

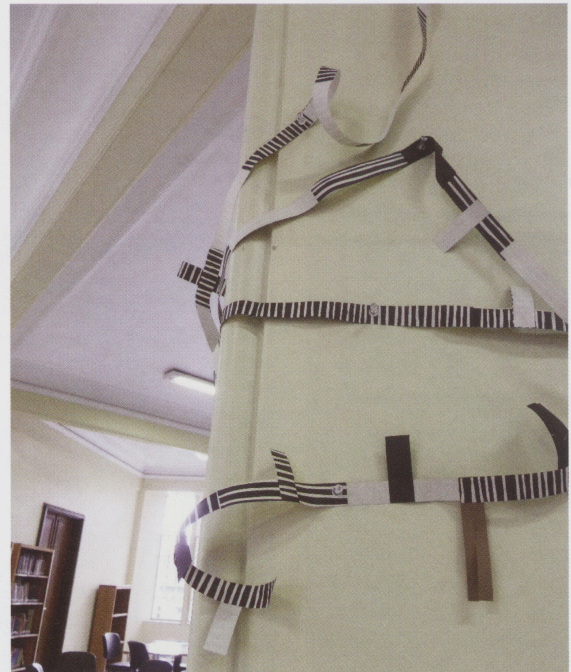
Readers and Dreamers

ARTISTS' BOOKS Mário Azevedo's robust printmaking and love of visual typography produces works that create new conversations, writes Sarah Bodman

During a visit to Brazil for the Perspective of the Artist's Book Conference at the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG) in Belo Horizonte, I took the opportunity to meet with the artist Mário Azevedo during an exhibition of his artists' books. Paulo Silveira took me to meet Azevedo at the Library of the Centro Cultural SESC JK in downtown Belo Horizonte. The exhibition was the launch event of the Biblioteca Viva project at the centre; a new scheme that aims to encourage educational activities and engagement with books through free exhibitions and workshops. The project is inviting the public to consider the library as a place to encounter experimental works around the book, and interact with the collections.

Mário Azevedo's exhibition was a small retrospective of 12 years of artists' books production from 2000–2012. Azevedo lives and works in Belo Horizonte, the capital and largest city in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, where he teaches at the Visual Arts Department of UFMG. Azevedo has been making artists' books, prints and objects since the early 1980s, seduced by the Brazilian Neo-Concretism movement formed as an emotive, organic response to the rigid, mathematical approach of Concrete Art in the late 1950s. Ferreira Gullar's *Neoconcrete Manifesto* (1959) argued for a more expressive art movement, away from the scientific principles of European Concretism. Traditional printmaking processes and the evidence of the hand of the artist play a seminal part in the production of Azevedo's books, and in those of many other creators of 'livro de artista' in Brazil, where traditional lithography, letterpress, etching and relief print continue to be extremely popular subjects in many art schools. Azevedo predominantly uses linocut, mounting blocks onto wood for longevity in the editioning process, even though he prefers to print by hand using a metal or wooden spoon to transfer ink onto paper rather than a press. He enjoys the physical effort required to create each impression.

Azevedo produces each of his books in small editions that express his love of visual typography. For his doctoral thesis he researched the work and theories of the Uruguayan artist and designer Joaquín Torres-García (1874–1949), in particular Torres-García's typographic inventions such as his handmade *carnets* – which continue to provide inspiration for Azevedo's own artistic practice today. Although deeply influenced by Torres-García's artwork, Azevedo identifies himself with the post-Neoconcrete era, embracing a more empathetic approach to visual poetry. Cutting and printing his works by hand adds to his emotive response to subject matter. For example, *Caderno de Passagem* (linocut edition of 15, 2003/4) which roughly translates as 'a passing/temporary scrapbook/section', is a visual representation of a lecture, subject unknown. The viewer decides the title and content of the lecture as they experience the book for themselves. Thick, black handprinted lines resonate with the potential of unknown discovery, from a daydream in the lecture hall to a philosophical opus; the lines represent whatever it is the viewer wants to begin to think about. Rather than simply limiting the content of the lecture with actual text, the lines impart an invitation to invent language and traverse the pages at the viewer's whim. Azevedo wants the reader/viewer to be reminded of the origins of any of the ways in which a book can be read: codex, scroll, linear, horizontal or vertical; all the ways in which we read, and the positions we assume when we are reading. The lines and layout he explains, are of a human impression of the printed word, not a mechanical interpretation.



For Azevedo it is crucial that his books be exhibited within a library environment, as he wants them to converse with the public and with other books. In the heat of downtown Belo Horizonte ceiling fans whirred, gently fanning the readers sitting around tables and the strips of printed paper in Azevedo's installation piece *Texto-em-tira* (*Horizontais/Verticais*, 2006). After editioning *Caderno de Passagem*, Azevedo used the remaining prints to cut into 'communication strips', as an unbound bookwork. Again using vertical and horizontal lines, but this time reminiscent of an old telegraph device ticking out messages of visual poetry that wind around the library's central pillar, up and down, across and back over the heads of the newspaper readers sitting quietly below. These visual 'telegrams' spread their inked up messages in all readers' directions in the social space between the bookshelves. Whilst translating some complicated parts of our conversation with the artist between Portuguese and English, Paulo Silveira remembered that the first sentence used for teaching English language studies in Brazil is 'O livro está sobre a mesa' – 'the book is on the table'. It truly was in Azevedo's exhibition, open and ready to talk with the library's books and visitors alike.

Images

Caderno de Passagem 2003/4 by Mário Azevedo. Linocut edition of 15, 300 x 280 mm
Texto-em-tira (*Horizontais/Verticais*) 2006 by Mário Azevedo. Unique linocut bookwork, approx. 5 m x 30 mm