

ULISES CARRIÓN: OTHER BOOKS AND SO

Gerrit Jan de Rook

With the arrival of Ulises Carrión (1941–1989) in Amsterdam, around 1972, the Netherlands was an exciting artist richer. [Fig. 1] Unfortunately, here in the Netherlands, too few people are aware of that. While Carrión had but a small group of admirers here, and only a handful of Dutch libraries have his books in their collections, international interest in this artist continues to be considerable. Carrión's major theoretical work, *The New Art of Making Books* (1975), was published in at least five languages, including a recent Greek edition. Several of his artist's books have been reprinted in Switzerland. In Mexico, he caused a furor as that country's first conceptual artist. The wide-ranging interest in Carrión's work is thanks not only to his great enthusiasm and the many languages he spoke, but also to his continual activities in various countries to draw attention to the importance of artists' books and mail art.

BEGINNING AT ZERO

When Carrión arrived in the Netherlands, he already had a career behind him, although he never talked about it. He had studied at universities in Mexico, France and England and spent time in Germany in order to learn the language. In his native Mexico, he had published two collections of short stories, and was counted as a promising young literary figure. In Amsterdam, he had to start again, at the beginning. On previous visits, he had met a number of South Americans, including the Colombian Michel Cardena (Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas), who had lived in the Netherlands since 1962 and who introduced Carrión to Amsterdam's first 'artists' gallery', the In-Out Centre (1972–1975). There, Carrión met Sigurdur and Kristján Gudmundsson, Pieter Laurens Mol, Hetty Huisman, Raul Marroquin and John Liggins. He had a solo exhibition there and, under the imprint of In-Out Productions, published stencilled books by artists.

The first of his own books published here [the Netherlands] was *Sonnet(s)* (1972). It comprises 44 versions of the same sonnet, with each version slightly altered. The direction of these changes was indicated by their successive titles, beginning with Borrowed Sonnet, and by way of such typographical interventions as CAPITAL SONNET,



Fig. 1
Ulises Carrión performing *Some Spanish Exercises* during *Four Language Performances* at the Dutch Art Fair in the Sonesta Hotel, Amsterdam, April 5, 1977.
Photo by John Liggins

Underlined Sonnet, 'tennos derorriM', they arrived at the final Famous Sonnet, in a publication that became responsible for Carrión's own fame. The changes are sometimes witty or humorous, but they also say a great deal about the sometimes minimal codes that govern language, such as the structure of a syllogism, the use of capital letters in German, or the usefulness of quotation marks and asterisks.

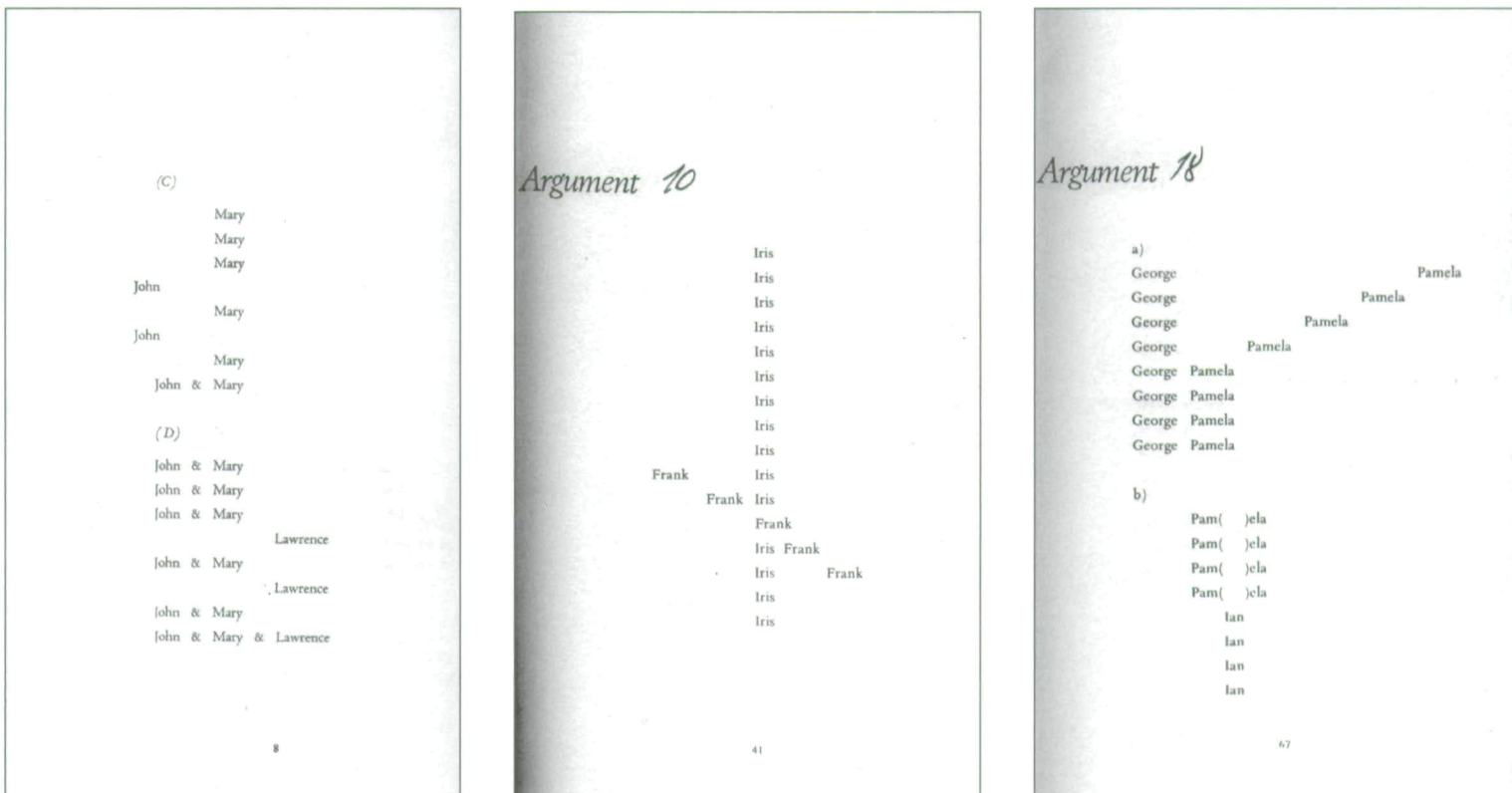


Fig. 2
Arguments, 1973, Ulises Carrión, Beau Geste Press
 From left to right pages 8, 41, and 67

Most of the artists who exhibited at the In-Out Centre were involved in creating their own publications. Carrión was also in touch with another Mexican, Felipe Ehrenberg, who was part of the artist-run Beau Geste Press in England, which printed a range of artists' books. In 1973, Beau Geste published Carrión's first offset printed book, *Arguments*. [Fig 2] In 25 "chapters," Carrión described all manner of human relationships simply by using names, which he arranged in ever-varying typographical relationships. The names approach one another, sometimes blend together and then separate again. *Arguments* is a sublime interpretation of the statement that he published that same year: 'All existing things are structures. Everything that happens is a metaphor. Every metaphor is a meeting point of two structures.'¹

In 1979, in an interview with the American artist Jan van Raay, Carrión made it clear that for several years he had no longer been using language in the way he had previously done as a writer. He now used it as a visual artist would, as a graphic element, volume or color. 'I do not call myself a writer, because I use language... from a non-linguistic point of view, but I consider myself a writer in the sense that I think that my work is important for language.'²

In his various books and projects, in an exceptional fashion, Carrión used an impassive, efficient structure to convey emotional and metaphoric content and design. As a result, in *Arguments*, bone-dry summaries are all about the joys and sorrows of love. His relationship to the reader, to whom his books often speak directly, is personal and intimate.

HIS OWN BOOKSHOP

It was an act of courage and ambition, on April 15, 1975, when Carrión and his friend, Aart van Barneveld – with the help of eighteen friends who each gave 100 guilders to pay the first six months rent – opened the gallery for books by artists, Other Books and So [Fig. 3] in the basement at Herengracht 227 in Amsterdam. In this relatively low-ceilinged space, about 6 metres wide and barely 10 metres deep, publications were displayed flat on a number of hand-made tables and in open cabinets. They did not stand tidily with their bindings side-by-side, as in a normal bookstore. As Vera Illés described it in the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper, "On view are objects in all sorts and sizes, which at first sight, and to simplify matters, can all be referred to as books, yet there is not a single real book."³ She then quoted Carrión's own words: "My ideal is the recognition of the book as an independent art form, in which language, the literal meaning of words, is less important, but where a whole is created from the content and the form."

It is astonishing how quickly this humble location became known far beyond our national borders, as the place for "the other book." Printed material was sent here from around the world and there were always new things to discover. 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. Thanks to the broad scope of the



Fig. 3
Other Books and So Archivé,
founded by Ulises Carrión,
Herengracht 259, Amsterdam
photo by Michael Gibbs, 1978

collection, in terms of origin (Eastern and Western Europe, Latin America, the United States) as well as technique (stencil, offset, photocopy, letterpress, stamp or handwritten), the gallery developed into the ultimate hangout for lovers of experiments with books. Publications by small bibliophile printers and stencil-makers lay side-by-side with books by Edward Ruscha or Sol LeWitt. Artists' cards, posters, magazines and audio tapes completed the collection. Carrión proved himself an ever-amiable host, always ready to offer background information. Exhibitions were organized around the newest trends of the day: visual poetry, fluxus, stamp art and mail art, this last an art form for which Carrión proved a warm supporter. Performances were also given, by artists such as Moniek Toebosch, Jackson Mac Low and Harrie de Kroon.

In the same way that Carrión had liberated himself from his role as a writer, for him, Other Books and So was a means by which to step back from the role of artist. He summarized his trajectory as follows: "Practical considerations led to the fact that we started making each other's books. In previous years, I had built up relationships with artists who were interested in books. I began to be an organizer, and that has become an essential part of my work. I no longer see them as separate."⁴ Carrión came to realize that with the establishment of an "institute," such as a gallery for books or a publishing house, the relationship between the artist and society becomes blurred. "You cease being a person, I mean an individual who is doing a certain work only in his name . . .

You are not an artist, but you are a gallery."⁵

In 1975, Carrión made a name for himself as a book theorist when he published something akin to a manifesto, "The New Art of Making Books," in the then highly respected art magazine, *Kontexts*. In a point-by-point summary of the importance of artists' books, he determined that in this new art form each book must be read differently, and that one can stop reading once one has understood the entire structure of the book. 'A book may be the accidental container of a text, the structure of which is irrelevant to the book: these are the books of bookshops and libraries. A book can also exist as an autonomous and self-sufficient form, including perhaps a text that emphasizes that form, a text that is an organic part of that form: here begins the new art of making books.'⁶

Other Books was doing well, receiving a great deal of interest from the Amsterdam public. In September of 1977, the gallery moved, once again with financial help from its friends, to a larger space at Herengracht 259 [Fig. 4]. Carrión also continued producing his own publications, including his magazine *Ephemera*. On December 1st, 1978, however, he abruptly stopped his activities on behalf of the bookshop. Subsidies that had been more or less promised had failed to materialize and he no longer wanted to be dangled on a string. The shop was taken over by someone else and continued for another two years as Art Something.

Carrión, however, was not sitting still. He changed his gallery into the Other Books and So Archives, which—as

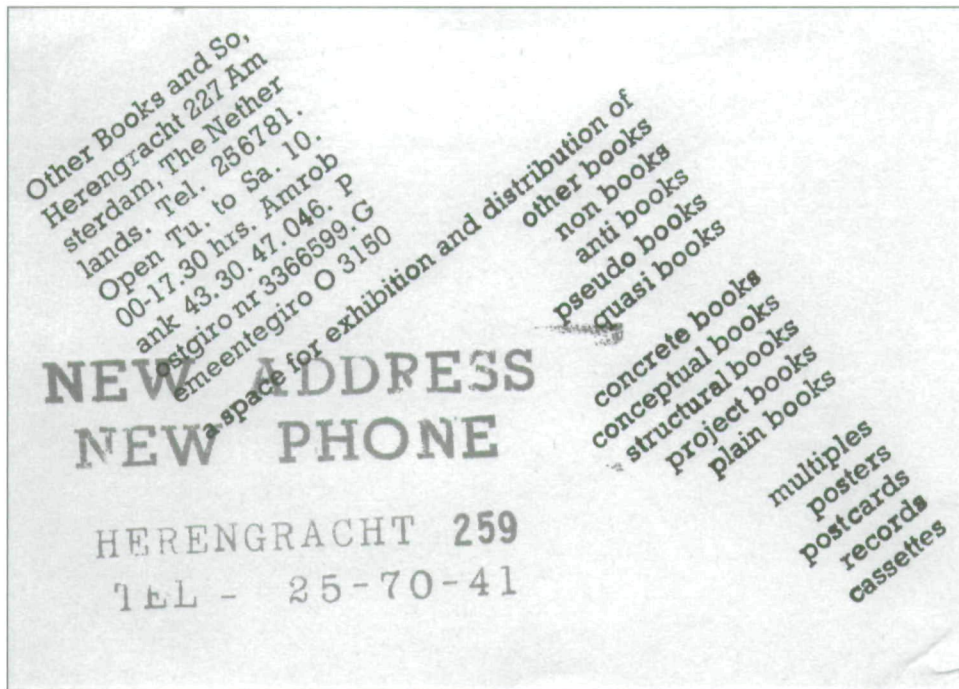


Fig. 4
Postcard announcing the
move of Other Books and So
to Herengracht 259, 1977.

a result of his daily artistic activities—he considered a work of art, first on the Bloemgracht and later at his own home. He continued to create exhibitions and was invited to lecture on artists' books in Poland, Brazil, Argentina, Hungary, Sweden, the United States, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, England and Spain, and was closely involved with Aart van Barneveld's activities as manager of the Stempelplaats Gallery in Amsterdam. Carrión was moreover involved with sound art and also created some twenty video works, as well as completing several projects at Galerie 'A' and De Appel in Amsterdam.

When Ulises Carrión died prematurely of AIDS in 1989, he gave his archival collection to a friend. The books were dismantled and went to Switzerland. Carrión's greatest work of art had ceased to exist. In 1992, Museum Fodor in Amsterdam organized a memorial exhibition, entitled, *We have won! Haven't we?*, an oblique reference to Carrión's love of boxing. After that, in the Netherlands, he more or less dropped out of sight.

Elsewhere, however, Carrión's fame continues to rise, stimulated by exhibitions organized in Latin America by Felipe Ehrenberg and the publication of an impressive book about his work, by Martha Hellion, *Mundos personales o estrategias culturales*, (Personal Worlds or Cultural Strategies, Turner, 2003). In 2005, Hellion again presented Carrión's work at the fifth Bienal do Mercosur, in Porto Alegre, Brazil. This year, 2010, bears witness to a veritable boom of interest in Carrión's work here in Europe. An exhibition devoted to his book collection was held at Fundação de Serralves in Porto, and no fewer than three recent exhibitions closely followed one another in Great Britain, at Westlondonprojects (2009) and The Showroom (2010) in London, and at Eastside Projects in Birmingham (2010). Perhaps, at last, the damage can also be—at least partly—rectified here in the Netherlands.

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This essay was previously published in *Metropolis M*, a Dutch art magazine. <http://www.metropolism.com/english>

Mari Shields translated this essay.

ENDNOTES

1. Ulises Carrión, "Textos y Poemas," *Plural*, Jan 1973, 94
2. Jan van Raay, "End of an Era?," *Artzien*, January 1979, 6
3. Vera Illés, "Other books and so: een nieuwe galerie," *NRC Handelsblad*, 10 May, 1975
4. Waling Boers, "Buitenlanders in Amsterdam," Tijmen van Grootheest & Frank Lubbers, eds., *Amsterdam 60/80, twintig jaar beeldende kunst*, published in Fodor maandblad, year 1 (1982), issues 8–10, 104
5. Jan van Raay, "End of an Era?," *Artzien*, January 1979, 7
6. Ulises Carrión, "The New Art of Making Books," *Kontexts*, no. 6–7, 1975. The text was reprinted in, amongst others, Guy Schraenen, ed., *Ulises Carrión: We have won! Haven't we?* (Amsterdam: Museum Fodor, 1992).

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