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# New latin-american poetry : an interview with Clemente Padin by Cristina Freire.

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# New Latin-American Poetry

## (an interview with Clemente Padín by Cristina Freire)

MAC USP, São Paulo, April 2008

**Cristina Freire:** I would like you to tell me about your relationship with the Museu de Arte Contemporânea in São Paulo from the 1970s onwards.

**Clemente Padín:** In the 1960s I had been working with a form of art in action, an account of which was later in the book *De la Representación a la Acción* (From representation to action, 1973), where I tried to create a language of action, establish theories and rules of language usage. But until that time I had been unable to finish many works and felt somewhat limited, internationally speaking. It was precisely thanks to Walter Zanini's invitation to participate in the exhibition *Poéticas Visuais* (1977), and before that in *Prospectiva'74*, that I got the opportunity to accomplish everything that I had proposed in terms of art in action. What I was trying to establish was that an action itself would act as a trigger and generate more awareness in people as regards ideas inherent to this action. A bit like the relation that Saussure establishes between the signified and the signifier. We can see them both separately but they are, of course, indissoluble. In the case of my proposal, the signifier tried to be just what the signified awakened in people. There would be three stages: first the prologue, then the central act, and finally an afterthought.

**CF:** And how was your relationship to Walter Zanini?

**CP:** I was very attached to some Brazilian poets, especially the Rio de Janeiro group behind the poema/processo movement ...

**CF:** Who were they?

**CP:** Wlademir Dias-Pino, Neide Dias de Sá, Alvaro de Sá, Moacy Cirne. I was also working with them on brief actions, and we had a philosophical and topical affinity that made for a strong connection. I think that's how Walter Zanini got to know about my work. Maybe it was also due to *De la Representación a la Acción* that he got to know my ideas and perhaps became interested and invited me. For *Prospectiva'74* I sent a proposal for an urban intervention, parasiting itself onto an advertisement campaign in Uruguay. The advert was titled "Aesthetic Awareness Campaign", so I changed the title to "Political Awareness Campaign" (*Campanha de Sensibilização Política*). It became an intervention and that's what I presented in *Prospectiva'74*. For *Poéticas Visuais*, three years later, I was prevented from traveling due to a prison sentence, but fortunately Walter Zanini wrote me suggesting the possibility of sending a project that could be realized in the exhibition. This was the performance *O Artista está a Serviço da comunidade* ("The artist is in service of the community"), where I wanted to achieve what I had proposed in the theories of action art. Finally, it was the Basque-Brazilian artist Francisco Iñarra who executed the piece. Much later I received pictures and could see that he had done a really good job, and in 2002 at last I had the opportunity to meet and thank him. It was really a very emotional situation, an encounter with my past and all the traumas of that decade that was so disastrous, both for my country and for me. I was cloistered for seven years ... out of the loop for seven years. Speaking of Walter Zanini, I want to stress the importance of his discussions of conceptual art, which led to a breakthrough in every way, both in theoretical and spatial terms, for Brazilian and Latin American

artists. We should thank him for having opened the doors for these new fields of exploration.

**CF:** How do you understand poema/processo?

**CP:** I see it as a poetic trend derived from the trunk of 1956's concrete poetry. Concretism, as you know, became an international phenomenon, but in Brazil there were very particular characteristics that produced three different trends. There was the São Paulo group, which generated a kind of monopolized poetry with Décio Pignatari, the de Campos brothers and others, who centralized a constructivist, rational, unadorned poetry dominated by the Futura typeface. This poetry was a major breakthrough in the field of formal poetry, and monopolized poetic invention in Brazil for a very long time. Then there was also a trend that Ferreira Gullar called neo-concretism. He launched a manifesto titled *Teoria do não-objeto* (Theory of the non-object), published in a Sunday supplement to *Jornal do Brasil* in 1959. I think this manifesto is a historical document that needs to be studied very carefully with respect to Latin-American concretism. Gullar speaks of a phenomenological and subjective art without objects, where the poem is of a conceptual order. And why don't we rescue this practice as a Latin-American precedent? It is ours! And there are also others. Finally, the third trend of concretism is poema/processo, which appeared a little bit later, in 1967, following the ideas of Wlademir Dias-Pino, who was developing a spatial tendency, tending towards a poetry without words. Dias-Pino always said, "let's try to make a poetry without words, but without mentioning that we will not use the word". He took advantage of the latest trends in technology, such as video, at the dawn of the digital. And he produced many interventions, such as *O pão mais comprido do mundo* ("The longest bread in the world"), and other events that were closely linked to the poema/processo movement, which opposed the structuralist tendency of the Noigandres group in São Paulo. Because their poems were highly structured and constructivist, you couldn't change them, while in poema/processo the possibility of a new version was at the core.

**CF:** And how do you see the participation of poema/processo, visual poetry and poetry as a whole within conceptualism? We talk a lot about action and political action, and I would like you to define this field a little more.

**CP:** Poetry is only one; we can start there. Fundamentally, it is transmitted through the expressive possibility that language gives us, and almost 99% of what happens is transmitted through the ability of the verb to express things. I don't pull up a tree, bring it and put it in front of you. I simply say, "tree" and it's done. Benveniste brought this convention to us. But language has other dimensions beyond its verbal function; you can, for instance, see and hear the words. And you can receive them in other ways than through the air. New technologies allow us to "read" in a different way, not just in a book or from a sheet of paper. Among these other manifestations, the most important are visuality and sound, which can generate new expressive possibilities. A good design, a good diagram can often communicate better than a word. So visuality can be very important. For many centuries, from before Christ to Mallarmé, i.e. until the end of the nineteenth century, visuality was (in practice) at the service of verbosity. When it appeared in the poem, it was to reveal something of significance. Thus it seems that visuality remained in the background until Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés*, where visuality intervenes in a very active way in the discussion of the aesthetic information that the poet wishes to convey. If you take away any of the visual precision you will lose information. It is not the same thing with the illustrated poem or the *carmina figurata* or figure-poems, where there is no loss of information because the visual element was only working as an assisting element, reinforcing the meaning that was already given by the verb. But in *Un Coup de Dés* you can't excerpt the visual elements: the white of the page, the blank spaces, the font, the font size, uppercase and lowercase. So, starting with Mallarmé visual poetry acquires, in a way, a domain of its own. At a meeting in Paris last year [2007], during a festival of visual poetry, I could appreciate that the situation, with digital media, has become almost reversed, because now the verbal tends to serve the visual. Concrete poetry is a part of this space, where the visual becomes one of the expressive elements along with sound and the verbal.

CF: And how was visual poetry connected to mail art?

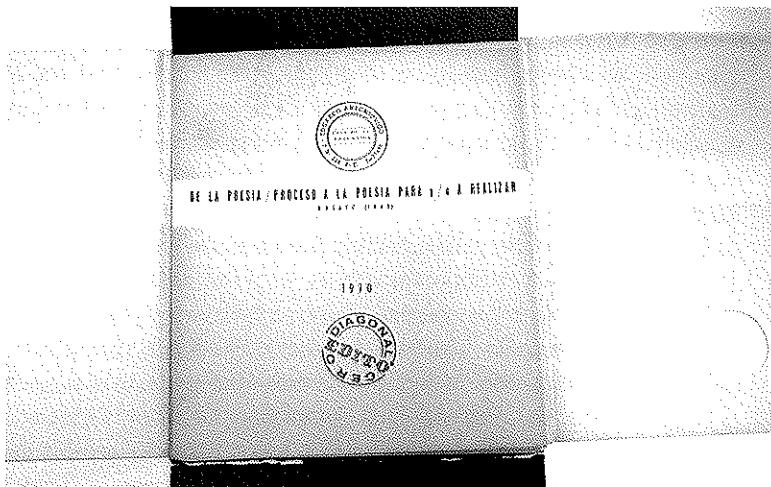
**CP:** Mail art is not a self-defined artistic movement, but rather a medium, and as such it admits works of any kind. You can send a photo, you can send a piece of music, you can send postcards, you can send graphical stuff, rubber stamps, and whatever you want, really. Even a visual poem ...

CF: And as strategy for freedom, how do you see it?

**CP:** There is a relationship because both visual poetry, as mail art and other genres are now in the hands of the producers. We are the first producers and have the power to control every step: preparation, execution, distribution. We can control even the archive and the files. It is precisely this feature that keeps us out of the art market, and many international institutions are fighting to seize these spaces. There is a shared interest between the performers, visual mail artists and poets, who are fighting for the same freedom, aiming to keep our art within our own control. Of course there are exceptions, confirming the rule. Nowadays when a mail artist dies, what does his or her family do with the archive? They sell it. And for this reason we must now struggle to create spaces like the one you have created here [referring to the research work of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea (MAC USP)], foundations or places where we can safeguard these archives, where the works and the testimonies of their networks can be kept alive. Because these works were not made and mailed to be sold. They were an act of communication, an act of friendship, which is why you can't ethically sell them. They don't belong to you; they belong to everyone.

CF: Could you tell us about the CIA and their control of artists in Latin America?

**CP:** In the 1960s we were living through the Cold War and so the Americans, in order to fight the Soviet Union on the cultural plane and to reduce the support of intellectuals – especially the Europeans, mainly from France, Sartre and all these people –, created a congress for freedom and culture that was funded by corporations, primarily the Ford Foundation, which practically acted as a Foreign Ministry of Culture of the United States based in all countries of the world. They caught the attention of the intelligentsia, especially the younger ones and invited them to travel to the US, financing projects, exhibitions, etc., etc. Of course when they won the Cold War this institute disappeared. But lately with all these movements being generated in Latin America, around their political ideas, this does not matter to the United States at all, because imperialism has always created divisions. *Divide et impera*, this is fundamental to them. If we join in a common cause things get very difficult for the United States. They don't want it in any way. And so they created a similar institution, but not for the entire world, only for Latin America, which is called the Hemispheric Institute. Also funded – what a coincidence! – by the Ford Foundation, which is present in major cities such as Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Lima. Using the same weapons as before, they are capturing the attention of the youth, their



desire to stand out from the crowd, and above all exploiting their lack of information. And every year they are sponsoring various festivals. Of course people like myself are not invited because they already know us well and we know how we would act. And finally I can say that in their zeal to capture the largest possible number of people, they put no limits to what is considered a performance. Now we don't know what it is, because virtually everything is a performance.

**CF:** Clemente, what was your relationship with Wlademir Dias-Pino?

**CP:** I got to know Wlademir Dias-Pino by exchanging publications. In Montevideo I published *Los Huevos del Plata* and then *OVUM 10*. In Rio de Janeiro the poema/processo movement published the magazine *Ponto*. In 1969 Edgardo-Antonio Vigo organized a show of visual poetry in Buenos Aires and the couple Alvaro de Sá and Neide de Sá passed by Montevideo. We decided to produce a joint edition between *Ponto* and *OVUM 10* on poema/processo. For this collaborative publication they sent me the material from Rio de Janeiro and I added the covers in Montevideo. Following this experience we began a very intense conversation about poetry, and in 1971 I would meet Dias-Pino in Buenos Aires at a congress organized by Vigo at CAYC, the Centro de Arte y Comunicación, ran by George Glusberg. There I had the opportunity to meet Dias-Pino together with the important historian João Felicio dos Santos, which would deepen my understanding of many aspects of Brazilian poetry. Even today our friendship continues. When Álvaro de Sá died, a very painful moment, I wrote a text in memory of his work, which had been so important. And now it has already been some time that I haven't seen Wlademir Dias-Pino.

**CF:** Can you tell me about the correspondence that you sent and that was lost after the military coup?

**CP:** In Montevideo I had organized what I called *A exposição exaustiva da nova poesia* ("A comprehensive exhibition of new poetry"), an exhibition of experimental poetry that comprised of a lot of visual poetry from all over the world, and publications, sound poetry, some films. All this material was exhibited at the U gallery in Montevideo for three months or so. On the request of the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chile, Nemésio Antúnez, it was packed and brought to the embassy to be taken to Santiago – and then got lost in the basement of the Chilean embassy. But then the coup d'état of September 11 (1973) happened and Allende died together with many others. And as there had previously been another dictatorship in Uruguay, I didn't dare to go and collect the works, and practically lost everything. This really was a blow! I have also lost works at other occasions, and the second time was when I was arrested and lost all my files, almost 20 boxes of material, correspondences and articles. Among your files here [at MAC USP] there is a work of mine whose existence I had forgotten. When it was shown to me I doubted it: This is not mine! But it really was, and then I remembered. And it was Klaus Groh who published it. So, I lost everything. Even an invitation to the Paris biennial, which had created a section for young Latin-American artists. The biennial invited the government, until then a dictatorship, to conduct a regional selection from all over Latin America, and the military government instructed the director of the Museum of Visual Arts in Uruguay to do this Latin-American survey. Many Latin-American artists got to know about it and we did not agree, because it was a crystal-clear maneuver by the French to legitimize the dictatorships of the Southern Cone, at least culturally. Because these countries appeared to be generating culture, produced by the youth. Well, we started corresponding to discuss what had to be done, because we could not let this pass. We planned a counter biennial and we added members, almost 200 young Latin-American artists were with us. Very few went to Paris. From Uruguay at least, only one artist went. We conducted a counter biennial to open in New York, a month before the Paris biennial started. We had gained the support of many intellectuals, artists like Cortázar, García Márquez. Finally everyone was supporting it because it was a clear maneuver. The biennial would start between October and December 1977. A month before that I was imprisoned. I was gone for almost three months, and no one knew where I was. I was, of course, in an interrogation room. They hold you there for 3 or 4

months, and after that, if you can't deliver any more information, they make you disappear or send you to jail, which is what happened to me. They sent me to jail on the charge of contempt, and derision of the armed forces. That was the charge for which I was sentenced to 4 years, but a great international movement was organized. Paulo Bruscky started it in Brazil, and he even organized an exhibition of mail art dedicated to my release. It was closed down by the police ... But in all parts of the world signatures were gathered, and – after 2 years and 3 months – my sentence was reduced. But what happened is that I went into a special probation category that is worse than being in jail because you can't work, can't get out of Montevideo. I could do absolutely nothing. I couldn't even talk on the phone. And every Saturday we had to go to headquarters for further questioning, every Saturday afternoon at 1pm for several hours. I was out of the loop for years, until the dictatorship fell in 1984.

CF: And you could do nothing during this period?

CP: Well, I was able to do something. In jail I even did some work, some visual poems that I consider the best I have ever done. Somewhat due to the situation and somewhat motivated by all the pain of the comrades who were living with me in jail. And I could also do some work under probation because I had many visitors and could work through them. I prepared postcards and passed them along with a mailing list so they could be distributed when the visitors returned to their countries. In this way I moved many works out of the country and also sent a work for the Bienal de São Paulo, to which Zanini had invited me. I couldn't go personally, as I had no passport and wasn't allowed to leave the country.



*Transcript and translation from Spanish to Portuguese: Carolina Castanheda Moura  
Translation from Portuguese: Tobi Maier*

In late 1969 Neide Dias de Sá and Alvaro de Sá came to see me in Montevideo after visiting the *Exposición de Novísima Poesía de Vanguardia / 69*, held at the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella in Buenos Aires. The exhibition was organized by the artist Edgardo Antonio Vigo from La Plata and presented the latest trends in visual poetry etc., including, of course, poema/processo, an avant-garde movement launched in 1967 and influenced by the works of Wlademir Dias-Pino, which had been exhibited in the historical concrete poetry exhibitions in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in 1956–57.

So, the de Sá couple had attended Vigo's exhibition, and on their way home to Rio de Janeiro they visited me at my home. There we exchanged works and developed some common projects. I gave them the collection of my magazine *Los Huevos del Plata* and a booklet on Wlademir Dias-Pino's work. We decided to edit a joint publication called *POEMA / PROCESO* through their own *Ponto* (the magazine disseminating poema/processo) and my *OVUM IO*.

This was the beginning of a strong friendship that continues still today, despite the unfortunate loss of Álvaro de Sá. A friendship developed through countless meetings and experimental poetry events, both in Brazil and in Rio de la Plata.

*Translation from Spanish: TM*

How I  
connected with  
poema/processo?  

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**Clemente Padín**

#### PROCESO: LECTURA DE PROYECTO

##### Proceso: desencadenamiento crítico de estructuras siempre nuevas.

Proceso es una relación dinámica necesaria que existe entre estructuras diferentes o entre los componentes de una estructura dada, constituyéndose en la concretización del continuo espacio-tiempo: movimiento-operar-soluciones. Operar (en períodos diferentes) o tránsito-continuo. (conjunto de actos)-(cambio que presenta cierta unidad).

\* "Cuando se dan cambios o transformaciones se dice que hay un proceso".

De modo que la relación fundamental existe en el proceso o a través de él consiste en que los diferentes elementos se influyan, esto es, un elemento es afectado por el anterior que le antecedió y afectará al posterior que le sucede, y es en este punto que se diferencia de la interrelación estructural, donde todos los elementos se integran estáticamente.

\*\*\* Todo proceso encierra un procedimiento.

Procedimiento = acto.

Acto: variaciones formales, aprovechamiento de las probabilidades dentro de lo individual (sistematica del estilo).  
Proceso: manipulación + desencadenamiento de invenciones (sistematica del antiestilo).

##### Poema/proceso: visualización de la funcionalidad (\*\*\*) consumismo.

No hay poesía/proceso, lo que hay es poema/proceso, porque el producto es el poema, quien encierra el proceso es el poema. El movimiento o la participación creadora es lo que lleva la estructura (matriz) a la condición de proceso. El proceso del poeta es individual, lo que interviene colectivamente es el proceso del poema.  
Poema/proceso es aquél que, a cada nueva experiencia inaugura procesos informacionales, esa información puede ser estética o no; lo importante es que sea funcional y, por lo tanto, consumible.

El poema se resuelve por si mismo, desanudándose (proyecto), no necesitando de interpretaciones para su justificación. (\*)

Proceso: autosuperación del poema que se agota en tanto sus probabilidades van siendo exploradas, y que envejece cuando es suplantado por otro que lo admira y excede. Poema/proceso: la conciencia delante de nuevos lenguajes, creándolos, manejándolos dinámicamente y fundando probabilidades creativas. Dando mayor importancia a la lectura del proyecto de poema y no más a la lectura alfabetica, la palabra queda desplazada, creando así un lenguaje universal, aunque sea de origen brasileño, queda desprendido de cualquier regionalismo, pretendiendo ser universal, no por un sentido estrictamente humano sino por su sentido de funcionalidad. No se trata, como algunos pudieran pensar, de un combate rigido y gratuito al signo verbal, sino de una explotación planificada de las posibilidades encerradas en otros signos (no verbales). Es bueno recordar que algunas estructuras mismas no se traducen: son codificadas por los procesos que rigen la comunicación internacional.

\* Desencadenamiento: lo que evita la redundancia.

\*\* Funcionalidad: invención de realidades.

\*\*\* Función creadora del artista: trabajar en los procesos, reinventándolos, modificando los cambios de cualquier especie de estructura, respuesta a una necesidad social.

\*\*\*\* El proceso tiene distintos planos o niveles.  
= (El poema/proceso es una posición radical dentro de la poesía de vanguardia. Es preciso esperar por la radicalidad).

TAPA: "Liberarse II" de Clemente Padín.

# POEMA / PROCESO PONTO - OVUM 10

edición conjunta PONTO (Brasil)  
y OVUM 10 (Uruguay)