



Initialist  
Bucklin

# Ulises Carrión Carries On!

MAIKE ADEN

Initially, this text was intended to give an introductory overview to all the multifaceted aspects of the artistic and intellectual oeuvre of Ulises Carrión (1941, San Andrés Tuxtla, Mexico–1989, Amsterdam, the Netherlands). It was meant to retell a prominent and fascinating artistic and intellectual adventure that took place over a period of approximately twenty years. It would have started with his early career as a successful and respected young writer in Mexico, following his studies of languages and linguistics in Europe, and mainly focused on his life and work in Amsterdam, an open and cosmopolitan city which attracted artists from all over the world to develop remarkable artistic experiments in the course of the break with Greenberg's established rules. For certain, such a survey article would have been highly interesting to place spotlights on the key facets of the protean nature of Carrión's body of work. But many important aspects would have remained unexplored or only been touched from afar.

Due to a certain cult of the (post-)1960s avant-garde, the work of Ulises Carrión has undergone an extraordinary appreciation in a few years [1]—in particular within the artists' book scene to which this article is addressed. This is at least my



impression after I gave some lectures on Carrión in the context of my work as a researcher for the recently opened retrospective exhibition on him in Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid. [2] It is precisely the time now to discuss certain aspects of his artistic strategies in detail. Therefore, I will concentrate on a particular aspect of his work which appears at first glance to be an early model of very recent discourses in the 21st century. With this focus, I hope to depict vividly Carrión's intriguing struggle for independence and innovation within the art system, as well as to rethink a particular trend of today that arose with the digital technologies of today.

### NEW CULTURAL STRATEGIES

The interest, one could also say the admiration for Ulises Carrión is currently mainly focused on his activities around the artist book, and perhaps, just barely, within the Mail Art movement. The widespread reception of his manifesto 'The New Art of Making Books' (1975) made him the central reference for the definition of the concept of the artist book. Also his bookshop/ gallery Other Books and So (1975-1979), the first of its kind devoted to artists' publications, became, despite its short duration, a mythologized paragon in the history of artists' books and their subversive, resistant air. His indubitably important role concerning artists' books sometimes prevents us from taking note that he was not only attracted by paper. Due to his permanent quest for new cultural strategies he was active in most of the artistic fields of his time. Despite a great number of bookworks, as he called artists' books, and his distribution, editing, publishing, and curating projects in the field of artists' publications, he realized a number of film, video, and sound works which may be less known, but all the more intriguing. And besides his significant contributions and initiatives within the international community of mail artists during its most creative period, he realized a considerable number of performances, lectures, and public projects, which are equally essential for his artistic career. Also his engagement in several artists' spaces is to be mentioned, which he considered as art projects: as co-founder of the first artist run

space in the Netherlands, the In-Out Center (1972-1974), and as a close collaborator of Stempelplaats (1976-1981), and the Time Based Art Institute (1983-1994), both run by his companion and accomplice Aart van Barneveld. Furthermore especially interesting are his highly elaborated theories on artists' books, Video Art, Mail Art, Copy Art, Stamp Art, Television, the art system itself, and much more.

All artistic projects by Ulises Carrión, whether on the spatial and visual potential of language, whether on the constructedness of a film, whether on the effects of mass media, or whether on independent communication systems, bring to light his rejection of "subjectivity, poetic associations, vague feelings, private fantasies, all this, where the art historian and art critic can feel most useful in explaining its deep significance". [3] His passion was language (as a cultural communication system) and its structure behind.

### STRUCTURES

Ulises Carrión's passion for language has been emphasized already in Mexico when he began his career as a traditional writer and poet. It stayed all his life, also after his break with this early career. His passion for structure was formed during his studies of literature, language and linguistics at the University of Leeds, where he graduated with his dissertation "Judas' Kiss and Shakespeare's Henry VIII".

The title "Judas Kiss..." might be a hint that Carrión didn't trust the language anymore. And indeed, language for him is, as he said later, "a lie". [4] The following small excerpt of his theses reveals what he was really interested in:

"The structure has a meaning which we can discover by summing up the various elements: speeches, actions and characters. How are the meanings of the elements established? By seeing in which way they hold together. The characters are not what they say they are. The characters are what their function within the structure of the play tells us they are." [5]



Without question, this is structuralism at its best! As unclassifiable as Ulises Carrión's permanent mutations have to be regarded, the structuralist approaches are the initial point and main motor for all his activities after 1972. All his work deals with the questions of how communication is made by structures, how they function, and how they produce their effects and meaning.

In this thesis, Carrión searches for the abstract function and objective structure of the dramatic language of Shakespeare. He unmaskes the author Shakespeare as a resident of existing language structures, which enabled the author to write his drama about Henry VIII. More essential than the meaning itself is to understand Shakespeare's strategies of meaning making. The form of the dramatic language is more important than the content, the language itself more than the author's opinion. The figure of the author, and with him his personal mental passions, feelings or impressions, was anyway dead, as Roland Barthes wrote, in favour of the birth of the reader. What the old Europeans called an originator and creator of actions, thoughts, and products became just a tiny node in the tracery of texts, signs and discourses, a participant in the cultural history and traditions of world views—or as Roland Barthes says, a linguistic construction.

#### "WHY PLAGIARISM?"

Following those ideas, promoted and encouraged by the broad intellectual movement structuralism, Carrión's oeuvre is based on the deconstruction of the glory of authorship and the power of originality in favour of conceptual strategies. In the spirit of the appropriation art of his time, but in fact several years before its official birth, [6] he practices and propagates making use of pre-existing art works, material, images, music, objects, etc. In 'The New Art of Making Books' for example he states quite explicitly: "Plagiarism is the starting point of the creative activity in the new art." [7] But already in 1973, he writes a manifesto, called "Why plagiarism?":

"There are so many books  
It takes so long to read or write a book  
Art is not private property  
They are a sign of love for the author  
They give a book a second chance to be read  
They make reading unnecessary  
They don't lend themselves to psychological interpretations  
They don't have utilitarian purposes  
They lack commercial value  
They are simple and absolute  
They are beautiful" [8]

Reading these enjoyable plea for blatant stealing, anyone familiar with recent art discourses and practises could perk up. It sounds as if Carrión anticipated for the hitherto unparalleled quantity of copies, imitations, quotes, and plagiarisms, which are currently pervading all cultural areas. It could appear as if he prepared the ground for all the artistic remakes, reenactments, revisitings, literary plagiarisms, cover-hits, footage-films, and even dance-karaoke events which have reached a certain cult status for the moment—even if appropriations, epigonism, pastiches, parodies, adaptations, mimicry, etc. are in no way an invention of the twenty-first century.

#### GENERATION REMIX

Needless to say, that times have changed and with them the conditions of making and thinking art. Today's climax of appropriation practices, at least since retro-visions have been a hot topic, are as multifarious as the concept of appropriation is unclear. However, all of them are not only based on well grounded, elaborated rejections, but on facts. Facts which are created by Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr, Tumblr, etc. In the digitalized world it seems impossible to identify the exact achievements of an author behind the inexhaustible lava of texts, sounds, and images. They are simply drowned, perished. Accordingly to this situation, the old criteria of defining the concepts of authorship,



novelty, originality, ingenuity, intentionality, creativity, expression, autonomy, and ownership can't be objectified anymore. Some end up by feeling invited that everything belongs to everybody. The theoretical background music is on the one hand extensively drawn from the quarry of the intellectual avant-garde of the 20th century. [9] But despite of factual arguments, moralism serves to declare intellectual property as "disgusting" [10], originality as "obscene" [11], the author as "the beginning of the system of lies" [12]. If some authors, artists, and composers still want a protection of their rights or even get paid for their works, they are regarded as out-of-touch and don't get the message.

Freed from the compulsion for innovation and creativity, [13] art follows the concept of use. As "prosumer" [14]—consuming and producing at the same time—one just needs to browse through the ever accessible and ubiquitous archive of images, words, and sounds in the cybersphere, in order to sample via copy-paste or drag-drop, and then to "postproduce" [15] the work. As the priority of fresh ideas and creative process over a perfect masterpiece is widely accepted, and digital technologies are easily accessible and feasible, it doesn't need special skills to bootleg, remix, and mashup [16] all possible found things and phenomenas to even "reprogram the world" [17].

The new 'generation remix', who have taken the stages of art, music, literature, dance and film, have caused highly controversial debates. On the one hand are the celebrators who foresee a new age of innovative, useful, and entertaining ways for the art of the digitized and globalized 21st century. Revolutionary new practices are going to change the moral and aesthetic values of art to produce the "next art" of the "next society". [18] The new artists will form new terms of understanding and defining art. They will not only realise Joseph Beuys' dictum that everyone is an artist, [19] but also "build free societies". [20] With this democratization process, art will be taken from its "high pedestal", as some say, "to hang it lower". [21] More critical observers see here the starting point of a huge problem. If creation is based on nothing more than carefree processes of finding, copying, recombining and manipulating preexisting media, concepts, forms, and

names, of any source, the understanding of art will shift in their sight to a trivialized, low-demanding, and regressive activity. In view of the limitation of art to references of preexisting concepts and forms, they diagnose endless recompiled and repurposed products. What the defenders call the new "archaeological avant-garde" [22] which shall create unexpected connections between past and present, [23] the skeptic calls a culture of recycling with an addiction to the past. [24] While some analyze this "hyper-stasis" as a "passive resistance to the transitoriness, volatility and fugacity of the present time" and to the "tyranny of having to respond to permanent changes". [25] Others say only lazy people who have nothing to say let themselves be inspired by the past. [26] Some say that this new trend of appropriation is only caused by the wish of embellishing oneself with an attractive genealogy. [27]

#### USING CULTURE

For many reasons, these debates are worthy of attention. To approach them, I will come back to Carrión and his aesthetic program. Many works by him breathe the spirit of using and manipulating something that pre-exists. To present the totality of all these works would definitively burst the boundaries of this text. But the few instances chosen as examples here absolutely permit us to formulate a typology of his ideas.

Ulises Carrión's bookwork 'Sonnet(s)' consists of a repetition of the quasi stolen poem "Heart's Compass" by the Pre-Raphaelite eccentric Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Forty-four times Carrión rewrites his poem with a typewriter, just adding minimal changes. One can read i.a. a 'Borrowed Sonnet' (the original one), a 'Dated Sonnet' (including date and point of origin), a 'Religious Sonnet' (ending with 'Amen'), a 'CAPITAL SONNET' (in capital letters), a 'Famous Sonnet' (ending with the word applause), and 'Underlined Sonnet' (completely underlined), etc. In fact, he runs through all possibilities of a typewriter. In contrast to Shakespeare's sonnets for example, his sonnets are free from any personal expression and emotion. As all his works, they refuse discursiveness.



"They are not meant to be true or beautiful. Each piece is a series of vocal units that unfolds according to simple rules. Their beginning and end are arbitrary—they could go on infinitely. They should go on. They go on." [28]

The concept is simple but striking to visualise the processes, mechanisms, and modes of functioning minimal language codes, as well as the reader's experience.

There are other bookworks which can be considered as examples of the concept of appropriation. 'Dancing with you' (1973) consists of nothing more than dancing instructions which are taken out of their contexts into the book. 'The Muxlows' (1978) consists of the copied family chronicle that Carrión found in an old bible so that the names, dates and places one after another become interchangeable and form "one single flow of sounds, become a pure rhythm (...) composed by the most essential events of life, brings us back to earth and ourselves", as he said. The book 'Tell me what sort of wall paper your room has and i'll tell you who you are' consists of original wallpaper which no longer functions as a passive element that transports the message, but becomes a significant asset.

In his crucial film work 'The Death of the Art Dealer' (1982), Carrión makes use of a 1949 movie by Max Ophuls. Holding a small video monitor on which the original movie was playing, he physically follows the original camera movements—from left to right, from back and forth, from up and down, and so on.

[Fig. 1]

Ulises Carrión, *The Death of the Art Dealer*, 1982, Courtesy: Private Collection, Paris



"All the elements of the film are getting dirtied up, loaded with these generations of transfer" [29], referring to his method of using the film of somebody else in order to depict and comment the film's construction.

An example which indicates how far Carrión went in using preexisting phenomena are his outstanding public projects. The 'LPS File' (1984) documents the use of a living person, the Mexican film star Lilia Prado as an object which he freely used for his creation. The underlying idea was to provide a platform to promote a star outside the dominant culture by transferring the dispositive of celebrity from one social-political culture to another.

"Don't you think that my gesture, my choice of Lilia Prado, is just as arbitrary as Duchamp's gesture?... Lilia Prado is my readymade", he writes, claiming: "My idea as an artist is to become invisible." [30]

Concluding, I will briefly draw attention to Ulises Carrión's mail art and stamp art activities and theories. These projects are based on the use of the official postal system to take over its complex dispatch mechanisms with all its bureaucratic elements (rubber stamps, postage stamps, postmarks, cards, faxes, telegrams, etc.) for art purposes. Appropriating this existing communication system for him meant a "guerilla war against the Big Monster [that] oppresses us" [31], to control the production and distribution of art.

Quite easily I could go on like this for a while, presenting all strategies of appropriation in Carrión's body of work. But these few examples demonstrate already the amazing diversity of the innovative and versatile scope of Carrión's appropriation strategies and intentions. They serve therefore as an excellent reference to contextualise the very recent concepts and practices of this kind.

### BIG MONSTERS

Today, many ask what Ulises Carrión would have done in view of the digital means of the 21st century. This question is completely useless. But it is, on the other hand understandable, even



## [Fig. 2]

Mail Art and the Big Monster, poster,  
1977, Courtesy: Private Collection, Paris



him to search in all possible directions to choose the best corresponding art form for an idea. More important perhaps is that his openness to a diversity of concepts, methods and forms prevented him to run the risk of getting stuck. Before a project might have had developed any ossification or stiffening, he had already jumped into something else. Mail art for example, he regarded "as part of the guerrilla war against the 'big monster', who is living 'behind the door of a castle'". [32] He didn't know exactly how to define the 'monsters', as he wrote. Assuming, this applies to any ruler of any powerful system, its corset of always unpredictably changing guidelines is often not really tangible and perceptible. In particular, the castles of today control our knowledge and attitudes by anonymous regulations and governance.

almost logical in light of the fact that he constantly embarked on new paths while investigating his media and concepts. In this respect he can be considered as one of the pioneers of today's tendencies of expanding art to any digital appropriation. But is the art world really catching up with the concepts, forms, and techniques that Carrión pioneered several decades ago? Many facts however, tend to contradict this option.

Carrión's manifold artistic preoccupations have several motivations. One may simply be his curiosity for all sorts of innovative art forms, leading

## DIGITAL CASTLES

Extending art to the remix of everything in the Internet by using easily accessible digital techniques, and diffusing the creations back through Internet seems to exactly accomplish Carrión's intentions. It's a striking idea to bypass the deadlocked and elitist art systems with their market mechanisms and celebrity syndromes today by the Internet which perfectly seems to ensure connectivity, global reach, multimediality, interactivity, independence, sovereignty, and equality. The problem is that the utopia of a digital world that is equal to a peculiar second reality that accommodates these values functioned only as long as unorganized pioneers made use of it. After powerful corporate and state behemoths woke up, they constructed a fortified castle with the tightest control system ever. Under its creepy line of "cost-free" information technology, invisible algorithms track each single step of Internet users for governmental and commercial exploitation. All activities, as nourishing and enjoyable as they may be for their creators, as equally nourishing and enjoyable for the 'monsters'. Using the rigidly carved presetting of computer programs means not only accepting the limitation to the technical and aesthetic parameter, it means multiplying the structures of their providers.

It seems to me that Carrión's assumption, that "most artists and the public seem to have lost themselves in the game" [33] especially applies to many of the 'generation remix'. Otherwise they wouldn't come to think that participating in the compulsion to network by means of a highly accelerated and circulating concentration of posts, re-posts, shares, re-shares, blogs, re-blogs, mix, re-mix, creation, recreation, use, re-use, etc. can be called art. Unless, they confuse art with a hyperactive hustle and bustle around a prevailing repertoire.

Let's have a look at a few examples of recycling the work of Ulises Carrión. Not all of them exist exclusively as a digitalized work, but the computer is always used, at least at one step of creation, presentation, or distribution. The self-portrait with paper-veiled eyes from 1979 seems to have particularly impressed the new appropriationists; in any case, the model has served numerous forms of exploitation, ranging from exact drawing



copies to reenactment. Another example is the Mexican artist Israel Martínez who has recently made downloadable on the Internet not the original version of Ulises Carrión's radio program 'Trios & Boleros', but his own reconstitution of it. And Michalis Pichler's book 'Some More Sonnet(s)' makes quasi re-use of Carrión's use of Rossetti's sonnet (s. a.). He absorbs Carrión's strategy and transfers it mostly to the typographic effects of modern computer programs. In the then analog printed book, we can read for example of a Times New Roman Sonnet, an Emailed Sonnet, a Leftbound Sonnet, a Rightbound Sonnet, a Centered Sonnet, a Raster Sonnet, etc. With this, we are dealing with the perfect copy of Carrión's concept of visualising the reading processes, and the mechanisms and modes of the functioning of the minimal language codes. One could interpret these appropriations as a mirror for artistic forms and concepts of Carrión's works to give visibility to hitherto ignored aspects of his or today's myths. In this sense, looking backwards would be a way to move forward. The problem is that they don't add any substantial aspect to the original ones, they are only absorbing the content and regurgitating it. Maybe they are a source of safe succor for identification for their creators who are exposed to the rootlessness of today's milieu of permanent change. But as they repeat not only the past, but also a common practice which has become a fatiguing trend, they lose all strength and fascination.

Ulises Carrión understood his art works and theories in terms of their transitory nature which evolve with time. Like living creatures, "they grow, reproduce, change color, become ill and finally die." With a sensitive and critical sense towards solidified conventions, canons, and ideological rituals, he gave permanent farewells to repetitive procedures and products before he got bogged down. This is the reason why it was no problem for him to distance himself easily from his plagiarism manifesto after five years: "Probably I was overenthusiastic about my recent freedom for using other people's texts". [34] About artists' books, which he recognized after some years as stale products, [35] he said without any lamentation: "I am not sorry

that books will disappear". [36] His art proved that leaving, and giving up is perhaps one of the most fundamental requirements to anticipate the insidious policies of the monsters. Keeping a distance to any established system, in particular the established art system with its rituals of recognition, blessings, and their financial funding strategies, was part of it. Instead, he took the risk to be marginalized or, to be more accurate, ignored. This was the secret that enabled him to enter as deep and as rigorous as possible into each realm of his uncompromising endeavors in the here and now of his time, to give them up without fear, as soon as his work was completed. In the future, too, this could be a model which poses an alternative to the false alternative between the trend of recycling everything, on the one hand, and the current imperative for permanent transformation.