

Mariana Castillo Deball interviewed by Johan Deumens and Karen Cheung
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JD: Johan Deumens

M: Mariana Castillo Deball

K: Karen Cheung

JD: I have chosen Penser/Classer as one of the books I want to look at in more detail. I want to find out what kind of book it is and how it relates to your work. To begin with, you're here and you have brought a lot of books with you. I think it is fair to say that the book is an important medium for you. Could you tell me how you started working with artist's books or books in general?

M: I worked a lot with scientists and I studied philosophy. So, one of my first approaches to art is the way you build sequences, discourses, or view small systems. In that sense, I really like the structure of books, that is to say, as a kind of small system you can play with. For example, you can read in a normal sequence, or you can jump from one page to the next. And I like books as examples of how you organize the world - you have dictionaries, yellow pages, classifications, compilations; in a way, all knowledge is stored in books and I am obsessed with how classifications work and how different orders are mixed together. That's how I began playing with the idea and I started with my own classification and my own way of ordering things. Like the first small collection of books that I did. I followed all the objects and all the rooms in my house for two years; I took photographs of the kitchen and the bedroom and the toilet and the bed, and of the fridge, every time I opened it. It's like a kind of examination of my own relation to the object and how much the object is a wild thing to me: suddenly you lose something and then find it again and suddenly the space becomes a mess and you cannot control it.

JD: When I first met you here, I found that you had a strong affinity with the work of Ulises Carrión and that you had been involved in making a retrospective of his work. Is this something you already did in Mexico, before you came here, or did you make it during your time at the Jan van Eyck?

M: No, I did that before I came here. In fact, that was one of the main reasons I applied to this place. I knew Felipe Ehrenburg and Martha Hellion and Jan Hendrix who were all here in the 70's and they all knew Ulises. I worked three years with them on the retrospective of his work. Then I realized that this place still existed, and I was curious about the fact that there were still people working the same way. It had the same atmosphere, not related to artist productions but to the obsession of working in groups and making collective projects, like this magazine. And that was what I liked.

JD: I would think that doing the retrospective on Ulises also brought you into contact with his books and his mail art. His mail art is also an important part of his archive. I actually had the pleasure of seeing it - I met Ulises Carrion in 1984 and he had an archive in a flat in Amsterdam. It was all stored in boxes. He was a bit of a sad person, because archiving was not the aspiration of his life. On the other hand, it was very central to initiating the project on mail art and his book project. You get so many things coming at you, which you are not able to answer. So you have to collect them, because you do not wish to throw them away. And you start putting them in boxes. Then, of course, it turns out he is a very ordered person, making classifications of how to organize all of this and this grew into books and other stuff, all classified in the archive of "Other Books & so". So, classification is a recurring issue. You can also see it in this catalogue of an exhibition in Groningen, which was dedicated to Ulises. He made a series of books using existing landscape paintings which were damaged and - probably for that reason - thrown away. He cut them into square pieces to make them interesting again, since these paintings were quite boring. By cutting them into pages, and by going through the pages, you have to construct your own idea of the painting in your mind instead of seeing the painting before you in its entirety. And it was much more interesting to go through the pages than to have the paintings themselves. The theme of this exhibition in Groningen was archiving and creating adventures. Which is in fact one of the main rationales behind artist's books. As you said, the book as such is very suitable to making your own classifications or to organize a collection. Now, you just told us that you started archiving by making registrations of your daily life. How did this continue into the art world, so to speak?

M: When I did the project, it was already part of my idea.

JD: You made a project of 24 books in the Invisible Collection. How did you start working on that?

M: I started the project here. I did not have any idea beforehand that I would do it until I was here. It was part of a bigger project I was working on - the Estocastic Archive. It was a show but it was also a big project about different ways of organizing information for newspapers, dictionaries, magazines and books. It was about how you reuse design and how information is displayed and also about how, sometimes, art world becomes a parasite of all the ways of organizing information.

In the section on the books - the Invisible Collection - I started like this: I took 10 books referring to different characters of writers who were really obsessed with ordering the world. It is about the possibilities and impossibilities of doing so.

JD: And George Perec was one of the most important ones?

M: No, he was not the most important one. But I was inspired by one book George Perec did, his *Penser/Classer*, and I took one text called 'How I organize the things that are on my working table'. So, this book is like a comment on that text and I displayed many photographs, taken over the years, of how I organize things on my working table. For each of the books in the Invisible Collection, I used the same format and the same number of pages and then I added my insertions. Sometimes they yield the rest of the book, like here, but other ones are almost empty. You have a couple of pages with image, or text or some information.

JD: What is this about the information being emptied? Is it quantity? What is it?

M: For me reading is very much to do with how you flip through the pages and suddenly something jumps at you, which surprises you and you read it. But if you want to find it again, it can be quite difficult.

JD: So, it represents a kind of highlighting.

M: No, it is more like a kind of playing with the idea.

JD: But you can also say that you can highlight things by leaving out the rest, some pages.

M: Yes, like in the other books, there are quite a few which are almost empty, or books which are interrupted. They start on page 147 and finish on page 162. And usually they don't have a cover. So, they are interrupted books and you don't know if they are just fall-out from other books or compilations of the other book.

JD: For a French-speaking person, it is quite clear that this may be the key to the work, because *Penser/Classer* is George Perec's title. But for somebody from China, it is just your title.

M: Yes, I showed the book to a friend of mine in New York, who had not seen it before, and she said: 'Wow, the other day I was in the book shop in the philosophy section and suddenly I saw this book. I had been looking for this book for ages, I looked in Paris and I could not get it because it was sold out. So, I thought, wow, finally! And I took it out and then I started going through it and thought 'What's this? It's nice but who did it?' She could not find the author's name. In the end she bought it because she was curious about what that was.

JD: She bought your book?

M: Yes, but just because it happened to be in the wrong place. Even the people in the book shop did not really know where to put it. They did not know what to do with it.

JD: I would just like to refer to another book, by Joseph Bartscherer. He is a New York based photographer. He collected everyone whose death had been reported on the front page of the New York Times. To appear on the front page is quite rare, even if it is on the occasion of your death. He collected front-page obituaries of the New York Times for 10 years, from 1990 to 2000, which amounted to a total number of 288 obituaries. Then he made a book called 'Eva Gardner Dies', showing all the photographs from obituaries on the front page. Within this collection of 288 obituaries, there are 18 without photographs, so there are blank pages in the book. In those cases, the only information you get is the absence of the portrait of the person who died. Even people in China or Europe may have heard of Eva Gardner, because she was an actress and one of the wives of Frank Sinatra, I believe. So, that may be a key. If you go through the book, you see Marlene Dietrich, you see Nixon, you see quite a lot of American based well-known people. I think the concept of the book is that these people are on the front page because they are so important; hence we don't need any classification of who they are. No names. That's the nature of the book. But if you show the book in Europe, most people probably do not know these celebrities

Going back to your book, I wonder if people also need some key to enjoy your book, to see what is in it, because there is much more in the book if you're aware of this Penser/Classer background than if you're not.

M: No, I think it is not the key thing. It is important that it is one of the clues. When I do my work, I never believe that there is one secret clue that will give you the answer to the rest. I never play this game of secret messages. Often I include too much information; you may even get more confused if too many things are displayed. Then, because of the small secrets, if you look under the table, you will find ... the whole meaning of the situation.

JD: I'm not suggesting that you are hiding something. It is about the information which is in the book. The question is more: 'How will the book be experienced by people who know this and how by those who don't?' I thought the title already inviting before I knew about the Percec background. When I went through it for the first time, I thought 'this is my key to the book.' It is about a kind of activity you have to do or are doing. It could be enough.

M: Especially with this one, I didn't plan to do it. I am always taking pictures of everything I do. I am really obsessed with taking pictures all the time, I photograph everything. In the end, I remembered the text and then I said to myself: 'maybe I have some pictures of my table, but I'm not sure'. I needed to go through my archive for one year. So I didn't plan it at the start. I did not systematically take pictures of my table. I really needed to look in my archive to try and find those pictures. What you see here is some points in between projects. In some ways, that is why I decided to print it because it's a name index of my work. See here, there is a photograph of a girl. You never get to know what was really happening. And looking at this you know that she was reading this book... and then there is this card game... maybe she was planning to do something, but in the end she did not do it. There are a lot of things I actually finished and some other things were just experiments on the table.

JD: But you can find this line because of the relationship between the pages, between what you had been doing. So, the jigsaw is coming back again and again. In other words, there are a number of main themes in your book.

M: Yes, for example, these pencils are the first experiment in another piece I did afterwards. These are the glasses that a friend forgot in my studio. These are the photographs I never used but always have in mind. And also this was the exhibition I always wanted to do but never did.

JD: At the end of the book, there is a table of content, in which you use the Percec book. What is it? Is this also the Table of Content in the Percec book?

M: It is the real index of the Percec book. But I just erased all other texts and only left the Percec text that I was talking about.

JD: Yes, I know. But this is not the Percec text.

M: Yes, it is.

JD: It is? That's nice.

K: That is the chapter you got the idea for this book from.

M: Yes, that is the text that I like a lot and wanted to make some sort of comment on. He is doing more or less the same. He was talking about his table and one day he's sharpening the pencils.

JD: Yes, I got that. But I didn't know it was in the contents.

M: That is why I erased the rest of the pages.

K: When I was looking through the book, I got the idea that there must be some sort of guideline for ordering all the things you follow. You said you were inspired by George Percec's book. So there is a connection between his way of ordering things and your way of ordering things. I was wondering what the guideline is for the way you order your things in your book. Before, Johan told me about the name of the book, which told me a bit more about it. I was wondering how you relate your way of connecting things to your reader or audience. There is this previous way of ordering things, and you have your own way, and finally, you show it to the

public. Did you have anything in mind when you made your work, in terms of how your work would inspire your audience?

M: I don't think I get inspired by what I read. It is more like a kind of conversation. I don't think I order my things in the way that Percec talks about his table. He is far more organized; for instance, he said he has a big ashtray because he smokes a lot and he was always sharpening his pencil; things I never did. However, there is one thing he is always pointing out which I really share with him: he is obsessed with all the various ways of organising the world which are constantly changing. He can never stick to one way of ordering things. He always has to change it again and to put things in new places and he makes a mess and needs to throw a party and he's using the same space. I'm more obsessed with this kind of crazy narrative of changing the order of things. So, I can get inspired by newspapers, or by how people put up messages on the notice board in the supermarket, trying to find someone who would buy the chair in their house. There are many ways of displaying this information. I really like how they sometimes just self-emerge. They don't depend on a very conscious system of ordering things.

K: So, it is not the system that interests you, but the instances in life...

M: No, I am obsessed by systems, but I really like how they change and how you can play with them. I am not a scientist. I am not someone who makes an ethnology of ordering things. It's more about...

K: Exception from systems...

M: Every system has an exception. You can never find a perfect system.

JD: I'd now like to talk about some details of the production of the book. You made the book by yourself. Do you want to have a kind of independency in producing books? This one has been published here. I think the way you are working is almost like a monk, producing books without being dependent on anyone in making them, bringing them to the world by yourself. Is producing by yourself important to you? Or is it just a question of not being able to find a publisher who would do it for you?

M: Well, .. in the...

JD: It is also related to the fact that most of your books are in black and white. It refers to the world of photocopying in which they are made; it is an easy way to make books, instead of using colour photographs.

M: I don't consider myself a monk at all. I don't make books as precious objects. And I believe there are many ways....

JD: No, that's not what I meant. I was talking more about the solitary way of working.

M: I mean that maybe... I don't think so. For example, in Mexico, where I'm from, photocopy machines are like....well, everybody uses them and everybody produces whatever they want. And it is very cheap to distribute or to share what you are doing with others. So, if I use photocopying it is not because I am a lonely worker, but because it is easier to show my work to people and to make this subject visible.

JD: Yes, that's what I meant with the independency...you can do what you want.

M: Otherwise you have to wait to have enough money to send it to the printer's.

JD: Yes, that's what I meant.

M: Many of them are books that I like but I would never make into art. It is a kind of experiment to see whether an idea works or doesn't work. What I like about photocopying is that you can stop the edition or you can make more, or you can throw it in the bin and you won't feel guilty.

JD: That is also the focus I would like to give it: the independency of saying 'I will make an edition of three, but maybe I will change it again and make a new edition out of it.' It is related to what is happening in mail art. Somebody is sending somebody else a work and he will recycle or change it and send it to another person instead of returning it to the same person. Maybe in the end, somebody will get the work back as an assemblage or collage in a completely different context. So I can imagine the way you are interested in systems

where your book may be published several times in several kinds of editions which are altered again. It may be possible too.

M: Yes, maybe... If I need them for a large audience, I will do it.

JD: Who is your audience? Do you share what you are doing? Who are the people whom you would like to share your projects with? To publish means bringing something to the public. So, what kind of public do you have in mind? If you publish something, at some point you make a decision to make copies of it, which means you want to distribute it.

M: I am not so specific about the kind of audience I would like. I just know that I wouldn't like to have art critics, people who are obsessed with my work. I would like to have writers or scientists as my audience, many different people being able to read my work and not just people who are related to the world of art, the context of art.

JD: Yes, you would like different kinds of disciplines. This is also an aim of this project, to have a plural discourse on your book or on the books we chose, in order to see how people from other disciplines will experience the books we chose.

Going back to the Invisible Collection. This is the only one you have singled out for an edition of 500 copies, to open it up to a larger public. Why this one?

M: Just because of what I said before: it's a kind of index of many things I did.

JD: So, it is important to you. When I show the Invisible Collection to people, there are some books in this collection which are very attractive and which are quite open to an idea of what is going on. And this here is a much more hermetic book; you have to work on it to get a grip on what is going on. I like that you have chosen this one. I just want to know if you had a particular reason for choosing this one.

M: Not really, but I think it's the only one that works on its own. With the other ones, I have the feeling that you need to see all the 25 books together to get the idea. And with this one, you can take it away and it still works on its own.

JD: Are you speaking about a kind of dependency in the books? Because I once talked to someone who had dedicated his works to kingfishers; the strongest aspect of his work is his entire body of works, as a complete set of books. Some books cannot survive, so to speak, when they are taken away from their context. This may also be what you are doing - building up a kind of interrelationship between the books, which makes it necessary to show them as a whole and not as different, single books.

M: In the case of this specific piece, I decided to do it like that - like a small collection. It is not something I will repeat in other works. I don't know... Some things will work on their own and others need a context of other pieces.... But I'm not already envisaging the collection I will be building in the course of my entire life. I am not that organized.

JD: Or you always want to change your way of classification.

M: It would be very boring if there was something I needed to follow all my life.

JD: I know at home they get rather confused when I say I'm going to make a kind of soup and it is always slightly different, because I do not wish to do the recipe the same way all the time. But they don't like it. They like to know what they get. But I could make a book on the different ways of making pumpkin soup. Maybe that's also my problem in classification.

MM: In a sense, is your work also a kind of comment on people who do believe in the finality of systems, like scientists or...?

M: Yes, but, I don't know, some of my best friends are scientists, but they do not think like that, you know. Sometimes they are more open than artists. Artists can be more dogmatic than scientists.

MM: You mentioned, for instance, the artists' obsession of re-ordering things. Would you like the two worlds to be more connected, or to be more open to each other?

M: Yes, I would like that. One of the main obsessions in my work is how to connect different people working on different levels or in different fields. So, it's something I would really like to see: that you are open, or you have an object and you know to which discipline it belongs: it could be a science manual or a magazine, or ...

MM: Do you think art has the power to change that?

M: To change what, like, the order of, or what?

MM: To make people realize that they are thinking within a discipline.

M: Yes, maybe if art has some use in the world, that is one of its uses: that it can slightly change how you are used to seeing things.

JD: Going back to the history of artist's books. You see (that) quite a lot of people have been working with the same affinity, for instance, Herman de Vries is one of them. Well, there's also quite a few women who have been involved in artist's books, but mostly only the men get mentioned. But, lately, I've been coming across various people who are in this field of interest. One of them is David Bunn. This book "Subliminal Messages" has recently been published. Bunn has been using discarded card catalogues of the Central Library in Los Angeles. Notes, stains and marks on these cards has been collected in this book. He has been scanning these "signs" and made blow-ups, revealing uncanny connections between these signs and the card texts. It is not the kind of book that one might expect from you, but it has some parallels with observations and themes in your work. Especially the way you are observing traces of readers, added to books after these have been read. Bunn concentrates on information which is on library cards, which is exposed here in a very obvious way.

M: They still use this kind of card in almost every library, right?

JD: Not anymore, I think. In fact, it's quite old-fashioned. So, he made blow-ups of all these details on discarded cards, to make them obvious, suggesting aspects of the subconscious and occult features. He also made a classification of this kind of information. Which leads me to your most recent project, which also took place in libraries, in which you were assisted by people from different disciplines, like writers, who wrote texts for you. These texts were deliberately put into books in the libraries. How did that work? You have now been to the three main libraries in New York, Berlin and Paris. How did it work to continue with this project? What have been your observations? How did you come to something which is open to the public, in this project?

M: Well, it is a project called 'The Interlude' - it's about traces left by readers and it was based on the idea that when you go to a public library, many people have read the same copy before you. Sometimes you'll come across traces, like a train ticket someone inserted, or notes, something that can reveal small details about the person who read the book. I wanted to make a collection of fake reader traces, to make a large-scale edition of fake reader traces and to distribute them in many different copies of the same book in different libraries. So, I worked with different people like writers, philosophers, curators, artists.

JD: Did you choose the books involved?

M: No, I didn't choose any books. I just chose the people I wanted to work with. And I told them that they needed to make a kind of nomad text or a text, or an action, or a photograph, whatever they wanted. And they also had to plan a strategy of how they wanted me to distribute these or to perform this action in the space of the libraries. So, some of the texts are very specific, and just for one particular book; others are random; or they have to be placed on the tables where people are working. So, in a way I am performing many different actions and act