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Past’s Present: Artist’s Books by José Oliveira
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Abstract
José Oliveira is a book artist who takes inspiration from the history and evolution of the Western book and of Western writing. His artist’s books take the form of codices, scrolls and leporellos and embody the beliefs, grief and hopes of their author. They ask us about our conceptions of the book and the nature of reading. They are evidences of their author’s resolute rejection of contemporary techniques applied to books.

Keywords: Book; Artist’s Book; Book Forms; Writing; Reading.

1. Introduction
José Oliveira is a book artist. He is also an artist of other arts: a concrete poet, a musician, a performer. A self-taught visual artist who studied sociology and anthropology but not painting or sculpture, he has taken from those arts the knowledge he needed to conceive his books, book-sculptures and other book-related works for the past 20 years. Working with books in multiple ways, José Oliveira has also produced bookworks in the sense defined by Garrett Stewart as “something done to a book, done with it and others like it, or done in place of it” (21). That is, he makes book-objects and book-sculptures as well as proper books.

In this essay I will deal mostly with Oliveira’s books: I will not consider his bookworks. In order to differentiate books from his other work on books I will begin by defining what a book is. And because Oliveira creates artist’s books, I will also offer a working definition of what an artist’s book is. I will start with his books as embodiments of abstract concepts related to forms and structures of the book, and then examine in more detail the techniques and genres that we find in his artist’s books.
2. Book Forms

Book format is the cherished art form for José Oliveira expressing his art. His books are mainly codices, but he has also produced scrolls and leporellos. Oliveira uses each format with specific aims: to enhance the difficulty of reading, to puzzle the reader, to establish cultural connections. Oliveira uses the typographic and bibliographic conventions to disrupt reading as an active element in the emergence of perceived form. His books are artistic objects that combine self-reflection on their condition as books with self-reflection on their condition as artistic objects (Portela, 2013b: 96).

Figure 1. Arundel.

Arundel (2003) is a good example of the shuffling of references used by Oliveira. Arundel is composed by a leporello and a box. The leporello literally sorts out of the box (Figure 1). The box has the shape of a codex, and the back cover of the leporello is pasted to the inside of the box, in what corresponds to the inside back cover of the codex. Blank pages painted in old oak alternate with pages covered with the characteristic Oliveira logograms, mainly inspired by hieroglyphs and runes.

In this work Oliveira plays with concepts close to the idea of the book: the box has the conventional and familiar format of the codex but when we open it we find a leporello. We realize and accept that the leporello is just another form of book but when we unfold it we find some pages inscribed with signs, while others are entirely painted in one colour. Blank pages are painted yet no verbal or visual sign is extractable from them. The pages inscribed with signs have a familiar look: signs are aligned in rows and columns and they do look familiar; we have the reminiscence of hieroglyphs, of ancient alphabets, and at the same time we sense they don’t make any sense (Figure 2). They are symbols of signs that in their turn are symbols of sounds and of ideas, that is,