll

The book (*liber* in Latin) is an object that conveys written language. Its formal structure consists of a few basic elements: a title, a sequence of hand-written or printed pages bound together in a volume, front and back covers, illustrations, typography, etc. In addition to its concrete material existence and endless possibilities for knowledge, the book has an extraordinary metaphysical importance. Jorge Luis Borges sums it up by saying, "According to Mallarmé, the world exists for a book; according to Bloy, we are the versicles or words or letters of a magic book, and that incessant book is the only thing in the world; or, rather, it is the world" (*On the Cult of Books*).

The *artist's book*, also called the *book-object*, is a peculiar category in art. It is based on the age-old structure we call "book," but it re-makes and re-invents that structure. It offers "readers" an aesthetic experience beyond the conventions of language, of its logic and of the two-dimensionality of the printed page.

Artist's books are not books about art. That is, they don't deal with art history or theory. They have nothing to do with art criticism or techniques; nor are they books illustrated by artists (between 1914 and 1973, Pablo Picasso illustrated 157 books, but he did not make a single artist's book). Thus, just as to the question "What is a sculpture?" we might respond—perhaps evasively—by saying that it is something that might be considered a work of art, to the question "*What is an artist's book?*" we can say the same thing: it is something that might be considered a work of art.

Artists from a disparate array of tendencies and who make use of varied forms of expression and poetics have made works with this indeterminate, and hence difficult to classify, nature. As a specific phenomenon, the artist's book began in around 1960 as part of a vast international artistic-cultural movement that combined a range of instruments, techniques and materials. In so doing, it attempted to offer a critical view of the production, distribution and consumption of art. Art could and should cease to be considered a prestigious semiotic good or a luxurious fetish, that is, a unique and auratic object. It is not a coincidence that in those same years the idea of the "dematerialization of the work of art" (theorized by Lucy Lippard) arose as a common characteristic that emphasized creative and participatory processes in keeping with the critical instruments developed by Marshall McLuhan, Guy Debord, Herbert Marcuse, et al.

In those years, the artist's book (like the art happening, the installation, objects, visual poetry, moving images, etc.) was an alternative model that could replace traditional works (painting and sculpture) and their context (the gallery and museum circuit). Given that the artist's book must be handled, the audience not only enjoys it visually, but through other senses. Nor is its insertion in the traditional art market indispensable: the phenomenon itself finds its own means of production (handcrafted or industrial) and its own channels of communication and distribution.

There are at least three masters who created, among other things, what we now call the *artist's book*. Each one of them is associated with a modern art movement, Constructivism, Futurism and Dadaism respectively. I am speaking of *To Be Read Aloud*, 1923, by El Lissitzky with poems by Vladimir Maiacovsky (in this work, the typography suggests the intonation), *Words-in-freedom: olfactory, tactile, thermal*, 1932, by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, and Marcel Duchamp's *Box in a Valise*, 1935, with photographs, documents and miniature replicas of three ready-mades that constitute a portable retrospective exhibition. In Argentina, the pioneers of the artist's book are Libero Badii, Edgardo Antonio Vigo and Juan Carlos Romero.

Since the sixties, the figure of the artist has not belonged to any specific discipline. He can make use of any discipline and move from one to another, work in a team or consult specialists. From the historical avant-gardes, the contemporary artist has inherited a multidisciplinary orientation: culturally, the idea of a specific genre has lost relevance and weight. In any group show of artists' books, it is clear that the works do not have as many important, constant similarities as there are in group shows of woodcuts and ceramics. The artist's book is not a genre or a technique; instead, it has its own problematic and tonality, a specific, shifting way of speaking and indicating.

In analyzing the artist's books by Teresa Pereda, we must leave aside any attempt to find stylistic unity or coherence, and open ourselves up to her irreducible multiplicity. Generally speaking, her artistic production is pluralistic: just as there are photographs and paintings, drawings, objects, texts and installations, there are books. Their breadth in terms of dimension, material, technology, structure and poetics indicates the absence of a single underlying and governing idea. Let's take a look at some of her works.

The artist's first venture into the book and its problematic is called

Las dos plegarias de Teresa Pereda (Teresa Pereda's Two Prayers) (1994-1996). This limited edition of three is made using handmade paper containing soil. It includes variations on the elements that would appear in her later work: journey, cartography, ceremony, word, image, earth.

El Libro de las cuatro tierras (The Book of the Four Lands) is the result of a two-year project. From 1996 to 1998, Teresa Pereda traveled to four regions of Argentina: the pampas, the desert, the Andes and the littoral region. Her procedure and research subject are drawn from the wide problematic of anthropology. But once the *in situ* tasks such as interviewing four locals, taking photographs and collecting samples of the four soils were completed, the artist strayed from scientific method. That is, she filtered the material through her sensibility. Without losing its essence, the documentation takes on a particular aesthetic-formal reality: it becomes an open work with multiple meanings in the art—not the scientific—context. Teresa Pereda selects, combines, designs and relates historical, social, geographic and ethnic strata and fragments from “real reality” based on a legible and recognizable code. It's a kind of trunk-book; its front and back covers are made of hardwood from Patagonia, and its pages are made of handmade paper using cotton pulp containing soil from the four regions.

In 2000, fourteen editions of *Cuatro tierras* (Four Lands) were published. The book is minute: it consists of two planes (front and back covers) bound by two hinges. One of the planes contains four glass compartments holding soil from the provinces of Buenos Aires, Neuquén, Misiones and Córdoba. The different soils are visible through transparent glass on which maps of the corresponding region are printed.

In connection with the parallel between maps and territories, Jorge Luis Borges writes that perfectionist cartographers, “set up a Map of the Empire which had the size of the Empire itself and coincided with it point by point.” (*Rigor in Science*). *Cuatro tierras* allows for visual contact

between two-dimensional representation—the map—and three-dimensional presentation—the soil—indeed, between the four maps and the four soils. The spatial and temporal symbolism of the number “four” is of interest: the four elements, the four seasons and, particularly, the four cardinal points, which provide order: the *East* (dawn, spring, childhood, crescent moon); the *South* (summer, fire, youth, crescent moon); the *West* (autumn, maturity, dusk, waning moon); the *North* (winter, old age, night, new moon). In *Cuatro tierras*, the artist plays with the absence of pages—the material support of writing, essential to the concept of the book—and with the immediate and concrete presence of something unlikely in a book: soil, ordinary matter, visible through the four glass squares and referred to by the title of the work. We must bear in mind that, according to the psychology of forms, all four-way divisions, especially the square and the cube, display the firm and certain constructive solidity of the material organization of the world.

The presence of earth behind transparent glass is a constant in Teresa Pereda’s work; it appears in her installations, paintings and objects. In *Cuatro mil centímetros cúbicos de aire y tierra* (Four Thousand Cubic Centimeters of Air and Earth) (2003), earth is placed inside four hermetic box-books on which there are texts about the word “earth” as “crop,” “territory,” “nation,” “natural ground,” and “homeland.” In *Caja para soñar una patria posible* (Box for Dreaming of a Possible Homeland) (2006) dimensions shift. The soil is no longer inside a box-book that can be handled, but inside a simple cube: a transparent primary structure, a kind of hieratic and distant monolith whose transparent sides are mapped.

The idea of the glassed structure that shows soil (or different soils) is taken to the limit in her work *Páginas de artista* (Artist’s Pages) (2000). The first definition of the Spanish word *hoja* (from the Latin *folium*) refers to the flat, smooth and thin ends of vegetables. By analogy, it also refers to a sheet of paper or metal, perhaps in a notebook or book¹. The

¹ The Spanish word “hoja” has both of these definitions; the English word “leaf” does not.

work consists of hermetic boxes in which one side is made of transparent glass through which it is possible to see loose soil. Significantly, among its definitions, the Spanish word "hoja" also refers to the portion of the ground that is planted one year and rests the next.

Bajo el nombre de Juan (Under the Name of John) (1998-2001) deepens Pereda's aesthetic-anthropological investigation. The ancient Nativity of Saint John the Baptist is celebrated on the same day—June 24—in the Old and New Worlds. Nonetheless, the natural cycles in each hemisphere are diametrical: while in the Northern Hemisphere the summer solstice occurs, in the Southern Hemisphere the winter solstice takes place. It is the moment when the Andean communities (sun worshippers) celebrate the New Year, the Intiq Raymin. The custom of lighting bonfires during the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist has magical connotations: it is an offering to keep the sun from abandoning the earth and giving it over to darkness and Evil. Based on these old magical-religious customs, Teresa Pereda undertook a sociocultural intervention that resulted in an artist's book.

Her method consisted of witnessing and studying both festivities, interviewing the presiding officials, gathering the soil in each place, collecting the ashes and coals from the bonfires and other items characteristic of the celebrations, as well as photographing the scenes. In 1999, the artist visited the village of Isil, in Spain, located in the Vall d'Aneu in the Catalan Pyrenees. In the Americas, in 2000 she went to the town of Cochinoca on the Andean plateau in the Argentine province of Jujuy. The population there is mostly Aymara and Quechua Indians, since it once formed a part of the Inca Empire.

An artist's book, *Bajo el nombre de Juan*, was published in Bogotá, Colombia; there are several editions in handmade paper containing ashes and coals, and it includes lithographs and embossment. Making the work entailed *in situ* interventions and team work. Teresa Pereda's piece

gathers and brings together images of the two celebrations, just as the two celebrations gather and bring together their communities. The two celebrations are one celebration, a historical and social, magical and religious fact: a whole, a meaning.

For two reasons, *1518 kilómetros de devociones* (1,518 Kilometers of Worship) (2002-2005) has a different place in Teresa Pereda's poetics. The first is the technology she uses: eight digitally printed editions on a rolled sheet of Duraclear inside an aluminum box; the second difference lies in the absence of soil as a material. The work consists of the visual (cartographic) narration of a 1,518-kilometer journey during which the artist documented all of the shrines at the side of the highways in Argentina (there was a striking increase in their number after the economic, social and political crisis in Argentina in 2001).

Bajo el nombre de Juan and *1518 kilómetros de devociones* fall within the idea of art developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*. He locates artistic practices and art itself "at a middle ground between science and myth." Mythic thinking makes use of signs, units with a limited number of combinations. Science, on the other hand, entails intellectual structures and makes use of concepts, which are unlimited in nature. Just as science aspires to greater knowledge of the world, myth aims to find its meaning, even at the cost of eluding history. For Lévi-Strauss, art like myth and religion plays the essential role of making meaning for social life. Far from any metaphysics, structural anthropology teaches us to look at works of art in terms of systems of signs and concepts.

1518 kilómetros de devociones speaks of the scattered shrines without any a priori order, law or hierarchy. These shrines were not created by an institutional power, but grew out of non-authorized symbolic practices, of marginal pilgrimages and magic rituals immersed in the material culture. They are precarious temples built by anonymous hands that make

up an elaborate web of presences. The shrines are meeting places; they are signs of the restlessness, questioning and hopes of some Argentine men and women. Signs of their inner and outer visions, of the delicate cross between the sacred and the profane.

In the late sixties, many artists worked with and in nature, using soil as a material for *in situ* interventions and alluding to it through moving and still images: monumental works in the deserts of Utah by the North American Robert Smithson, documentation and collection of stones by the English artist Richard Long, installations by the Italian Mario Merz, and interventions in the (urban or rural) landscape by Argentines Carlos Ginzburg and Nicolás García Urriburu. Alone or along with other raw materials, soil serves no ideological or economic purpose. Its materialness shows its resistance and utopian quality, perhaps due to its obvious closeness to existence itself.

The four elements that inspired age-old cosmologies, mythologies and philosophies are water, fire, air and earth. Let's not think of earth as simple crumbly matter that makes up the ground and has animals, plants, roots, rocks and underground streams. Let's think of the Earth with a capital "E," a spherical planet that is slightly squashed at the poles, one that belongs to a solar system lost in space and inhabited by human beings with a history.

For a decade, Teresa Pereda's art has been focused on the earth as material and on its real, symbolic and imaginary meanings. Earth as origin, point of reference, belonging and sociocultural origin. Myths and ceremonies, geography and history, celebrations and journeys are implicit or explicit in her work. Her art goes beyond mere information and image to give rise to sense experiences. And it is experience that shows us that the earth is irreducible and impenetrable. Everything comes from and rests on her; everything is shown by her and hidden within her. She is origin, foundation, fate.

The poetics, identity and substance of Pereda's work grow out of her focus on the earth. Sometimes the optical, chromatic and tactile qualities of her installations, sheet iron, papers, objects and artist's books enlarge this prime material, rendering it opaque and resistant. Other times they allude to history and the human journey. It is always the essential point of reference.

It has been said that, like other means of communication, the book is an object capable of extending vision, reflection, imagination and memory. Certainly, this also applies to the artist's books (the book-object, the book without literature). Indeed, it reflects Teresa Pereda's vast production. Created during a period that goes from 1994 and continues into the present, her books are a reduced, multiple, mobile model of her work as a whole.

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