

**CURATING WITH
LIGHT LUGGAGE**

**EDITED BY
LIAM GILLICK AND MARIA LIND**

KUNSTVEREIN MÜNCHEN

M585342
"Comprovante" da NF _____ em 21/11/06
Procedência Doação Verba Fapeesp/06

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Kunstverein München

Edited by Liam Gillick and Maria Lind

Design by Liam Gillick

Printed by Parat, München

Printed in the E.U.

Translations by Charles Richard Castleberry II (Cristina Freire)

The symposium CURATING WITH LIGHT LUGGAGE was part of the project

TELLING HISTORIES: AN ARCHIVE AND THREE CASE STUDIES

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY MABE BETHÔNICO AND LIAM GILICK

at Kunstverein München 2003.

Curated by Ana Paula Cohen, Søren Grammel and Maria Lind.

In partnership with Allianz Kulturstiftung.

Special thanks to Ana Paula Cohen and Ludger Hünnekens.

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ISBN 3-936919-82-8

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TERRITORY FOR FREEDOM:
A MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART UNDER
MILITARY DICTATORSHIP IN BRAZIL
CRISTINA FREIRE

In the last Documenta catalogue, we find CIDADE Y CAMPO (City and Field), images of an action realized by Artur Barrio in 1970. I spent a long time trying to locate the slides of this work, which were acquired directly from the artist by the then director of the MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO (MAC-USP), Walter Zanini.¹ In this series of images, Barrio registers an action in which he scatters heaps of bread rolls bound with red twine at various sites in the City of Rio de Janeiro.

After three decades in the Museum's collections, it appears that this work was not as lucky as others have been. The format (photographic slide) caused it to be scorned and forgotten. This example illustrates a situation in which a collection of conceptual art has remained in this museum for almost three decades. A set of around 2000 works that has been kept unknown to the public and away from the most current museological procedures. The collection I am referring to embodies photographs, installation projects and performances, texts, slides, artist books, videos and films realized during the 1960 and 70s.

By critically analysing such voids, I seek to understand how the visibility of each historic time is organised and, in this sense, the idea of the museum as a point of strategy. In the context of the museum, these works suggest pending problems for the curator, in relation to themes connected to the transitory nature of the artwork; the real definition of the art object; the dialectical relations between art and documentation, as well as the urgent necessity for new parameters to define the documentation, preservation, exhibition and upkeep of contemporary art. Above all it forefronts concerns related to the use of new technology by artists.

Artur Barrio is one of many artists whose production has only very recently come to be assimilated in museum collections. The reception of this artist's work, at the height of the dictatorship, operated within a certain dialectic, contrary to the normal situation of an artist. This is why the 60s and the 70s are marked by voids. In this period, the military regime was responsible for the exile of many intellectuals and artists. From a cultural memory



Artists installing work
6TH YOUNG CONTEMPORARY ART, 1972
Archives Museum of Contemporary Art/University of São Paulo

perspective, forced amnesia coincides with the transitory nature of many artistic propositions. Such recent history shows us the strategies of a system of artistic production and distribution whose potentialities have not run out and are still rich in implications. The exhibitions organised within the initial decades by the museum's first director, Walter Zanini, are significant to this history. This learned, forward thinking university professor belongs to a generation of Brazilian intellectual idealists who wanted to see their country in close dialogue with the world, leaving economic and geographic isolation behind. In 1963, he was nominated director of the recently created MAC-USP, immediately after returning from a long period of study in Europe.

During Zanini's first years at the museum, his concern with the cultural void within cities, the countryside and other Brazilian centres, echoed the idea of an 'art train,' inspired by the utopias of the Russian Revolution, which could carry exhibitions to the more distant cities, in the hope that decentralization would be synonymous with democracy. He strived to act on these concepts towards the understanding that a museum's function should be to go beyond its traditional duties of looking after works of art.

Through diverse opportunities for discussion such as The INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF MUSEUMS OF MODERN ART, linked to the ICOM, and workshops with other museum directors in Brazil and abroad, professor Zanini always sought to include Brazil and Latin America on the map of exhibitions organised from the established art centres. An awareness that the country was situated on the outskirts of the centralised system of the United States and Europe suggested that the museums of Latin America should unite to face common problems.

A period of effervescent art creation led to the rise of the NEW CINEMA and BOSSA NOVA in Brazil. The Military Coup of 1964 interrupted this vitality. Those who did not go into exile sought to develop strategies of survival in the middle of a hostile environment. Within the larger cities, especially in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, the Universities took a stance against the dictatorship.

If May 1968 brings back the image of French students smearing the walls with words against art institutions including museums, in São Paulo, on the other hand, the Museum of Contemporary Art at the University kept its doors open and carried on as a free space for artists, students, professors and any others who came. Towards the end of that year, art censorship got

tougher, and the cinema, theatre and music bore the brunt of its wrath. At the University, the collections of masterpieces guaranteed the Museum's stability, tying it to the past and confirming the conservative expectations of the average public with their limited conception of museums, artworks and artists. The future of art was seen as 'an idea,' within processes and concepts that would not turn the museum into a collection of inert objects or a remarkable building, but into gestures full of significance. Between the conventional idea sustained in the social imagination and this other completely new path, Zanini strived to maintain a balanced position at the MAC.

On one side, as the director of a university museum, he responded to the expectations of the governing bureaucracy that, in the interest of maintaining power, impeded expansion, without subverting the institution. He sought, without a doubt, to highlight the museum's fabulous collection.² However, at the same time, he served the calling of this recently created institution's contemporary vocation within a country marginal to the hegemonic socio-political system. Zanini organised the museum into a series of post-modern bases, putting accepted, naturalised notions of linear history on hold. Therefore he interrogated the institutional locations of creation and exhibition.

Since 1968, and throughout the period when the BIENNIAL OF SÃO PAULO was boycotted,³ the MAC-USP has been a stable ground for the reception of contemporary art. Perhaps, by being misunderstood, many of the exhibitions that he organised slipped safely past censors. Nevertheless, even today, these forward-looking projects remain largely unassimilated. Yet, the exhibitions/statements of the period have revealed, since the 1960s, the idea of a museum that, although not perpetuated, remains as latent content, questioning the fundamentals and practices of museums of contemporary art in Brazil.

A visit to the XIX CENTURY MUSEUM OF MODERN ART,⁴ which Marcel Broodthaers had installed in his own home, in Brussels, created a profound impact on Zanini, as well as on all the other members of the Brussels INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF MUSEUMS OF MODERN ART (1969). The Belgian artist had transformed the domestic space into an ironic statement concerning the principles of museums.

Empty transport boxes occupied the rooms of the house, which were

numbered like galleries, and more than 30 postcards of 19th century French 'masterpieces' decorated the walls. By turning his own studio into a museum, the artist condensed production and reception into the same space, revealing their interdependences and calling attention to the ideological determination of their typical separation. Museum and studio, observes Douglas Crimp,⁸ became one element, which holds profound implications for the ways in which we think about the museum, the work of art, creation and reception.

Condensing the space for production with the space of artistic reception brings new roles not just to the museum but also to the artist and the public, by confronting them with new paradigms. In this case, the emphasis falls on the artist and no longer on the artwork. In the resulting relation between art and life, everyday life approaches the museum. Therefore the artist and public have interchangeable roles that become entwined. We are not dealing with Duchamp's example of shifting a banal object to the space of a museum, thus conferring upon it the status of a 'work of art'. Within a reciprocal operation, you are dealing with turning a gesture of everyday life into artistic work and, within the context of the 1970s in Brazil, turning an artistic gesture into everyday life verged on heroic.

Within this reciprocity between art and life, the autonomy of the white cube is dismantled allowing the museum to become an epicentre for the subversion of rigid norms and accepted and naturalised notions of what an artwork should be. At the opposite pole sits the conventional museum, which emphasises art objects and provides parameters for the market. Whether explicit or not, Zanini's policy strays from the autonomous sphere. Much more than the isolated object of art, the interest here is in strategies currently utilised by artists. The transitory nature of the means and the precariousness of materials are alternative critiques in face of the social and economic reality of Latin America. That is why it was necessary for some artists in Brazil to examine the relation between the economic value of materials and notions of privilege.

There is also evidence of a critical attitude towards artistic institutions, and forms of circulation and distribution, in which the postal service holds a privileged role. These installations, performances, photographs, recorded actions, visual poetry, mail art and artists books arrived at the exhibitions by post. The public was encouraged to become more permeable to transformations and the new. Therefore, a less conservative and more

inventive and attentive attitude was necessary. In short, the passive state lived on a daily basis in those difficult years was not reproduced at the Museum.

However, as opposed to what we see today with the spectacular architecture of some contemporary museums, the museum, at that moment, could still work with the proposals' transitory nature and precariousness as part of the project. In an article from the time Zanini looked to the future (1976):

"It is a fact that a decisive part of artistic activity today no longer falls back on space, but is engaged in the dimension of time. This means that we should foresee changes to the actual architectonic conception that has been governing the spirit of the museum building."⁹

An 'operational space' would be the thing that best expresses a revolutionary museology at an experimental level while emphasising conceptual tendencies. The museum, within this conception, does not just follow artwork onto the scene, but turns into its concomitant. In this manner, the museum assumes an active position, as it fades from its role as an expectant, exclusive, memory-warehousing body to take action within the nucleus of creative propositions, and the direct participation of artists."⁷

Throughout his years at the head of the museum, completely isolated from the critics, who understood little or nothing of his proposals, Zanini was cheered by artists who alongside him, organised collective exhibitions in Brazil and abroad, stimulating the use of the museum for the development of projects, courses, lectures and as a forum for debates. Just as artistic work should not be disconnected from its context, the exhibition should be organically tied to its time. And in this spirit, the exhibitions YOUNG CONTEMPORARY ART (JAC) were held throughout the period of military dictatorship.

The 6th JAC, occurring in 1972, for example, was held with the declared objective of broadening the bounds of the exhibition, and became a real statement during a time when any protest, or even gathering of a few people in a public place, was prohibited. The exhibition was, in fact, configured as a process. The participants remained working and discussing their proposals, in other words, occupying the museum during the two weeks of the exhibition. The emphasis shifted from the produced object to

the processes of production and aimed, above all, at the awareness of its signifiers. All of the participants were asked to provide written proposals about the basic intentions of their works – which were publicly debated. By declining a jury or any outside authority, the participation of those enrolled occurred without any censorship or restriction. A space 1000m² was divided into lots and the lots were drawn and then traded among those enrolled. The possibility of confrontation, collaboration, support, exchange, construction and destruction, in addition to the permanent argument among the participants, solidified the exhibition's collective responsibility. At the height of the military regime, an experimental exercise of liberty was held as the exhibition/statement.

Any judgement value or criteria for including the 120 winners of the lottery from among various artists and groups was abolished. Such a process seems disconcerting due to the chaos that invades the antiseptic atmosphere of the museum. The previous planning of the space gave way to those decisions taken in common agreement among the participants where an artist was not distinguished from the public. There was no curator, and even the museum director's executive power was debased. The museum was therefore defined as a microcosm of the possible, holding liberty as a goal. Within the political context that was lived in Brazil in those times, a public space of participation was radicalised in this exhibition.

It is true that the previous paradigmatic exhibitions occurring in Europe, WHEN ATTITUDES BECOME FORM, (Kunsthalle, Bern, 1969), curated by Harald Szeemann, and INFORMATION (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970) were also ruled by principles that were far from conventional. However, some distinctions are significant. In INFORMATION the character of pure information was highly criticized and the curatorship of Kynaston McShine⁸ projected a clean, neutral, white space for the exhibition, without dispensing with the elements of traditional museography, like display cases and plinths. The maximum participation of the artist seems to have been the project by Vito Acconci, who passed by to pick up his mail at the museum (SERVICE AREA, 1970) during the exhibition. As for the public, it participated in the survey of Hans Haacke, which confronted the visitor with information and questions in which conscience and positioning are required in relation to the interdependence of the spheres of art and of politics.

ST RATEGIES

In the program at the MAC-USP, Zanini sought tirelessly to broaden horizons in dialogue with the rest of the world in order to include Brazil on the map of international exhibitions. He selected and sent artists and artworks to exhibitions abroad, in addition to stimulating local artists to experiment with new ways and means. He understood that his function as director of a museum of contemporary art in Brazil, during those difficult years was, "less to overcome the unassimilated function of the museum than to begin finding the means of transforming fiction and utopia into reality."⁹

Also significant, in the international context, were encounters with other curators who defended alternative practices for contemporary art museums, among them were Jean Cassou, René d'Harnoncourt and also from another generation, Werner Hoffmann and Pierre Gaudibert.¹⁰ On the impact of May 1968 in France, Gaudibert draws distinct boundaries between the academic culture sustained by the traditional bourgeoisie and progressive culture. The first, according to Gaudibert, is loaded with traditional norms, where common taste and stable social order are set.¹¹ This is engaged through a considerable system of devices for control and diffusion (schools, press, etc), which maintain control without mixing with social relations. For progressive culture, the protesting statement goes back to inherited forms, visual habits, previously consolidated internal laws and, at an ideological level, aims to alter the structures of the imaginary and of sensibility, liberating 'desire' against the institutional system. It denies the market, and contests the aesthetic order and, as a consequence, the reigning moral and ideological order.

BY MAIL

The use of the postal services as an alternative form of circulation was widely used at this moment. It was not possible to separately identify each artist, from the system in which such a network was constructed and reproduced. Experimentation with new means of production such as Xeroxes, with their easy accessibility and rapid reproduction, were easily allied, for those artists of the 70s in Brazil, to the wide-reaching universality of MAIL ART, which multiplied outside the closed circuit of galleries and museums. During the political repression, the use of handheld tools of reproduction like mimeographs, for example, was forbidden, and therefore, photography was a widely used technique for reproducing and transporting ideas.

The members of FLUXUS, above all Dick Higgins, Wolf Vostell and Ben Vautier, in addition to the COLLECTIVE D'ART SOCIOLOGIQUE, had a constant, significant presence in various exhibitions through the 1970s. By taking advantage of an international correspondence network, they were frequent participants in MAC exhibitions. Krzysztof Wodiczko, Jaroslaw - Kozlowski, along with Klaus Rinke, Antoni Muntadas, John Cage, Janis Kounellis, Friederik Pezold, among many others, sent works to the Museum. Besides denying the laws of the market, these postal deliveries opened up the museum to the propagation of artistic content.

As the artist Ulises Carrión observes (Mexico City, 1941-1989):

"Mail Art has transferred the focus of what is traditionally called art, to a broader concept of culture. This change is what makes Mail Art really contemporary. Mail Art emphasizes cultural strategies where there are boundaries between the artists work and the organization and distribution of this work. The artists may choose the system of distribution as the same structure for his work. In this sense such strategies are their formal components."¹²

There is a reason why such a large number of artists originating from diverse countries participated in the MAIL ART movement. This network integrated countries that in other circumstances would be left out of the hegemonic artistic circuit of the United States and of Western Europe. In addition to their Latin American neighbours, the participation of the Polish and Czech artists who sent their works by mail to the MAC-USP in the 1970s was highly significant. As Zanini described, MAIL ART "is a poetics arising out of the urgency to substitute structures on an international level."¹³ In Latin America, the content of these works, especially during the difficult years of the 1960s and 70s, was eminently political. MAIL ART was constituted as a liberating strategy facing a repressive political context. Clemente Padin (Lascano, 1939), for example, was imprisoned by the military dictatorship in 1977. For this Uruguayan artist, MAIL ART was also a process of artistic decentralisation:¹⁴

"When artistic messages can be sent from any small village to any corner of the world, in contrast to those 'upright' hegemonic poles implanted after World War II, when a system of galleries, museums, critics, curators controlled a restricted apparatus of marketing and prestige that was imposed on universal art, Mail Art arises from the creation of new processes

of artistic signification, within a ideological project that may be summed up as: 'NEW objects for new subjects.'¹⁵

THE MARGINS

In the same period there was an abundance of artists' publications in the form of handmade magazines that were also distributed by post. Periodicals of various types, journals, fanzines, stamps, prints, postcards and a significant quantity of address lists proliferated. In that sense, these artists created a forerunner of the Internet, for the postal service network was an 'internet' that was less agile and more concerned with the form-content ratio. This pre-history of computer use for artists projects had already seen its first developments in the mid 70s. Zanini, privileged through his marginal situation in relation to the central art system, wrote:

"The traditional limitations of the habitual circuit for access to the art-museum, gallery, private collector, tend to be breached by the widespread circulation of work. Obviously, this phenomenon has been provoked directly by conceptual trends, therefore being more than just a supposition, it makes us believe that this discursive aspect of art - sharply characteristic of the 70s - will tend to consolidate itself in the future."¹⁶

At that time, there were many hybrid projects that combined MAIL ART with artists' books, simple forms of offset printing, Xerox and card collections. As for these proposals, Zanini observes:

"A central consequence of this order of things is the de-privatisation of how the message is used. The substitution of visual expression systems from other circumstances for flexible mechanisms of presentation causes the mystique of the unique masterpiece, with its combined implications of aesthetic value and economic value, to disappear."¹⁷

This mystique was tenaciously battled by Zanini in order to keep the museum away from having any marketing appeal, during a time in which the stock market in São Paulo was created and art ran the risk of being confused with stocks, in a market avid for anything.

He thought about the museum as a laboratory, a space for participation, and the exhibitions/statements of contemporary art as the unique way of bringing museums to life, not separating them from their social reality, but integrating them with society as a counterpoint to a lack of perspective,

since he understood that the artist always works with awareness of the cultural political and social context. The influence of social reality distinguished Brazilian and Latin Americans proposals from those emanating from the United States and from Western Europe. The attachment of artists to social reality defines this conceptualism as a statement of 'living conceptual art,' an expression arising from that period.¹⁸

The most distinguished Brazilian artists within conceptual poetics do not admit that their artwork should be considered under the label of 'conceptual art,' imported mainly from New York after 1969. Yet, in discursive forms, as in the explicit cognitive content, the nature of the work is conceptual, as Peter Osborne observed:

"Conceptual Art in Latin America can be understood as a reaction against the artistic models of Europe and the United States mobilised after World War II as projects of modernisation for the region (lyric abstraction and abstract expressionism) in light of the failures of this project. It was the displacement of the artistic practices of official artistic institutions to a social and political domain that made the substitution of the art object for conceptual forms necessary."¹⁹

In fact, a modern project for the country materialized out of Abstraction, which held a remarkable presence in Brazil, above all at the BIENNALE OF SÃO PAULO. This project and a modern set of ideas also influenced the programs of new art museums, ideological symbols of the country's rapid post-war modernization. MoMA in New York was one of the models that was followed. The museum is then turned into a hostage of a modern project that, upon becoming incomplete in Brazil, is then turned into a boundary that impedes the accomplishment of effective contemporaneity. The conceptual poetics that, without a doubt, represent this turnaround from the modern to the contemporary, did not just happen in order to get tossed out of the history of art that is forged by the museum.

THE MEANS

Means of production such as photography and, later on, video are placed between the artwork and its documentation and thus become the privileged means for recording transitory actions and situations that interrogate the role of institutions. That is why, in these photographs and films that record the actions and performances of the period, the work of art is entwined with its documentation, a process that confronts the object's fetishism, complicates

market expectations and further challenges the appropriate, accepted and naturalised idea of what an authentic, unique artwork really is.

Many of these fundamental projects of the 1970s were fleeting actions and situations that only exist today as records. Nevertheless, this relation between document and artwork, despite the pioneering of a few, such as Zanini, still encounter resistance from many museums of contemporary art, which operate under the modern paradigm of the autonomous work of art.

NOTES

1. Walter Zanini, born in 1925, lives in São Paulo. Studied art, archeology and museology in Europe, between 1954 and 1961 with Masters Degree and Doctorate at the INSTITUTE OF ART AND ARCHEOLOGY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PARIS. As soon as he returned to Brazil he was invited to become director of the recently created MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO, where he worked from 1963 until 1978. During this period he was responsible for the organization of the most important exhibitions in the country, always stimulating local artists to explore new technologies. He was curator of the BIENNAL OF SÃO PAULO in 1981 and 1983. He was the head of the School of Communications and Arts of the University of São Paulo. His books includes: TENDENCIES OF MODERN SCULPTURE (1971), GENERAL HISTORY OF ART IN BRAZIL (1983), ART IN BRAZIL IN THE 1930s AND 40s (1991), VICENTE DO REGO MONTEIRO (1899-1970), ARTIST AND POET (1998), as well as many papers published in Brazil and abroad.
2. MAC-USP was created in 1963 with the donation of the collection of industrialist Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho and his wife Yolanda Penteado to the UNIVERSITY OF SÃO PAULO. This initial collection was composed of masterpieces of international artistic importance, namely works by Mondigliani, Boccioni, Picasso, Marx Ernst, De Chirico, together with Brazilian modern and contemporary artists. The works acquired in the beginning of the BIENNAL OF SÃO PAULO also contributed to the Museum's collection. From 1960 to 1970, under Walter Zanini's direction, MAC-USP stood up for experimental exhibitions with Brazilian and foreign artists' participation. The collection of MAC-USP comprises 8000 works today. It is a university and public museum with one of the most important collections of modern and contemporary art in South America.
3. In 1969 the Institutional Act no. 5 was promulgated and the military dictatorship was intensified in Brazil. In that year, the MUSEUM OF MODERN ART OF RIO DE JANEIRO prohibited the exhibition of artists selected to participate in the VI Biennial of Paris. This censorship provoked an energetic protest from the BRAZILIAN ASSOCIATION OF ART CRITICS. Under the dictatorship, many artists and intellectuals were pursued and arrested. The boycott of the International BIENNAL OF SÃO PAULO was organised from outside of the country. The foreign and local art community refused to participate to protest the military dictatorship. The boycott lasted up to the beginning of the 1980s when the country returned to democracy.
4. MUSEUM OF MODERN ART - XIX Century Section, 1968-1969. Congress of the International Committee for Museums and collections of Modern Art, Brussels, 9-12 December 1969, Brussels.
5. CRIMP, Douglas. ON THE MUSEUM'S RUINS. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993. p.210.
6. ZANINI, Walter. O MUSEU E O ARTISTA. Fifth AMAB Colloquium. June 1972. Informative bulletin 172 MAC-USP.
7. ZANINI, Walter. OS MUSEUS E OS NOVOS MEIOS DE COMUNICAÇÃO. Estado de São Paulo, Newspaper, 7 March 1976.
8. McShine designed the exhibition with the assistance of Charles Froomm. See: STANISZEWSKI,

- Mary Anne, *THE POWER OF DISPLAY: A HISTORY OF EXHIBITION INSTALLATIONS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998, p.270.
9. ZANINI, Walter. *COLÓQUIO DE MUSEUS EM BRUXELAS*. Estado de São Paulo Newspaper, 21 February 1970.
10. Walter Zanini was at the ICOM meeting in Brussels in December 1969. Among other museum professionals he met on that occasion were: Jean Cassou, Director of the MUSÉE NATIONAL D'ART MODERNE, Paris; René d'Harnoncourt, Director of the MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, New York; Werner Hoffman, Director of the KUNSTHALLE, HAMBURG; and Pierre Gaudibert, Coordinator of the CENTER ARC (Animation - Recherche - Confrontation) of the MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE LA VILLE DE PARIS.
11. GAUDIBERT, Pierre. *ACTION CULTURELLE: INTÉGRATION ET/OU SUBVERSION*. Paris: Casterman, 1972.
12. FREIRE, Cristina. *POÉTICAS DO PROCESSO. ARTE CONCEITUAL NO MUSEU*. São Paulo, Iluminuras, 1999, p.78.
13. ZANINI, Walter. *A ARTE POSTAL NA BUSCA DE UMA NOVA COMUNICAÇÃO INTERNACIONAL*. Estado de São Paulo. Newspaper, 27 March, 1977.
14. Uruguayan artists Clemente Padin and Jorge Caraballo were imprisoned (1977-1979) by the military regime.
15. PADIN, Clemente. *MAIL ART IN LATIN AMERICA. PART 1*. Available from: <http://www.concentric.net/~lndb/padin/lcpma.htm>. Cited: 1st March, 2004.
16. ZANINI, Walter. *OS MUSEUS E OS NOVOS METOS DE COMUNICAÇÃO*. Estado de São Paulo Newspaper, 7 March 1976.
17. ZANINI, Walter. *ibid*.
18. ZANINI, Walter. *ARTES PLÁSTICAS NO SEU PRESENTE PASSADO E FUTURO*. Estado de São Paulo Newspaper, 17 September 1972.
19. OSBORNE, Peter. *CONCEPTUAL ART*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2002, p.37.