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# Object-Books and Exposed Writings: New Textual and Literary Landscapes in Latin America and Spain

Objetos-livro e escrituras expostas: novas paisagens textuais e literárias na América Latina e Espanha

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**ABSTRACT:** In this essay I explore new ways of literary transmission edited in formats other than the codex in Latin America and Spain. My study also analyzes what Armando Petrucci called exposed writings. Taking as departing point a review of the concept of book, I will scrutinize several object-books to offer an analysis of literary materials edited in non-codex supports. This essay also proposes a clear distinction between book-object and object-book. Since the object-books I analyze convey literary texts, a main aim of my research is to vindicate the inclusion of these new materialities of literature into the field of literary studies, an area that historically has omitted non-codex formats considering them non-serious literature or literary diversions.

**KEYWORDS:** Print culture. Material culture. Materiality of literature. Textual materiality. Book-object. Object-book.

**RESUMO:** Neste ensaio, exploro novas linhas de transmissão literária editadas principalmente em formatos distintos do códice em América Latina e Espanha, incluindo o que Armando Petrucci chamou de escrituras expostas. Tomando como ponto de partida uma revisão do conceito de livro, examinarei com minúcia vários objetos-livro para oferecer uma análise de materiais editados em formatos distintos do códice. Este ensaio propõe fazer uma clara distinção entre

livro-objeto e objeto-livro. Como os objetos-livro analisados transmitem textos literários, um dos principais objetivos de minha pesquisa é justificar a inclusão dessas novas materialidades da literatura no campo dos estudos literários, uma área que historicamente tem omitido os formatos fora do códice, considerando-os divertimentos literários.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Cultura escrita. Cultura material Materialidade da literatura. Materialidade do texto. Livro-objeto. Objeto-livro.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>

In everyday language, when talking about books, we refer to a specific format, that of the codex, the traditional book shape that we are so used to. Nevertheless, this is only one possible textual support among many others. For practical reasons of knowledge transmission, the rise of the codex led gradually to the disappearance of an important variety of textual materials and homogenized the possibilities of dissemination by relegating a great variety of textual transmitters to extinction.<sup>3</sup>

In the Greco-Roman period there was an important variety of textual supports, mainly rolls and scrolls, but also inscriptions of wishes on vases, jugs and pitchers have been widely discovered.<sup>4</sup> Curse tablets –or *tabellae defixionum*– were also found during that period.<sup>5</sup> They were small tablets with a written curse on them used to ask the gods or spirits to perform an action on a person, or otherwise compel the victim of the curse. Typically, curse tablets are thin sheets of lead with text in small letters engraved on them. They were often rolled, folded, or pierced with nails and placed beneath the ground: either buried in graves or tombs, thrown into wells or pools, or nailed to the temple walls. Tablets were also used for love spells and, when used in this manner they were placed inside the home of the intended object of desire. These writing practices involved the agency of the writer to call on spirits to perform an action and, at the same time, brought magical connotations to the act of writing. Other texts as oracle bone inscription is one of the oldest systemized form of Chinese writing found, these words are recorded by carving characters onto animal bones or turtles' shells.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that nowadays some book-artists are returning to the practice of writing on stones, so updating the old writing practice of petroglyphs.

A variety of material supports and a diversity of written objects are in the genesis of print culture. Somehow, with the object-book, I will explain this concept in detail in the following pages, writing goes back to the heterogeneity of its origins. Object-books can be thought of as a return to the diversity of formats abandoned by the emergence and generalization of the codex.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the history of writing and even the history of the book takes as a starting point the first inscribed objects.<sup>8</sup> Roger Chartier asserts that "*Folium*, a leaf, only took on the new meaning of the leaf of a book in the fourth century CE –by which time the codex was rapidly becoming the dominant material support for pagan texts, as it had been for Christians from the beginning of the second century, if not earlier".<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Ana María Gómez-Bravo, when analyzing textual transmission in 15th century Spain, argues that: "one of the problems that derives from the acceptance of the primacy of the book over the centuries is that other material supports are destroyed or left unstudied and, therefore, rendered invisible".<sup>10</sup> The preeminence of the codex was detrimental to other scriptural

2. Part of this research was published in Spanish in the Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies. It can be found in the references section under Climent-Espino (2018).

3. I will follow David D. Hall (1996) and Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (2007) on topics related to the history of the book.

4. An important work on this issue is *A History of Writing* edited by Anne-Marie Christin (2002).

5. The works by María del A. López Jimeno (1991, 1999) on *tabellae defixionum* are extremely valuable.

6. A general overview on writing and reading practices on an important plethora of material supports can be found in *The Book of Codes* by Paul Lunde (2009).

7. On the transition from roll to codex, I find illuminating the study by Guglielmo Cavallo (1995).

8. Cardona (1999); Eliot; Rose, *op. cit.*; Lunde, *op. cit.*

9. Chartier (2013, p. 194).

10. Gómez-Bravo (2013, p. 6).

11. On how digitalization is threatening the codex see Grafton (2008, p. 41-58), and Finkelstein (2005, p. 118-132).

12. Eliot; Rose, *op. cit.*; Chartier (2013).

13. Cf. Grafton; Williams (2006); Grafton; Shelford; Siraisi (1992); Greetham (1995).

14. Cf. Chartier (2013).

15. Cf. Bentivoglio (1985, 1990); Silveira (2001, p. 214).

16. On the concept of non-book, see the studies by Mirella Bentivoglio (1985) and Jessica Prinz (1991). Flora Süssekind (2004, p. 442-443) suggests the possibility that object-books be framed within the concept of non-book, which would also be within the tag of artist book.

17. On the importance of play as cultural element, see Huizinga (1980).

supports that disappeared gradually. Nowadays, in the 21st century that context has drastically changed and for such a prominent scholar as Anthony Grafton in his *Codex in Crisis*, the codex is now threatened by the massive digitalization of books and the new writing and reading practices that the Internet offers.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of book has varied substantially throughout history,<sup>12</sup> and there is some consensus that book production, specifically codex production, is closely related to the efficient transmission of knowledge and ideas at least in the early stages of its history.<sup>13</sup> The codex prevailed for practical issues of information transmission but, until achieving the codex format, there were hesitations on which supports to use. Recently, another prominent scholar in the history of books, Roger Chartier, devoted an entire article to answer the basic question of 'what is a book?'.<sup>14</sup> In order to answer it, Chartier chooses to define what is not a book. This question remains problematic and is relevant within the field of textual studies. Chartier clarifies that, for instance, rolls, scrolls and other written objects that are not codices are books. To simplify Chartier's argument, he supports the idea that sometimes just the intentionality of binding different parts together could be a book.

## BOOK-OBJECT VERSUS OBJECT-BOOK

Book-object retains the codex format and clearly refers to its characteristics by transforming them. The obsession of many artists to create within the limits of the codex format or having the codex as raw material has been called *bookism* –*librismo*– by the Italian artist and poet Mirella Bentivoglio.<sup>15</sup> In opposition to book-object, the term *object-book* has been proposed for creations that avoid the codex format and prioritize any object as a textual transmitter.<sup>16</sup> Both book-objects and object-books would be within the most comprehensive field of artist books. In this essay, I analyze objects converted into original books that incorporate literary text to show how writing enables new possibilities to use the object, and how the object enhances connotations and new reading possibilities and interpretations of the text that it transmits. This union, or sometimes friction, between object and writing creates a synergy that offers the reader a highly unique literary object, this is a new and original materiality of literature. I risk to assert that with object-books, writing is released from the restriction of paper and codex formatting. Object-books propose a more playful handling of the text by rejecting the compositional elements of the codex and exploring writing and reading possibilities offered by different objects.<sup>17</sup> The plasticity of objects proposes a non-linear, multidirectional

and dynamic reading. Further, in some cases, object-books turn reading into a performative act by demanding from the reader a constant manipulation of the object. As I will show, writing in object-books modifies the uses of the object forcing the reader to reshape her/his reading practices. In fact, "The 'material' study of text (writing support, graphic and typographic techniques, etc.) can be combined with all the possibilities of philosophical, literary, and sociological approaches to better grasp the multiple dimensions of the written word".<sup>18</sup>

18. Cf. Pantin; Theis (2017).

19. Chartier (1995, p. 2).

There are two essential ideas that underline my research. The first is that a written text requires materiality –whatever this may be. There is no written text without materiality, and therefore a text is always an object. A second important idea is that the materiality of the text determines the reading or, in other words, that the same text will be understood differently if presented to readers on different material supports. So, the materiality where a text is written and how it is presented to readers matters in order to understand its meaning. It is in this vein that Roger Chartier asserts that "When the 'same' text is apprehended through very different mechanisms of representation, it is no longer the same".<sup>19</sup> To illustrate this idea, let's think about a short and common text –"I love you"– on three different material supports. Firstly, imagine a huge street graffiti where "I love you" has been written. Here, the readers face a public writing and public reading, the person who wrote it probably wants any passer-by to know about this love, or the message may be for anonymous readers, and the writer wants everyone to feel loved so as to create a better atmosphere, a better day, etc. For a second example, imagine an intimate handwritten note in a small paper where, again, "I love you" has been written. This note places the reader in a pretty different situation, now it is a space of intimacy, where sender and recipient –or writer and reader– know each other. Probably the note was left in a bedside table within an envelope, or in the kitchen with a fresh brew of coffee. Finally, let's imagine again the same text, "I love you", written in a bullet. In this case, the materiality where the text is written makes the reader questioning on the intentionality of the text and its friction with the object that conveys it. Because of the object, love and hate seem to be at the same level. The reader or recipient faces a threat. The textual support, the bullet and its uses, can completely change the meaning of the text. So, these examples show that is relevant to reflect on textual supports in order to fully understand the meaning of a text.

In order to understand who the pioneers of the object-books are, we must observe some innovations of the French poetry at the end of the XIX century. It was Stéphane Mallarmé, with his poem *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (1897), who first revolutionized the concept of the page by combining the graphic and textual, thus innovating in two decisive factors for a new

20. Cf. Mallarmé (1993).

21. Though calligrams were revitalized by Apollinaire at the beginning of the 20th century, they have a long tradition that would take us at least to 300 BCE with the *Egg* by Simmias of Rhodes.

22. *Surrealism and the Book* by Renée R. Hubert (1988) is a fascinating study on the role that book and print art played in the avant-garde movements, specifically in surrealism. For a review of Duchamp's work, see Calvin Tomkins (1966).

23. Cf. Pantin; Theis (*op. cit.*).

24. Cf. Bentivoglio (1985, 1990); Castleman (1994); Drucker (1995); Rodríguez Núñez (2008); Silveira (2001).

understanding of the page.<sup>20</sup> Firstly, the spacing of writing by leaving blank spaces around certain words acts as silences, which he incorporates as a central part of the reading. Secondly, the use of a typographic diversity implies a variety of intonations and contrasts within the poem. Mallarmé breaks for the first time the spatial homogeneity of the page showing a plurality of unexpected and surprising nuances. But, above all, he is a pioneer in granting meaning to blank spaces, an unexplored resource that creates tension between the readable and the visible. Mallarmé will be followed by aesthetic experiments such as Guillaume Apollinaire's calligrams and some avant-garde movements such as Dadaism, Futurism and Surrealism that will innovate the page.<sup>21</sup> Marcel Duchamp's *readymades* can also be considered as precursor of this new object art.<sup>22</sup>

Originally, the page designated the waxed surface on a tablet on which it was written, and also the leaves of the papyrus and parchment scrolls. The page must be considered as a minimum unit of construction of the book, and it can assume autonomy with respect to the entire work becoming an *object-page*. A page can be defined as: "A surface or frame containing a written text (alone or associated with other elements) that can be viewed globally or scanned by the eye in such a way that, during reading, all the elements in the frame are likely to interact".<sup>23</sup> Historically, the concept of the page also came to mean strictly the pages of the codex. I will show how in the object-books that I discuss the object can take the page limit to unexpected spaces that will provide new meanings.

Academic literary criticism faces the problem of incorporating object-books into literary studies programs. The researcher who wants to incorporate these creations into her/his research must "transfer" a legitimacy to these works that would not be necessary when studying writers published in codex format. Formats outside the codex arouse suspicions for critics regarding their claim, as is evident by the obvious omission of these works within the literary studies field. Object-books have been much better received by academics and critics in the field of visual arts.<sup>24</sup>

It is worthy to reflect briefly on the reasons why so little attention has been paid from literary studies to the object-book in the Hispanic and Latin American cultural context. A first idea is that when thinking about the object-book as a specific variety of the artist's book, its authors are considered artists and not strictly writers. These creators are dissonant authors within the literary landscape and are relegated to a secondary or tertiary level of interest. The Hispanic and Latin American literary panorama is still very homogeneous, though there has been a significant increase in publications of small publishers, and self-publishing is also an opportunity for artists/writers who use the Internet to show their creations.

It is necessary to incorporate the study of object-books into literary studies programs, which have mostly excluded any formats other than the codex. There are indeed many formats and objects that convey literary expressions to readers. The question arises of how to address the work of these authors, and how to understand the relationship between object and text. The approach to this type of work must be done by analyzing its specific characteristics, as they usually take root not specifically in the history of the codex, but rather in the history of objects. I will show how the history and uses of the objects enhance potential meanings of the text. In his *Forms and Meanings*, Roger Chartier asserts that "If we want to understand the appropriations and interpretations of a text in their full historicity we need to identify the effect, in terms of meaning, that its material form produced".<sup>25</sup> By writing on new supports or objects, object-books are perceived with strangeness by the reader, there is a *defamiliarization* in the transmitter of the writing.<sup>26</sup> I refer to defamiliarization as the artistic technique of presenting to audience common things in a strange way in order to enhance perception of the familiar.

But what are the minimum units of object-books: their materiality, their textuality? What are the possible reading itineraries? The structure of the object? The text? One of the most important Mexican conceptual and book artists, Ulises Carrión, tried to shed light on these questions.<sup>27</sup> He stated in his *The New Art of Making Books* that there are many wrong assumptions about the creation of books to assert that: "A writer, contrary to the popular opinion, does not write books. A writer writes texts".<sup>28</sup> He understands the book in its full materiality: "A book is a sequence of spaces. Each of these spaces is perceived as different moments. A book is also a sequence of moments".<sup>29</sup> *Object literature* presents a destabilizing discourse in relation to the traditional writing/ reading practices created by the codex. There are some precedents in Latin America of *object literature* that are worth mentioning, the first one is related to Brazilian concrete poetry, I am talking about the famous *Poemóbiles* by the Brazilian poet Augusto de Campos and the Spanish poet Julio Plaza.<sup>30</sup> *Poemóbiles* is a kind of origami book and, though these poems lie within the limits of the codex format, they also challenge the codex as a mechanical artifact.<sup>31</sup> *Object literature* has its emergence along with object art in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century.<sup>32</sup> Though there is no interdependence between writing and books –there are books without writing, and writing without books–, usually in the codex the primacy of the text is unquestionable. *Object literature* presents object and text at the same level of importance, in these creations the textuality of the object and the materiality of the text cannot be separated. Critics must pay attention to the semiotic load of the written artifact since the characteristics of the object will determine the reading of the book.

There are expectations about the function of objects –a shoe, a pencil, a bottle–, that are part of an aprioristic understanding that will condition the

25. Chartier (1995, p. 2).

26. I refer to *strangeness or defamiliarization* as used by Russian formalists, mainly by Viktor Shklovsky (1990, p. 1-14).

27. Cf. Carrión (2012).

28. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

30. Cf. Campos; Plaza (2010); Campos; Pignatari; Campos (1975).

31. To explore the codex as artifact, see *Structure of the Visual Book* by Keith Smith (1984).

32. Marchán Fiz (1990, p. 163-171).



33. *Paper before Print* by Jonathan M. Bloom (2001) is a fascinating work on the importance of paper as material support of writing.

34. Cf. Fiorilli (2012).

35. *Ibid.* Unless otherwise indicated translations from Spanish and Portuguese are my own. In the original: “24 obleas comestibles escritas e ilustradas. Cada tarjeta está impresa en azúcar y su consumición es apta para todo tipo de lectores. Los poemas tienen una caducidad de 2 años, a no ser que usted se los coma antes. La poesía no es la hostia, consúmala preferentemente en comunión con su prójimo”.

reading of the text that the object conveys. In turn, writing invites reflection on the immanent attributes of the object. The object-book is a three-dimensional object that the reader manipulates, but the text transmitted through it separates the object from its initial function: now it is a readable object, it has been given a new use based on an innovative writing practice. When conveying a literary text, the object becomes a literary object whose reading is governed by its own geography. A precise interpretation of the object-book cannot be made without studying it as technology or artifact. Objects place readers mentally in very specific contexts or semantic fields, there are references in our memory that are activated to know how to use them. Textual content can be presented to emphasize its uses, to subvert them or make a parody of them.

Henceforward, I analyze several examples of object-books, among them a picnic box-book from Argentina, a matchbox-book from Spain, and a house-book from Cuba, all of them have been turned into original object-books. Their authors have abandoned not only the codex, but also the ubiquitous paper as privileged material for textual transmission.<sup>33</sup> For these artists, writing is another element, but not a priority, within artistic creation. The following examples explore possible forms of perception of the text based on the physical relationship between reader and object-books.

## GRAPHOPHAGY: EATING WRITING, DIGESTING TEXTS

When a writer or artist chooses or creates an object to write on, she/he is also seeking to enhance possible interpretations, and in some cases to propose a performance to the reader. Within the range of book-objects there are some consecrated formats such as the roll, the accordion, the case, the envelope, the folder, or the box. *Poetry to Eat – La poesía da para comer* – (see Figure 1) is a picnic box that contains edible wafers written by the Argentinian poet Sebastián Fiorilli.<sup>34</sup> Each wafer offers texts on one side and illustrations in reference to the text on the other. The book is presented as a picnic basket, it includes a white and red checkered tablecloth, a blue plastic fork and:

24 edible wafers written and illustrated. Each card is printed with sugar ink, its consumption is suitable for all types of readers. The poems have an expiration date of two years. Poetry is not the host, but consume it preferably in communion with your neighbor.<sup>35</sup>



Figure 1 – *La poesía da para comer*. Picture: Michael L. Darough.

These 24 page-wafers are numbered and divided into five blocks that follow an order indicated in the lower right portion of the wafer, so they are not completely autonomous pages. This object-book is also an example of ephemeral art and transitory writing.<sup>36</sup> The wafer, a thin sheet of unleavened bread, is made to be eaten. If the reading process is to mentally digest and meditate in order to understand, this book suggests to physically eat the book: chew it, taste it, swallow it, convert it into an assimilable substance for the organism. The title, *Poetry to Eat*, suggests ingestion and poetic digestion, the wafer invites the reader to consume it, perhaps in communion. Known as *graphophagy*, the practice of textual ingestion or consumption has ancient roots, and also an important tradition within the field of object-books.<sup>37</sup> Giorgio Cardona<sup>38</sup> describes graphophagy as a non-linguistic use of texts, and as an old practice considered therapeutic.<sup>39</sup> Cardona offers detailed descriptions of old religious practices in relation to graphophagy, like the one called “written water” among Jews and Muslims.<sup>40</sup> Cardona describes how even today water is used to clean tablets with Koranic verses, or even macerate pieces of paper with Koranic verses and, after the ink dissolves in water, this water is then drunk by believers.<sup>41</sup>

36. Cardona (1999, p. 52).

37. *Ibid.*, p. 170-174.

38. *Ibid.*

39. In relation with this therapeutic component, Climent-Espino (2019) has analyzed several books offered to readers with formats of medicines.

40. There are documentary evidences of this practice of *graphophagy* in relation to medicine in medieval times as documented in Pensado Figueiras (2018, p. 43, 49).

41. Cardona (1999, p. 171-172).

42. Fiorilli, *op. cit.*

43. "Between 1961 and 1970 Roth created about fifty 'literature sausages.' To make each sausage Roth followed a traditional recipe, but with one crucial twist: where the recipe called for ground pork, veal, or beef, he substituted a ground-up book or magazine. Roth mixed the ground-up pages with fat, gelatin, water, and spices before stuffing them into sausage casings. The source materials include work by authors and periodicals that the artist either envied or despised; they run the gamut from lowbrow illustrated tabloids to well-regarded contemporary German novels to the works of Karl Marx and the influential nineteenth-century philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Roth turned literature into a metaphorical object for intellectual consumption and physical subsistence" (DIETER..., 2020).

44. Cf. Roberts *et al.* (2019).

45. Cf. Brussel (2017); Silveira (2001, p. 224-226).

46. Cf. Bruscky (1974).

47. *Como ler* can be translated as "How to read" or as "I eat reading". Note that *como* in Portuguese can be translated as 'how' but it is also the first person singular present indicative of *comer*, to eat.

48. Silveira (2001, p. 211-213).

It is probably not by chance that in *Poetry to Eat*, the pages are wafers, which links this practice to communion. In order to use a codex, usually sight and touch are needed. In this object-book, Sebastián Fiorilli proposes that the reader taste it.<sup>42</sup> Now the *pleasure of the text* can be twofold, mental and physical. Text and illustrations are ready to be read and ingested. Note that by offering poetry as food, a poetic influence in the physical and mental realm is intended, there is an intention to poetize those who eat it. By leaving the limits of the codex, we find new original writing and reading practices which are not exempt from a history of affiliations within print culture and literature history. These non-linguistic uses of texts are somehow connected to the writings found in many vases and pitchers in the Greco-Roman world, also objects to eat and drink.

There are numerous links between books and food in the context of the artist's book. A precedent that must be mentioned is Dieter Roth's *Literature Sausages* (1964).<sup>43</sup>

Roth's experiments with books include pages that can be shuffled and reordered, miniature volumes, and his most radical effort, his *Literature Sausages*, each of which consists of a sausage made in accordance with a traditional recipe calling for ingredients such as salt, garlic, and fennel, but with one critical substitution: a minced printed publication in place of meat. The mixture was stuffed into a sausage casing, and the resulting object playfully proposes to viewers and readers another means by which information may be ingested and digested. Each *Literature Sausage* (*Literaturwurst* in German) is unique—different in shape and size and containing a different book, magazine, or newspaper.<sup>44</sup>

Dieter Roth described the process as follows: "From time to time I take books I can't stand or from authors I want to annoy and make sausages: c. 40 cm long, 8 cm thick, [they] should end up as an edition of 50, titled on the outside, signed, numbered".<sup>45</sup> Though Roth's intent was clearly derogatory and provocative, I found particularly interesting that he even typed up recipes for those books. This is another example of book destruction to create a written "edible" product.

Another precedent of *Poetry to Eat* is the bread-book performance by the Brazilian artist Paulo Bruscky<sup>46</sup> who, in *Como ler*, invited visitors in a bakery to coffee and to eat printed bread.<sup>47</sup> This kind of performance is obviously full of humor and irony.<sup>48</sup> All these artistic productions link with anthropological practices in relation to writing. What I am wanting to show is that any written practice, even those that we deem the craziest, always have closer precedents in the history or the anthropology of writing.

In *Poetry to Eat*, the physical relationship between the reader and the read object is unavoidable for reading. After a first moment of strangeness, the reading

is enhanced by the uses and forms of the object. *Poetry to Eat* is an edible book, a textualized meal that moves away from the codex in its claim to interrogate the possibilities of the text as part of its intentionality. Both sides of a wafer are shown in this slide (see Figure 2), the text states: “Close the eyes / bite my sadness / build me a mess when you touch me / please / I don’t ask for anything else.”<sup>49</sup>

49. Fiorilli, *op. cit.*, p. 1-3. In the original: “Cierra los ojos / muérdeme la pena / constrúyeme un desastre cuando me toques / por favor / no te pido otra cosa”.

50. Cardona (1991, p. 170-174).



Figure 2 – *La poesía da para comer*. Picture: Michael L. Darough.

The illustration on the right “illuminates” the text on the left, this is another type of artist’s book: the illustrated book. As we can see, the command “bite” as well as this “soup of tears and sadness” connects both text and image, as well as the main intention of this object-book: to be eaten. In addition, the illustration links body –eyes–, writing –pena/sadness– and food –dish of tears. So, by reading text and image in parallel the interpretation of the text is enriched by the fact that it is written on an edible wafer, also a page. If, as Giorgio Cardona argues, *graphophagy* has therapeutic purposes, perhaps eating of this wafer will mitigate the sadness in the reader.<sup>50</sup>

51. Cf. Fernández Peláez (2012).

52. *Ibid.*

## SELF-DESTRUCTIVE LITERATURE: MATCHBOX-BOOKS

*Cabezas rascan paredes (Poemas para prender en plena calle) –Heads Scratching Walls (Poems to Light on the Street)–* by Julio Fernández Peláez is an object-book made in a matchbox with long matches (see Figure 3).<sup>51</sup> The box, cover and back cover of the book, is a container of 36 handwritten matches or pages that make up the book. On the back cover it is reported that: “*Heads Scratching Walls* is a book of poetry written in matches / and it is also a matchbox that contains a book of poems”,<sup>52</sup> therefore, a book that serves as an object and object that is a book. Each one of the 36 matches are materiality that conveys writing.



Figure 3 – *Cabezas rascan paredes*. Picture: Michael L. Darough.

In the cases I analyze here, authors feel the need to clarify to readers that they are creating books. The artist has full control over his creative process, he is the author and editor of the book. The technique used in *Heads Scratching Walls* is pretty simple: texts handwritten with blue ink on the wooden stick of each match, and a print run of 50 copies –which means a total of 18 hundred written matches and 72 hundred written sides. The thoroughness required to write on such a narrow and irregular material is extreme, which is somehow reminiscent of the care and skills of scribes in the past. The use of calligraphy is significant and remarkable, it implies a return to old writing practices –such as those of scribes and copyists– and a clear rejection of the industrial production of books. Nowadays, the increase of textual digitalization is detrimental to personal calligraphy. The presence of calligraphy in this book works as a way to resist the omnipresence of typography (see Figure 4). In the current cultural context where electronic texts and digital writing have almost been imposed in the name of productivity, the use of calligraphy proposes a return to the craftsmanship of



53. *Ibid.* In the original: "ACCIÓN 1. Acudir con el poemario a una revuelta pacífica. 2. Abrir la caja y repartir las cerillas entre un grupo de confianza (cuidado con los infiltrados). 3. Indicar a los manifestantes la posibilidad de modificar a su gusto el contenido del poema. 4. Prender la cerilla a un tiempo y antes de que cargue la policía (evitar a toda costa los golpes). 5. Leer los poemas en plena carrera, o una vez a salvo. 6. Volver a reunirse en privado para llenar la caja con los restos y guardar el libro en una biblioteca pública".

SON PERSONAS LAS QUE BUSCAN A OTRAS PERSONAS  
 el ser humano extra en escena  
 las interferencias de la vida  
 ADAPTILO  
 las similitudes  
 las diferencias  
 VENGO  
 de desprendido  
 de asmas  
 N SENTIDO  
 PACION  
 prometiendo  
 falta  
 cosas  
 esta  
 desea  
 los  
 razones

Figure 4 – *Cabezas rascan paredes*. Picture: Michael L. Darough.

In fact, this object-book proposes self-destruction in its back cover:

ACTION 1. Go with the poems to a pacific riot. 2. Open the matchbox and share the matches with trustworthy people (be careful with undercover agents). 3. Indicate to the protesters that they have the possibility to change the content of the poem as they wish. 4. Light all matches at the same time before the police charge against you (avoid hits at all costs). 5. Read the poems while running, or once safe. 6. Meet again in private to fill the box with the remains of the matches and keep the book in a public library.<sup>53</sup>

This performance, which includes public reading, goes beyond the limits of the object by creating an event where active participation of readers is required: the process has as much interest as the result. On the other hand, it refers to ephemeral art since it is a work conceived not to last in time but designed with a transitory nature. The burning of matches would make the book disappear in a matter of seconds. Writing on matches allows a simple act such as lighting a match to become a performance.

54. In *Universal History of Book Destruction*, Fernando Báez (2004) offers a fascinating history of biblioclasts and bibliokleptomaniac practices, prohibited books and censored books over the centuries in very different cultural contexts. A more specific work on the same issue is *Burning Books... What a Strange Pleasure!* by Francisco Gimeno Blay (2001).

55. Pennac (1993, p. 159).

56. Fernández Peláez, op. cit. In the original: "este poema sin cabeza/ es/ un pensamiento en blanco/ es".

57. *Ibid.*

Further, the destruction of the book links *Heads Scratching Walls* with the history of the destruction of books committed throughout history when burning books pursued the destruction of knowledge, memory, and of the individual.<sup>54</sup> The ACTION talks about vigilant police in points 2 and 4 and, therefore, of state control. This idea makes us think about the burning of books carried out by the Spanish Inquisition, or more recently by the Nazis in Germany to prevent "textually transmitted diseases."<sup>55</sup> In fiction, well-known examples include the famous scrutiny in the first part of *Don Quixote*, or to cite more recent instances: *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury or *1984* by George Orwell. In spite of the originality of the format, the possibilities of *Heads Scratching Walls* can be framed within specific historical practices and literary contexts that sometimes are more associated with the object that transmits the text and its uses than with its textual content. The history of the object is a useful itinerary for the analysis of object-books.

The fact that there is no pagination forces the reader to pick the matches up randomly and read them out of sequence since there is no organization of any kind within the matchbox. The match itself also proposes problems for the reader, since each one can be read in different order. On the other hand, the materiality of the object offers new creative possibilities for the writer. For instance, we find a headless match with the following text:

this poem without head/a blank thought  
is/oris  
a blank thought/this poem without head  
isis<sup>56</sup>

There are two matches joined together with white sticky paper (see Figure 4). On one side of the paper is written the word "passion", on the other "condemnation", both richly connoted if thought of in relation to fire: passion and fire, condemnation and fire. Poetical ideas are also part of this self-destructive object-book. There are matches with poetic multiplications with wrong, but also poetic results, since there is a play of alliterations between the wrong and right result:

2x5= dios [diez] / 2x4= noche [ocho] / 2x3= sexo [seis] / 2x2= cuadro [cuatro]  
2x5= god [ten] / 2x4= night [eight] / 2x3= sex [six] / 2x2= picture [four]<sup>57</sup>

But, does the result of the operation matter when the final destination is to be burnt? The playful nature of *Heads Scratching Walls* is clear.

There are metapoetic references like: “~~This poem is better crossed out~~ / to learn / to be / poem”,<sup>58</sup> and even some appeals to the reader: “DECLARATION OF FRIENDSHIP / please burn me up / give me an ember in your lips / a hug of coals”,<sup>59</sup> where there is a clear pun between *abrásame* (burn me) and *abrázame* (hug me) in Spanish, the meaning of these verses is emphasized by the fact that they are written on a match. The text is clearly referring to the material that conveys it in a kind of metaobjectual allusion. Through this verse, the object asks to be used, the match asks to be lit. This is another example of how materiality determines the interpretation of the text, a reading that would not be possible if the text was offered in a codex format.

There are matches with romantic verses that bring playful relations between words and syllables: “Love heals everything / MADNESS / love all love / everything heals love”.<sup>60</sup> In these verses there is an original anadiplosis between *lo cura* –it heals it– and *locura* –madness– followed by an epanadiplosis with *el amor* –love. The easy manipulation of matches affords the possibility that by joining different matches new poems may arise, these combinations of matches and verses would produce endless poetic sequences. It is also interesting to note that since the match is produced to be lit, this book would correspond to a variety of *ephemeral* writings.<sup>61</sup> As the object itself attests, it is not made to last in time, but to disappear.<sup>62</sup>

Surprisingly, the matchbox seems to be a preferred object for many writers and poets in Latin America. There is a yet unwritten history of these objects in relation to literature. This kind of pyromaniac literature has several followers. Among them, I will highlight *Phosphoros*, by the Brazilian artist and writer Elida Tessler.<sup>63</sup> This specific work is based on all books that were burnt in *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury. *Phosphoros* consists of 122 matchsticks where the title of the books and their authors in Bradbury’s novel are inscribed in matchsticks. It is also worth mentioning the Brazilian writer Samir Mesquita’s *Dois palitos / Two Matchsticks* (see Figure 5), an object-book with 50 mini short stories.<sup>64</sup> In his webpage, Mesquita offers the possibility of reading these mini short stories with the same time it takes to burn a match.<sup>65</sup>

58. *Ibid.* In the original: “Este poema mejor tacharlo / para que aprenda / a ser / poema”.

59. *Ibid.* In the original: “DECLARACIÓN DE AMISTAD / abrásame por favor / dame un rescoldo en tus labios / y un apretón de ascuas”.

60. *Ibid.* “El amor todo lo cura / LOCURA / el amor todo el amor / todo lo cura el amor”.

61. Cardona (1999, p. 52).

62. In relation to this idea, Simón Marchán Fiz (*op. cit.*, p. 12) proposes to relate obsolescence and art as follows: “From the perspective of productive relationships, I suggest that obsolescence, as a specific psychological category, affects the artistic sphere. In today’s societies, artistic work, like other products, will be of a provisional originality, condemned to a rapid and incessant consumption that enhances the exploration of the new, preferably formal, but not of contents. Artistic psychological obsolescence, then, is hardly comprehensible detached from *planned obsolescence*, which affects current relations of production. The interests of the market in a society, where the work has progressively lost the values in use in favor of the pure exchange value, impose the need for incessant artistic innovations, similar to fashion phenomena”.

63. Cf. Tessler (2014).

64. “*Two Matchsticks* contains 50 mini short stories, made up to 50 letters (not counting title and punctuation), perfect for transporting anywhere” (Mesquita, 2007).

65. Available from: <<https://bit.ly/315jJVG>>. Access on: Mar. 15, 2020.





Figure 5 – *Dois palitos*. Picture: Samir Mesquita.

I finally want to mention the *Hai-kaixa* (see Figure 6) by Marcelo Dolabela, a small matchbox that contains one hundred haikais:<sup>66</sup>



Figure 6 – *Hai Kaixa*. Picture: Michael L. Darough.

## EXPOSED WRITINGS: HOUSE-BOOK AND TEXTS IN THE CITY

The last sample I want to analyze is an extreme denial of the codex book, a house-book in Havana, Cuba. This book is unique and unrepeatable, in this case the place of publication has never been more important if someone wants to read it since we deal here with an actual house. The text tells the story of three generations about the author's family who lived in the house for decades. It is not common at all to find narrative works out of the codex format; in fact, narrative has been much more dependent on the codex format than poetry. Manuel Martínez Pérez, author of this house-book, wrote his family story in the internal walls of the family house, where he actually lives surrounded by his own writing. All rooms and walls have been written to complete the story that was first written in regular paper.<sup>67</sup> The concept of exposed writings was created by the Italian paleographer Armando Petrucci and it is very useful to analyze this work. Petrucci defined *exposed writings* as:

Any type of writing designed to be used in open or closed spaces, which allows a plural (in-group, massive) reading, from a distance, of a text written on an exposed surface. As a result, a necessary condition for its use to be effective is that exposed writing needs to be sufficiently large, and to present the message it carries in an evident and clear (verbal and/ or visual).<sup>68</sup>

In the case of the house-book (see Figures 7, 8, 9 and 10), the reader does not manipulate the written object, here the reader is both literally surrounded by text and in transit within the space depicted in the narrative, the actual spaces where the characters lived. This literary creation is at a crossroad of several fields: architecture, literature, visual arts, anthropology of writing, etc. But, again, there are uncertainties on what steps to follow in the reading process within the house:<sup>69</sup> how to read this book?

In order to read the story, the reader is going to be part of an involuntary performance. There is a challenge to the act of comfortable reading, now the reader is a puppet-like in the hands of writing. The reader in movement will read the texts in the walls, but she/he will also walk in the spaces once dwelled by the characters of the story. At the same time, the reader finds in the walls old and new photographs of the characters and even random objects that are sometimes part of the story. The spatial position of writing and reader is very innovative in this creation. We can link this writing to graffiti art, but there are obvious differences since most of the text is not in sight for passers-by who would not been able to read it. Readers need to walk within the house in order to read this narrative.

67. On public writing, see Petrucci (1993).

68. Id., 1986, p. xx. English translation in Castillo Gómez (2020, p. 58).

69. For writing practices in domestic spaces in early modern Europe, see Castillo Gómez (op. cit., p. 59-62).

70. Available from: <<https://bit.ly/34b1XCA>>. Access on: Mar. 16, 2020.

71. On the process of creation of Boa Mistura see Serano Guerra et al. (2018).

72. Boa Mistura (2012). São Paulo seems to be an open book as city, not just for the art of graffiti in its streets and avenues, but also for the abundant *pichação* / *pixação* or “wall writings” all over the city. For an analysis on *pichação* in São Paulo as exposed writing, see Pereira (2010, 2016).



Figure 7 – House-Book. Picture: Manuel Martínez.

To finish, I would like to analyze briefly a very original example in relation to writing and the poetization of urban space. It is the work made by a group of artists called Boa Mistura –Good Mix– from Madrid, Spain. They have worked together since 2001 and their motto is “Art as a tool for change”. This group has poetized the degraded and polluted urban spaces usually in big cities all over the world including Latin America and Spain, where they started informally their work as graffiti artists. Writing is one of the elements that Boa Mistura uses in order to create that possibility of change. On their webpage,<sup>70</sup> Boa Mistura asserts that, “We understand our work as a tool to transform the street and to create bonds between people. We feel a responsibility for the city and time we are living in”.<sup>71</sup> The pictures –Figures 11, 12, 13– are from 2012 when Boa Mistura made several urban interventions called *Luz nas vielas* –Light in the Alleyways– in the slum of Brasilândia, in São Paulo, Brazil.<sup>72</sup> The group was hosted by several families in the slum, having in this way direct contact with the people of that community and their concerns. Since the purpose was to modify rundown communities using painting and writing as tools for change and inspiration, there is a clear communicative function of these graffiti:



After preliminary studies and analysis, the defined framework are the narrow and winding streets that connects the urban net, known as *vielas* and *becos*. The dialogue with residents and their active participation has been decisive for the Project. BELEZA [beauty], FIRMEZA [strength], AMOR [love], DOÇURA [sweetness] and ORGULHO [pride] are the concepts chosen by the collective for the interventions.<sup>73</sup>

73. For a short documentary on this project, see: <<https://bit.ly/2Yf5OuC>>. Access on: Mar. 28, 2020.



Figure 8 – House-Book. Picture: Manuel Martínez.

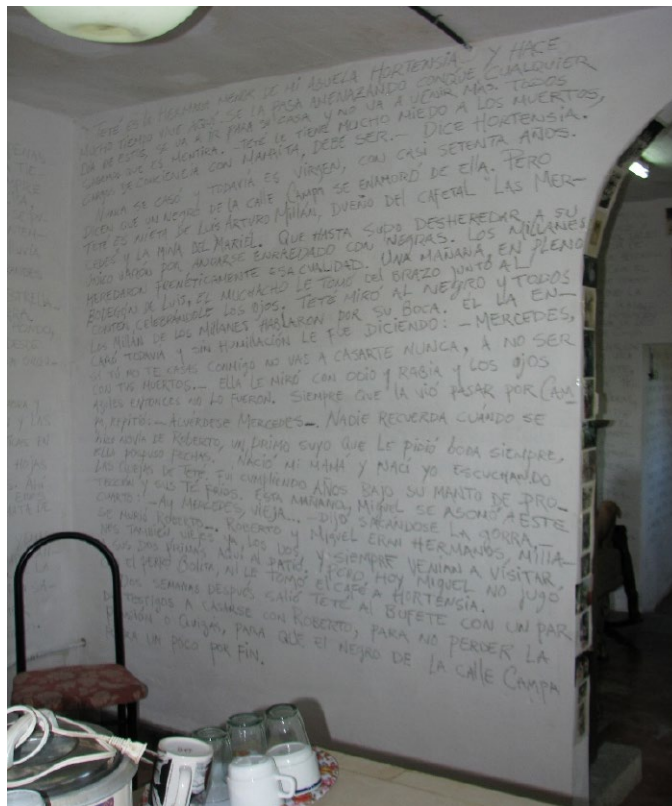


Figure 9 – Kitchen. Picture: Manuel Martínez.

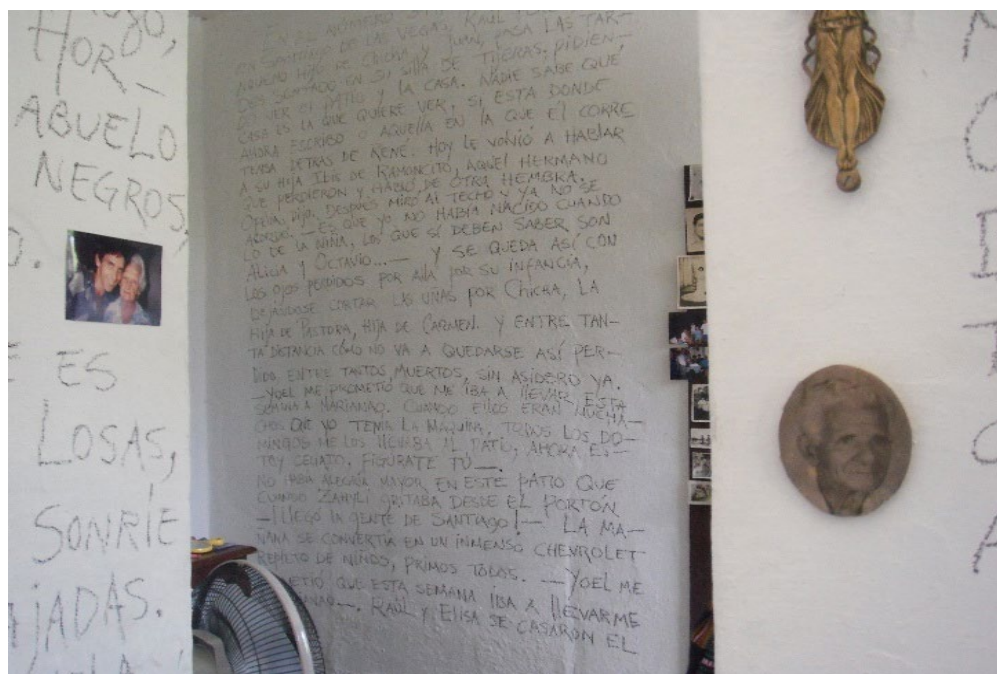


Figure 10 – Corridor. Picture: Manuel Martínez.





Figure 11 – *Beleza / Beauty*. Picture: Boa Mistura.

It is meaningful that for the interventions, the members of the community, stigmatized with misery, distress, violence and drugs, chose democratically to print on walls words like “beauty”, “persistence”, “love”, “sweetness”, and “pride”, all of them full of positive connotations.<sup>74</sup> These are meaningful concepts for dwellers that represent their hopes and dreams, these public writings openly question the stigma that these communities face. The interventions were made in busy alleyways of the neighborhood, the words in the walls will be read but the intention is that oral interaction among passers-by will bring those topics –beauty, sweetness, poetry, love, etc.– to regular conversations. Readers will be surprised to find themselves walking through those art interventions. The permanence of those words in the walls of the alleys remember inhabitants and visitors that the meaning of those words also dwells those spaces that they transit. As aforementioned, Roger Chartier<sup>75</sup> supports the idea that sometimes just

74. Following Armando Petrucci, Antonio Castillo Gómez (op. cit.) has recently analyzed public writing in Early Modern Europe. My analysis of this intervention by Boa Mistura is guided by both Petrucci (1986, 1993) and Castillo Gómez (op. cit.).

75. Cf. Chartier (2013).

the intentionality of binding different parts together could be a book, perhaps these alleyways are binding a book that Boa Mistura just only started to write. Further, Boa Mistura explores here a social function and use of writing when they gathered together many members of the community to intervene those spaces.

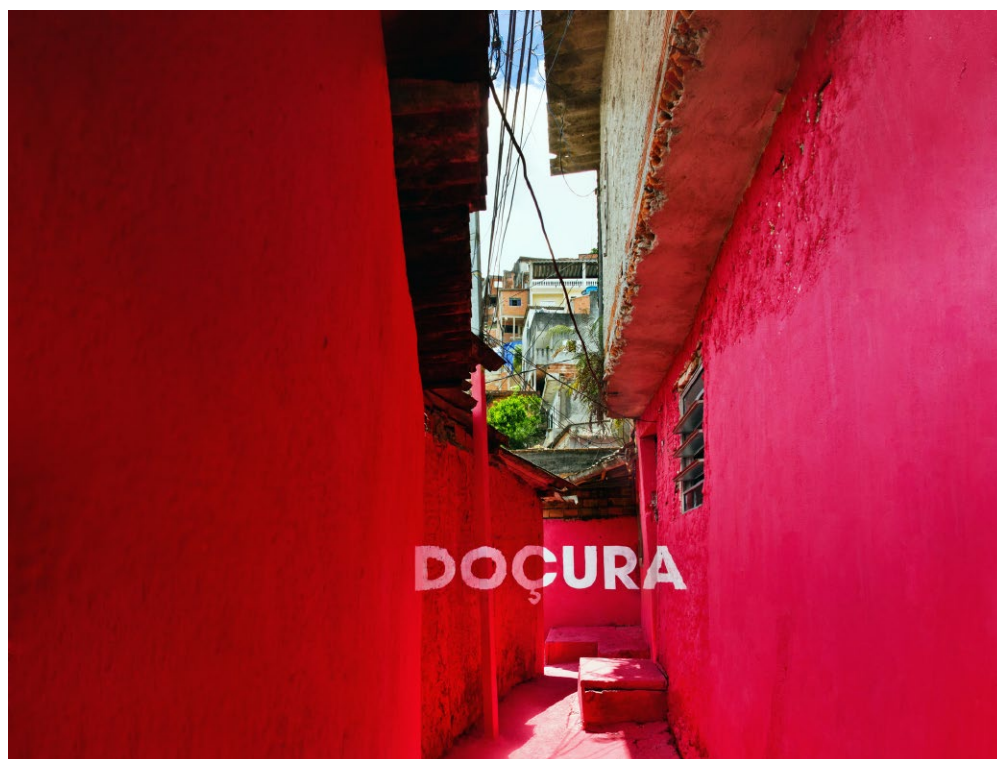


Figure 12 – *Doçura/ Sweetness*. Picture: Boa Mistura.

To draw these meaningful words in the walls of the space where they live is also an attempt to create a better atmosphere in the daily lives of the inhabitants with the hope that the essential values that those words represent –beauty, strength, love, sweetness, pride– would come true and be permanent in the community. The written words on those walls constantly will remind the inhabitants of the slum of the possibility of a change for the better.

Figures 11, 12 and 13 show writing activities that take place in the urban scenario. These large size graffiti are painted with a clear design and a well-thought size and perspective. There is also the intention of permanence, passers-by will repeatedly read them again and again, interacting with the written walls as part of their daily routines. Eventually, the community will decide if they keep those interventions and the public exposure of those words, or just let them disappear over the years.



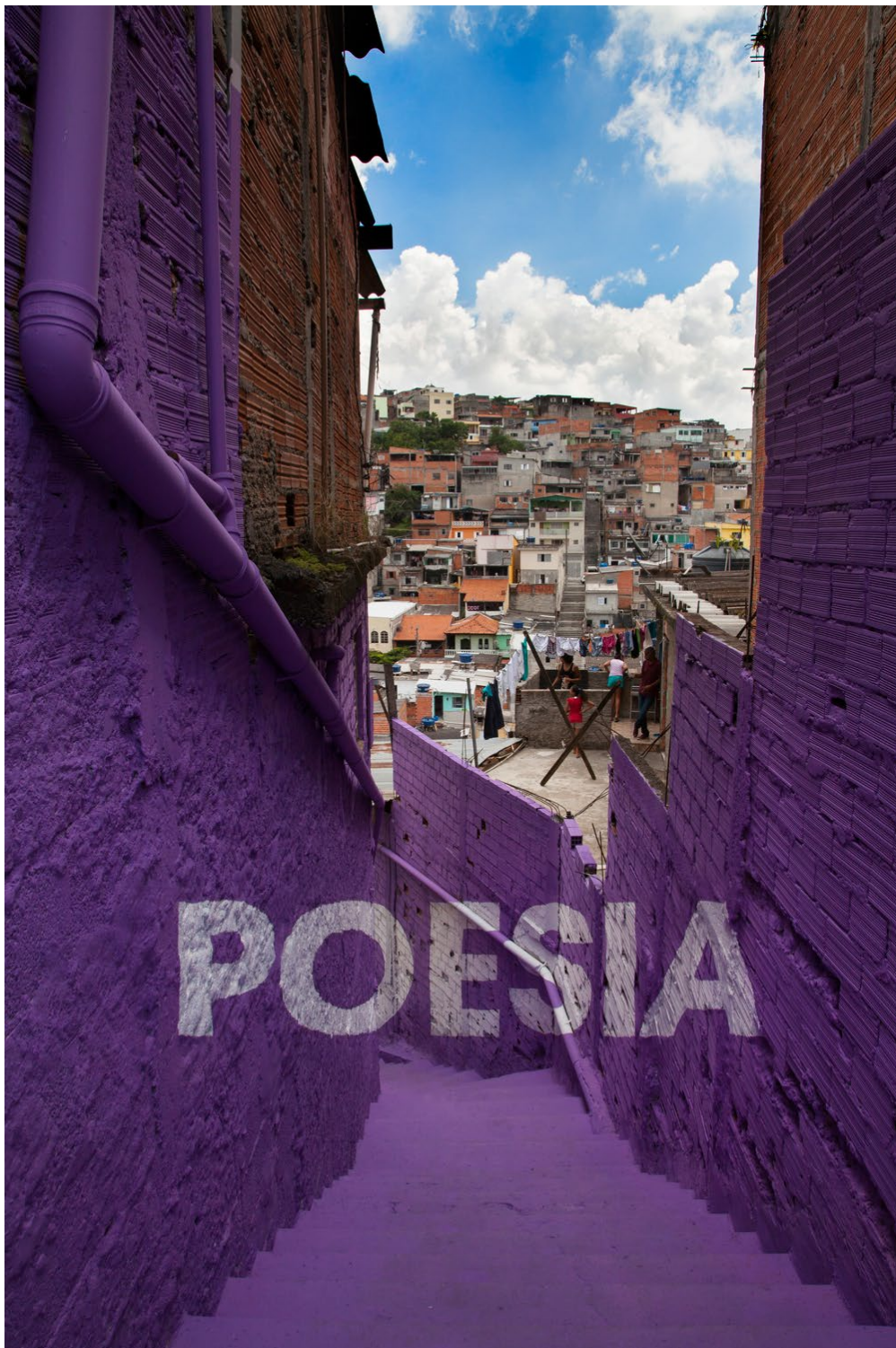


Figure 13 – *Poesia/ Poetry*. Picture: Boa Mistura.



76. Id. (1995, 2013).

77. Cf. Petrucci (1993).

## CONCLUSION

In this essay I analyzed new ways of literary transmission edited in formats other than the codex. Taking as departing point an open understanding of the concept of book by Roger Chartier<sup>76</sup> as well as some important concepts such as exposed writing by Armando Petrucci<sup>77</sup> (1993), I dealt with several object-books to offer a detailed analysis of literary texts edited in non-codex supports. This essay proposed a clear distinction between book-object and object-book, and a strong vindication of including these original materialities of literature into the field of literary studies, an area that has omitted non-codex formats considering them literary diversions. In my analysis, I have shown how the objects and the new material supports that convey literature to readers are enhancing surprising connotations and new interpretations of the text that they transmit.

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